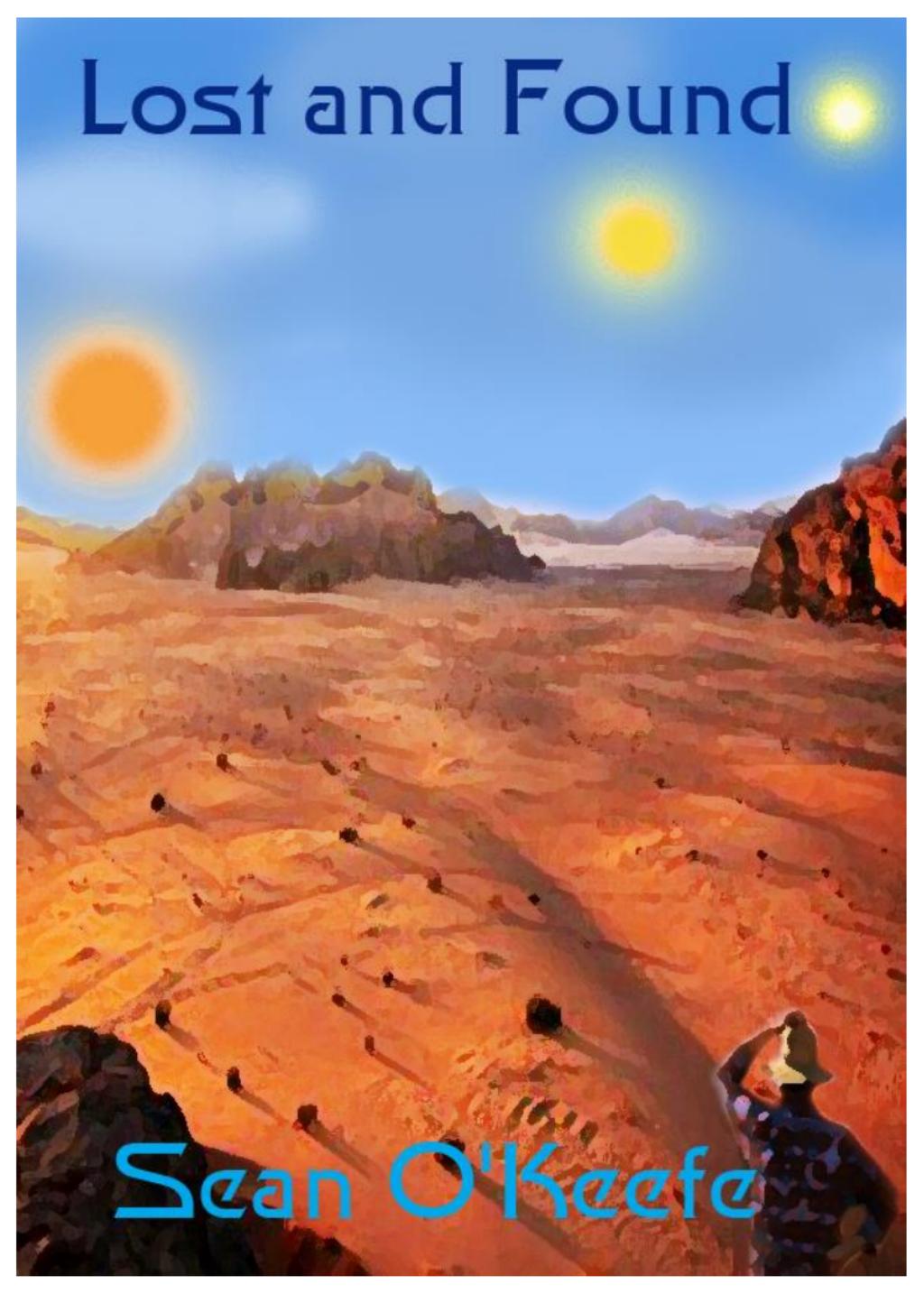


Lost and Found



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Prologue

About 2500 years before Stardates began.

Dust drifted in the air, shaken loose from the ceiling from yet another blast outside. Even though they were a hundred metres below the surface, the group of scientists from around the world huddled together fearfully. They knew they were anything but safe in their underground bunker. If anyone knew how deadly the weapons being used above were, it was them. After all, they had invented them.

The group's leader shook his head in abject dismay as he read the monitor before him. The radiation on the surface was too high for life to continue. His heart sank as he realised even the bacteria would soon die out. The situation was not only dire, it was terminal.

Given how bad things had gotten, the warring sides continued their campaign of terror against each other, not seeming to care that their actions had already signed the death warrant for their species.

“Well, 42, how bad is it?”

Their leader turned his gold-skinned head and looked up at his fellow. Their dark eyes met and his look told the whole story. “I’m sorry, 96.” His high-pitched voice, which was normal for his people, was full of regret. “We’re end stage.”

To punctuate the statement, the bunker shook once more, the sound of a not-so-distant explosion rumbling though the room. The lights flickered for a moment then

stabilised.

“How about down here? Surely the rock strata above us will afford us some level of protection.” The female, 54, shook and covered her blue-skinned breasts with her arms. Her large, black eyes were filled with fear.

42 stepped over to 54 and put an arm around her. Their people had no scruples regarding clothing and so none were worn. However, the only thing that differentiated the sexes externally was their colouring. Gold for males and blue for females.

“While there is not much air down here, there is still hope for us,” he said loudly enough for the other seventeen scientists to hear as well. “Even though we will die physically, all is not lost. Something of us will survive.”

At that point, 68 stepped out of the crowd. “65,475,142,” he said, addressing 42 by his full name, “I’ve gone over your design for this machine, and I believe your theory is flawed.” He indicated the large device behind him with a flourish.

42 looked at the machine – his labour of love for five solar cycles – and gave a grim smile. Hidden within its vanilla exterior was the most intricate device his people had ever conceived. Its capacity was breath-taking, and it very probably was their people’s last hope for continuing their culture.

“The Gestalt Device *should* work,” he said with a grim smile. With more than a touch of sarcasm he added: “And, frankly, as the level of radiation in here is *already* lethal, I believe there’s little point in *not* giving it a try.”

The older 68 had to concede the point. He looked about him at the faces of those he had known over his long career as one of this world's eminent scientists. Fear showed in most, but there was also an undercurrent of resolve. If their people were doomed, they may as well do *something* to leave a legacy.

“How does it work?” he asked, resigned to his fate.

42 ushered him over to the unit and gestured to the interface points that dotted its surface. “This is where we plug in,” he said as he began handing out cables. “Just plug them into your jacks,” he indicated the surgically added points behind and below their right ear holes, “and then into the machine.”

As he was doing so, he had already begun to notice to deleterious effects of prolonged exposure to radiation. The weakness he felt in his very bones had begun to slow him down. He looked around him and noticed he was not the only one. Time was running out.

“Quickly,” he said, adrenaline giving him a boost. He helped some of the more weary among them to finish interfacing them with the machine.

68 realised 42 had never answered his question. “You never....”

Their leader caught his eye. “You don't want to know,” he said quietly, just before he rammed home the activation button and the nineteen people in the room dropped to the floor as the machine ripped their minds out.

The stars were all new to those passing them. Humans had never travelled this far out before and the going was arduous as the *Daedalus*-class *U.S.S. Republic* made its way through unexplored space. Even for their day, the *Republic* was old, but the Romulan War had cemented the class' place in history and kept them in service long past their expected use by date.

Essentially a ball propelled by a toilet tube engineering hull with twin warp nacelles attached to it, the *Daedalus*-class wasn't pretty, but they were practical. All the more so for the *Republic*'s current mission.

No surprise, she was carrying colonists whose goal was to create a new home for themselves. A place where they could continue in their chosen way of life without hindrance. Unlike most other missions of this type, they had no idea where they were going beforehand. Their departure from Earth had been rushed, to say the least.

Of course, Starfleet had objected to what could have turned out to be a lengthy cruise. However, the colonists assured them that they would not be choosy. Besides, everyone on Earth wanted to be rid of them. The sooner they left, the better for all was the general consensus.

Fortunately, there were not that many of them. Enough to fill a *Daedalus*-class starship, as it happened. However, they had been so militant in their campaign against the current government and their way of life that their request to leave had come from the highest level and

they, reluctantly, agreed. Luddites were not welcome any more on planet Earth.

The *Republic*'s crew had just finished a long-range scan of the solar system ahead when their much loved Captain stepped onto the Bridge. He was much loved because he shared the crew's resentment towards their passengers and the ridiculous amount of time it was taking for them to approve of a new homeworld. In the Captain's mind, the sooner they got rid of them, the better.

"So, how does it look?" Cheerfully, the Captain rubbed his hands together and stepped towards the screen. It displayed a twin G-type star system with a number of planets that made Mercury look like a good place to ski in comparison. There were also two sizeable gas giants and one marginal M-class world. Definitely nothing to write home about. He frowned at the grainy image of the habitable planet and shook his head in annoyance. "No doubt they won't approve of this place, either," he growled.

His First Officer stepped forward and handed his superior a printout of their scans. The man's strength of character was one of the principal reasons why their crew had not gone space happy. He knew how to keep their people busy, whether it was training, drills, poker games, quiz matches, tournaments or even wild parties. The tall red-head had the gift of leadership, something the Captain was grateful for as this tour had been wearing him down as well.

The Captain speed read the report, taking note of the pertinent issues. The most obvious flaw with this world was

its distinct lack of water. It was mostly a vast desert. It had some small, shallow oceans, with nothing more than a breathable atmosphere to relegate it to class-H. “It doesn't look good at all, George, does it?” Bitterly, the Captain screwed up the offending report and tossed it at the screen. “How much longer?” he muttered, tired to the bone. Oh, how he longed to be home with his wife and growing daughter. He tried not to think of her and how much he had missed of her youth. It was too painful.

George understood his Captain's weariness. He had a wife and two boys of his own waiting for him back on Earth. Just like the Captain, he missed his family, but he was a creature of duty first and foremost. They had been tasked with the job of finding a new home for their passengers, and he would not go home until he did. He would never leave a job half done.

“I don't see why we should even bother telling them about this system, Cap',” he offered, casting the offending world on the viewscreen a baleful look. “We may as well just keep going.”

The Captain's eyes grew cruel. “I've a mind to leave them there, anyway.”

George laughed. He knew the Captain would do no such thing. He never forgot his duty. He spoke up for the Navigator. “Set course for the next system, and prepare for warp three.” Hopefully, the Chief Engineer was sober enough to get the ship back into warp drive. “Engage when ready.”

Any consideration of actually fulfilling those orders

became moot as the ship suddenly lurched to port. The bridge crew, taken completely by surprise, were hurled into bulkheads and now sparking panels. The lights dimmed and everybody had just regained their footing when the ship shifted violently again, this time to starboard. Bodies flew in all directions as the inertial dampeners failed completely.

Sparks flew, the air was filled with pungent smoke and the dead lay still. Most of the officers managed to regain their posts, but two would never move again.

Solemnly, George crouched next to the Captain and checked for a pulse. There was none. His friend's head rested at an odd angle and George was certain his neck was broken. Doing his best to remain composed, he gently closed the Captain's sightless eyes and turned back to the crew.

His ship had been damaged in a cowardly attack, his friend was dead and George was mad. "Get the shields up!" he yelled. "If it's Klingons, I don't want them coming by for another pass and taking us out this time. Scan the area, who attacked us?"

The *Republic*'s science officer scrambled to make sense of his messed up systems. He wasn't certain that his readouts were in Federation Standard or Sanskrit. "Working on it, X," he said, trying to buy time.

George took his place in the Centre Seat as one who was born there. Now the Captain was dead it was a way of reminding his people that someone was still in command – that the situation was under control.

"Damage report," he ordered crisply. On one level, he

really *didn't* want to know, but this was no time for indulging in cowardice. Reports started filtering in from all parts of the ship – all except Engineering. “Carruthers!”

A petite, young, and decidedly beautiful young ensign looked up as she was called. “Aye, sir!”

George forced calm. To show anything less than complete professionalism could lead to all out panic. “Get down to Engineering and get me a report.”

“Yes, sir!” she said, encouraged by George's demeanour. She gave him a smile that was a blend of determination and grimace. She was not sure she was looking forward to what she might find.

Knowing that he had given the Science Officer all the buffer he could afford, he snapped: “Science, report!”

The Tellarite at Science squinted at his readout. George once again marvelled at how Tellarites could see at all with their tiny eyes. “Sir, we were not attacked. Sensors show no other ships in the area. No nothing, for that matter.”

George frowned. This was getting weirder and weirder. The only people he knew of who had cloaking technology was the Romulans and their Empire was two hundred light years closer to the galaxy centre. Every day they had travelled had taken them further from the galaxy's known trouble spots.

Realising it was now a waiting game as his hands were tied until their foe revealed themselves, he said: “Are the hull sensors still functioning?”

The Tellarite punched in the command. On the main viewscreen, areas of the exterior hull were being shown, at five second intervals. No damage was apparent, but when the

view panned back from the forward hull, the crew gasped. The starboard nacelle was intact, no problem there. The port nacelle – was gone. Nothing remained except the stump of the support strut which had been cut so cleanly it was if a galactic Starship surgeon had suddenly amputated it with a deft slice with a laser scalpel.

George was grim. Without that nacelle, there was no getting home. No chance of leaving the system. No chance of ever seeing Winona and the boys again. And not only that, the image of the impulse drive showed the whole casing was twisted, no doubt finished as well.

He turned to the communications officer. “Call Starfleet Command and report our status. Ask for a rescue ship to be dispatched, immediately.” Not that it would do them much good, now. It would be months until a ship would reach them, and he would have to find somewhere to put down until help arrived.

He received the answer he was half expecting would come. Communications were down. Their subspace transceiver dead, unrecoverable. All back ups were damaged beyond repair.

“It never rains, but it pours,” he muttered. “Send out a probe with our message broadcasting at regular intervals.”

The science officer looked up from his instruments. “Commander, the damned probes are also damaged, and our ship's recorder buoy is melted.”

George shook his head. The damage was *too* selective. There was no way of ever informing Command of their plight.

Tightness gripped his chest as he realised there was no

way he would ever see his family again. His beloved wife and his boys were lost to him.

He clenched his fist and let his anger fuel him as he fought for self control. He was not going to give in to despair, not while there were more important things to think about – like the well-being of every man, woman and child aboard this ship.

“Navigation, what is our current trajectory?”

The seasoned officer, a twenty year space veteran, had already summed up their situation in his mind. They were doomed. All the same, he checked his instruments and looked up, surprised. “We’re heading towards that “M”-class planet ahead.”

Unlike the navigator, George was not in the least bit surprised. His gut told him something was waiting for them down there. Unfortunately, he had been left with no choice but to find out what it was.

Resigned to their fate, George activated the intra-ship intercom and addressed their surviving crew-mates. He quickly informed them of the situation and the death of their Captain. He finished with: “Whether we like it or not, this is going to be our new home.” There was more than a touch of fatalism in his tone. He looked once more at the viewscreen at the planet that was slowly growing larger. With its bleak appearance in mind he muttered: “Home, sweet home.”

Several weeks later, Captain Heihachiro Nogura knocked on the old wooden and wire door at the entrance of his friend’s farm. The middle-aged Starfleet veteran sighed as

he took another look around him at the wide open spaces of Iowa, at the crops in the fields, at the old barn nearby, and wished for the tenth time that he did not have to do this.

The inner door was opened promptly by his friend's wife, Winona. She was just as lovely as the last time he had visited, when he had been invited to spend his shore leave with George and the family. He looked past her shoulder into the dim interior and noticed little Jimmy and Sam standing behind her in the shadows, curious, but not intrusive.

Winona took one look at Nogura's dress uniform then began backing away from the door. "No," she said, her voice sounding as if some demon was tearing at her very soul. "No, no, NO!" She grew more shrill with each utterance. Her strength fled her and she fell to her knees in the middle of the living room, crying and begging God not to let it be true.

Heihachiro, shocked, gently opened the door and went to her side and tried to help her to a chair. Immediately protective, even though they knew the Captain, the boys stepped forward as one. "Leave her alone!" Jimmy shouted.

Nogura shook his head in dismay. They did not understand. Tenderly, he helped Winona to a chair and dropped to one knee before her. He held her and she cried, for what seemed ages. The boys, confused, tried to talk to their mother, asking, and then begging her to tell them what was wrong. Finally, when dusk began to fall, Winona stopped crying and solemnly asked Nogura what had happened to her husband.

He explained to her that George's ship was missing and had not made its last five reports. A rescue ship was being

dispatched, but the nature of the *Republic's* mission was making it close to impossible to retrace her steps. He tried to tell her not to lose all hope, but he knew Winona. He knew she was well aware of the dangers of space flight and that, in all probability, this had been inevitable.

Nogura glanced over at Jimmy and remembered Winona had given birth to the young man on George's last ship, the *U.S.S. Kelvin*. What a way to come into the world, he thought ruefully.

Winona nodded absently and tried to assure him that she would continue to hope, but her eyes betrayed her. In her mind George was gone. He was never going to return.

Mrs Kirk suddenly got up and went into the kitchen and put on the kettle. She offered the Captain a seat, and shoved biscuits at him. While she was pottering around the kitchen, Nogura turned his attention to the boys, who were obviously distressed and while Sam had shed more than a few tears, little Jimmy had remained stoic. Such a strong young man, he thought to himself.

He looked out the still open door and noticed the stars were coming out. Somewhere out there was his friend, probably in trouble, maybe even dead. He turned his attention back to George's sons and decided to tell them what he knew of their father.

“George Samuel Kirk was my best friend....”

Chapter One

“I now pronounce you man and wife.” Captain Piper, grinning like a schoolgirl, leaned forward. “Go on, kiss her.”

Cheers erupted from the guests as the happy couple's lips met for what seemed to them hours. They parted and gazed into each other's eyes, drowning in the joy of the moment, then turned and stepped forward into the crowd. As if by magic, rose petals suddenly appeared in the air and drifted down onto their shoulders.

Piper looked around for the culprit and noticed her Chief Engineer, Lieutenant Commander Judd “Scanner” Sandage, scrutinising a loose rivet in the ceiling. The forty-odd, but always youthful, American Southerner caught her gaze and grinned sheepishly.

Piper's eyes then shifted to her First Officer and best friend, Sarda of Vulcan. It was one of those moments when he was doing his best to appear pleased without actually doing so. They shared a look, and she felt his warming presence in the back of her mind, confirming her observations.

The Captain of Starfleet's flagship, the *U.S.S. Millennium*, stepped down from the podium and followed her friend and Chief Medical Officer, Doctor Merete AndrusTaurus, and her new husband, Doctor Rogen TandroVerandi, down the aisle. She scooped up some of the petals and tossed them over Merete's platinum blonde hair. Delighted, she spun and playfully jabbed Piper with a finger.

Rogen grinned at his wife's antics and steered her toward the exit. With a parting wave they turned and bolted out the door and towards the nearest turbo-lift. Its doors parted and they disappeared from view.

“Well, ain't they in a hurry?” drawled Scanner with a knowing smirk. He tried to straighten his ever untidy uniform, gave up and stepped over to the refreshment table and crunched a pretzel.

The *Millennium*'s Chief of Security, a tall, white, leonine Cait named Amantallah shook her lightly maned head and tsked her friend, which was always something to see considering her large, sharp teeth. “It's clear you don't know a lot about the Palkeo Est,” she said cheekily. “By their tradition a newly married couple must consummate their union within the first half hour or the wedding is nullified.” She smirked at her comrade. “After all these years of serving together, I would have thought you'd have learned *something* of the Doctor's culture.”

“Ah'm an engineer, not a social therapist.” There was no heat in his tone, their banter was becoming commonplace and drew no attention, even given their difference in rank – she being a lowly Lieutenant. Judd filled a glass and downed the fruit punch with a gulp before looking her in the eye in complete sincerity. “You'll never catch me gittin' married, though. Too many complications.”

Amantallah's whiskers arched forward in amusement. “This coming from someone who is in charge of maintaining the most complex starship ever created,” she said drolly. She looked around her, taking in the immensity of their vessel.

“Nope, nothing complicated about this ship.”

Piper materialised out of the crowd. “Famous last words, Judd,” she said with a wry grin.

Beside her, Manny, as her crewmates knew her, drew her white brows together in a frown. “Captain, as your Chief of Security I formally request that you stop doing that.” She shivered, her fur just beginning to flatten out again after being startled. “It’s unnerving.”

“How else am I supposed to keep my crew on their toes?” Piper looked off in the direction the newlywed couple had disappeared in as if she could still see them. She sighed, content. “I love weddings,” she said and her face showed it.

At this point, Sarda joined them at the table. He raised his bronze-coloured brows and said: “I have observed just that, particularly since you get the honour of performing the ceremonies.”

Scanner waved a taunting finger in his friend, Piper’s face. “Always the bridesmaid, never the bride,” he said as if it was a foregone conclusion it would remain that way.

The Captain stared him down. “You never know what the future holds,” she said with only a shred of heat.

Piper’s comment was somehow overheard by everybody on the spacious Recreation, or Rec, Deck. For a moment all was silent, however the Captain pretended not to notice. “Not all ship’s captains are married only to their ships. Perhaps one day it might be me up there taking vows.”

Sarda looked speculative. “That will be the day we experience hail on Vulcan.”

Piper elbowed her friend in the ribs and turned back to

the party.

Rogen kissed his new wife and rolled back onto his side of the bed with a sigh that spoke of deep satisfaction. Beside him, Merete leaned into her pillow and stared at her husband, an air of euphoria around her. “A perfect end to a perfect day,” she whispered.

Her husband grew thoughtful. “You know, I never thought that I would get married,” Rogen muttered in his deep, husky voice. “Then I get transferred here and I get married six weeks later.” He shook his head in amazement at the swiftness of their courtship phase, his long, black hair that was typical to the males of their race getting in his eyes. He brushed it away and smiled down at his mate. “And now here I am.”

Merete ran a hand over Rogen’s muscular frame, taking her time and enjoying every sensation. Rogen was very fit. “I just hope you don’t mind being my subordinate.”

Rogen shrugged. “I never minded before, why should I now?”

Merete became evasive. “You know...”

Her husband shook his head as realisation struck. “The Palkeo Est gave up thinking women were the greatest of God’s creations a generation ago.” He tenderly brushed his wife’s cheek with a finger, taking in her petal soft flesh. He tapped her nose with gentle instruction. “You know I’m not like other men who still resent working under women.” He head shook in disbelief at their attitude. “They must be really paranoid.”

Merete raised a curious brow. “Why do you say that?”

Rogen scratched at his ever-present stubble in thought.

“I guess that people who have low self-esteem often put others down to bring up their own sense of self-worth.”

Merete gazed inward in thought for a moment then focused on her husband as a thought struck her. “You aren’t referring to Sarda and Scanner, are you?”

Rogen was confused for a moment at her reference then he laughed out loud as realisation hit him. “No! Not at all! They rib each other because they like it. It’s part of the way they relate.”

The lithe woman pushed her mate onto his back and scowled mockingly at him. “You just can’t stop being a psychotherapist, can you?”

Rogen pulled her to him, letting her scent fill his nostrils. He found it intoxicating. “Well, there are some things I prefer doing.”

Merete smiled and melted into his arms.

Crash prowled the silent bridge, bored out of his skull. Ever since Piper had promoted him to Lieutenant Commander and given him Second Officer’s duties on top of being in charge of Communications, he had generally been too busy to notice that time had flown. He had managed, finally, to catch up on the business of the day as he was in charge during the wedding and reception whilst Captain Piper and Commander Sarda were busy partying. Funny, he had never thought Sarda the partying type.

The black-furred Caitian, Krashtallah to be precise, had

previously learned that if he walked the bridge on all fours, it kept the crew more alert that he was watching and therefore more attentive towards their duties. Remaining seated in the Conn just gave him a sore back and while he was on watch, all he got to do was sign reports and wait for something to happen. It was the waiting that was tedious in the extreme, he was a person who longed for activity. Not necessarily warfare, that was his sister, Amantallah's, preoccupation, but just to solve some problem somewhere, or perhaps to explore the galaxy the way the *Enterprise* had.

But no, Starfleet Command in their infinite wisdom had relegated their ship to Neutral Zone pacing, and it was driving the restless crew crazy. The general consensus aboard was that the *Millennium* was being wasted on patrols instead of getting out there and exploring the galaxy, and Crash could only agree with them.

“Status, Mister Valastro,” he growled in his deep voice that brooked no argument.

Lieutenant Carman Valastro glanced down at his board at Navigation. His handsome Grecian eyes took in the information in a second. “We are leaving sector twenty-three and entering sector sixteen. On course and cruising at warp one, all is quiet.”

The ever cheery Australian, Lieutenant Jason Nunn chipped in from his place at the Helm. “Not a furious ruby to be seen, Commander.”

Crash understood the slang. “Furious Ruby” was the current term of derision for the Tholians, the most aggressively organised territorial landgrabbers this side of the

Mutara sector. They appeared as four-foot angry gemstones who could be very annoying at times, especially when they employed their almost indestructible energy webs. Very few starships had ever escaped one. Crash knew that this ship was here at this time as a message to the Tholians to behave themselves. They had gotten into trouble with patrolling vessels once too often of late.

“I’m sure the “Rubies” would enjoy your wit, Mister Nunn,” Crash admonished, “if you ever survive a meeting with one.”

Chastened, Jason minded his station, and Crash let his teeth show for a moment in pleasure. He turned to the viewscreen and gazed out into the void, letting it fill his mind and soul. Somewhere out there was an adventure just waiting to happen.

As if in answer to his thoughts he noticed his second in Communications stiffen, concentrating on an incoming message. Good, the *Millennium* needed exercise as much as he did.

“Commander,” the young officer said breathlessly. “Message coming in from the *Hathaway* patrolling sector four.”

Crash got up on his hind legs and stood, ready to address their caller. “On screen.”

With the deep chime of connection being made the Captain of the *Hathaway* appeared. The bridge of the other ship was bathed in the deep red of alert status and its seasoned human commander appeared calm even as the ship shook from another phaser burst. He wasted no time on pleasantries.

“Millennium, we are under attack from ten Tholian vessels. They are demanding our surrender and have begun to weave their Web. We would appreciate your assistance.”

Crash nodded at the Captain of the *Hathaway*. They had spoken a number of times over the previous weeks, and he had to admire the man. He was polite no matter what the situation. “We are under way,” he said confidently. He glanced at Lieutenant Valastro who was holding up ten fingers. “E.T.A. ten minutes.”

The *Hathaway*’s Captain gave them a grim smile. He knew the odds of his still being there in ten minutes could be slim. “We’ll see you soon,” he said with a nod that spoke of appreciation, but also that he bore no grudge if they couldn’t make it in time.

With a beep the connection was broken and the viewscreen returned to the vista of space.

Crash whirled on the crew. “Red alert! Set course for the *Hathaway* and engage at maximum warp as soon as co-ordinates are set. Arm weapons and warm up the projector. Captain to the Bridge!”

The hum of warp speed reached Crash’s paws before he had reached the Conn.

Piper dropped her cup and began running as soon as she saw the red flash next to the door. Amantallah joined her a fraction of a second later with Sarda trailing. Scanner disappeared through another door toward Engineering.

The Captain was through the door and dashing to a turbolift as she was called the Bridge.

Merete looked up through dreamy eyes to see the red flashing overhead. She jerked up violently and jumped out of bed, tossing her husband his clothes. "Only in human fiction," she muttered as she slipped into her medical dress.

Piper, Sarda and Amantallash strode onto the Bridge and took their posts. Crash stood and reported, adding that their present E.T.A. was now nine minutes before resuming his post at Communications.

Piper swivelled in her seat. "Crash, try to re-establish communications with the *Hathaway*. Sarda, have you scanned the enemy yet?"

The Vulcan quickly straightened, jostling loose a lock of bronze hair. "Not yet, Captain. They have appeared to have established a low-level Thoron field. It is enough to confuse the sensors at this range."

The Captain felt his suspicions through their so far unbreakable psychic link, a leftover from a previous adventure. She set it aside for the moment and simply nodded. "Tell me what you can, when you can." She felt the friendly warmth of his confidence in her in response. She glanced over at Security. "Lieutenant, prepare to activate attack plan sigma at my order."

"Aye, Captain," mewed Amantallash, her eyes sparkling at the prospect of battle.

Piper turned to the helm. "Maximum magnification on screen," she ordered.

"Aye, Captain." Jason remained calm and businesslike.

Good, thought Piper, he's learning.

The viewscreen shifted slightly to show a dim white fuzzy object in the distance.

"Unable to raise the *Hathaway*, Captain," Crash called. "The Thoron field is disrupting the signal."

Piper frowned. "How was it that they got a message out before?" she asked out loud. Now she knew why Sarda had been suspicious.

Her First Officer gazed at her with his usual calm, even though she felt his apprehension through their link. "They may have transmitted before the field was established."

The Captain screwed up her nose in annoyance. "Convenient," she said, her scepticism showing. She tapped her teeth with a nail as she considered the situation. "I don't like it. The Tholians are up to something." Knowing that the answer to the question would only come when they arrived on the scene, she turned back to the viewscreen which was now displaying a much clearer image of the *Hathaway*, and the elongated diamond shapes of the fighter-sized Tholian ships swarming around her. "E.T.A.?"

"One minute, Captain."

"Go to impulse power and active plan sigma."

On the bridge of the *Hathaway* the air was tense. They had managed to pick off two Tholians who had gotten careless, but there were still enough of them to complete the web and keep the Weapons Officer busy.

Captain Jonathan Poulson looked up at the screen in time to see the *Millennium* drop out of warp not more than ten

thousand kilometres away. He was startled when another starship appeared behind her, and another, and another. Soon six of the massive *Ingram*-class ships surrounded them, enough to intimidate a squadron of Romulan warships. Each vessel would also be carrying a squadron of fighters in its enormous hangar bays, so the balance of this engagement had suddenly shifted dramatically.

Understandably the Tholians scattered, disrupting some of the web of tractor energy they had been creating around his ship. The web seemed no more than gossamer, but he knew that no amount of energy directed at the thin web would free them. It would only absorb it and fortify itself. He drew his attention to the screen to see that the enemy had turned on their new adversaries. Enough of the web had already been created to effectively cut off any retreat.

Suicide, thought Poulson. That amount of Starships would clean up this little problem in no time. Still, the enemy was still working as a unit and only firing on one of the newcomers, the *Millennium* herself! Well, Piper would sort them out in no time.

“Status on Photons?” he asked his Weapons Officer.

A harried young ensign squeaked out, “Still down, Captain.”

Poulson gave him his most fatherly look. “Let’s see if we can get them working again. And I mean soon.”

The Tholian ships blazed a trail toward the *Millennium*, firing and jolting the mighty ship. Piper merely gazed at the screen, trying to get inside the pilot’s minds. She knew they

had nothing to fear from them as the *Millennium* carried triple shielding.

“Warn them off.” She used the voice of supreme confidence she used in times like these. It helped keep her people at ease and at their most efficient.

“No reply, Captain.” Crash put down his earpiece, not the least bit surprised. “They’re not talking.”

“Hmmm.” She knew the Tholians had somehow scanned their fake fleet and realised that hers was the only real ship. How, she had no idea, however the advantage was lost. “It seems the Tholians are unimpressed, Mister Sarda,” she said ruefully.

The Vulcan caught her eye. He had guessed the same, the projector would not protect them this time. He would have to upgrade the system, or they would have to scrap the entire strategy altogether. The projector took too much energy to use.

Piper stood and faced their adversary. “Well, Mister Krashtallah, it seems like we’ve been using the wrong language.” She turned slightly. “Mister Amantallah, fire at will. Launch the fighters.”

From the rear of the *Millennium* the shuttlebay doors slid aside and a swarm of twelve one-man fighters shot out in tight formation and headed towards the buzzing Tholians which were still making a beeline for the *Millennium*. As soon as they were clear of the *Millennium*’s shields they began firing. When they got close, they split into six pairs, targeted the same number of enemy ships and went after them, matching them move for move whilst harassing them with

standard phasers. Space lit up for a moment as a Tholian's shields went down and a fighter's photon torpedo found its mark.

Behind them the *Millennium* lashed out from all of her phaser pods simultaneously, vaporising four of the Tholian fighters instantly. The remaining Tholian fighters bugged out, knowing they were overmatched and retreated towards the *Hathaway*, followed closely by the *Millennium's* fighters. When the *Hathaway* picked off one more with an expertly aimed phaser shot the enemy vessels sought shelter in the Tholian Neutral Zone.

Once they had done so, the Starfleet fighters, led by Lieutenant Steven Goldberg, peeled off. "Let the Rubies go, guys," he called, doing his best Maverick impression. "The day is ours. Back to Mother." It was his shorthand for regroup inside the *Millennium's* shields.

On the Bridge of the *Millennium*, Piper listened to the pilot's banter as it filtered to her from their "control tower" behind her. It was recessed where most Capital ships had a status board for the ship. It sported four stations that monitored the fighter's status, communications and strategy. They were run by Lieutenant Caitlin "Ghost" Ryan, a petite ex-fighter pilot who had to give away her passion due to a spinal injury acquired during combat. Piper overheard her say with an amused/annoyed Irish lilt: "Stop calling the *Millennium* Mother, Ish."

Whilst Piper appreciated the good humour and morale, she disagreed with Goldberg's assessment of the situation. She stared at the screen; eyes narrowed. "What are they

waiting for?" she muttered to herself.

Her voice carried. Lieutenant Nunn looked up eagerly. "Are we gonna go after them, Captain?"

Piper said nothing, merely rested a hand on the back of his chair and watched. After a moment of intense contemplation, she looked to Navigation. "What is the Tholian ship's position?" she asked quietly.

Carman answered instantly. He had guessed her next question. "Just inside the NZ, Captain."

Piper stepped between the Helm and Navigation consoles, wondering what the Tholians were doing. The Tholian people were idiosyncratic in almost every aspect, everything in their society had to be just so, ordered to perfection. So why would the Tholian ships remain just out of reach? They knew the Federation would not violate the Neutral Zone so what were they waiting for? Reinforcements?

Piper spun around and ran to her chair. She punched the intercom button to Engineering. "Chief Engineer to the Bridge!"

Scanner's voice came back an instant later. "Aye."

Sarda appeared at her side. "Captain?"

Piper looked up at her First Officer, concern in her eyes. "They're waiting for reinforcements," she said, loud enough for the rest of the bridge crew to hear.

Sarda nodded his agreement. "I take it you have a plan."

Piper glanced over at the turbolift as the doors opened and Scanner stepped out. "Yes, I do. Scanner, you were still on board the old *Enterprise* when she was attacked by the

Tholians, weren't you?"

"Yes, Captain." Scanner appeared puzzled for a moment, then remembered. "Ah see, Cap'. Mister Scott and I worked on ways for us to deactivate the Tholian Web. We put together a few ideas, but we never had the chance to perfect them."

Piper steered him toward the science console. "Well, get cracking! I want you to talk to the *Hathaway* and get her free. At this close range we should be able to raise them." They both looked at a schematic of the other ship, surrounded by enough of a Web to cause them problems. "Get to it, Scanner. We haven't got much time."

The Captain resumed her seat at the Conn. "Mister Nunn, bring us about. Put us between the *Hathaway* and the Tholian ships. Mister Krashtallah, call Starfleet Command and request assistance. Mister Valastro, overlay a schematic of the Neutral Zone on the screen."

A sharp intake of breath was heard when the Zone appeared on the screen, less than four kilometres away, the Tholians just beyond. "Be alert, people," said Piper, quietly serious. "They'll be here any moment."

The Chief Engineer of the *Hathaway* looked up from the screen, smiling to herself. "Yes, Scanner, it could work, and it would certainly serve those Tholians right." She spun around and waved a tentacle at her assistant. "Let's get to work."

"Now what?" Jason muttered, wiping his hands on his

trousers.

Piper was not deaf. She leaned into his ear and spoke quite loudly. "We wait, Mister Nunn!" Jason fairly leapt out of his seat.

The Captain sat back, drumming her fingers on the arm of her chair. "Mister Sarda, do your scanners report anything?"

Sarda's frown said it all. "Nothing, Captain. The Tholians are not moving."

Piper tapped a control on her chair arm. "Scanner! How are we doing?"

Scanner, who had returned to his domain, oozed confidence. "Whenever you're ready, Cap'."

Piper broke into a grin. "Good. Crash, hailing frequencies."

"Hailing frequencies open."

Piper stood and addressed the screen, knowing that even though she couldn't see them, it was good for her adversaries to see her resolve. "Tholian vessels, this is Captain Piper of the *U.S.S. Millennium*. You are ordered to withdraw from the Neutral Zone immediately. You are in violation of the Federation-Tholian treaty of 2265. If you do not withdraw you will be fired upon, and your actions interpreted as an act of war. You have thirty seconds to respond."

She didn't really expect a reply. She was fully aware of the Tholian's attitude to the treaty. To them it was nothing more than empty words. The only reason the NZ was respected at all was because the Federation fiercely enforced it. Today, her intention was to avoid further conflict and

simply warn them off, hoping that they would realise that right then and there the Starfleet vessels had the upper hand. As they were not moving, it confirmed Piper's suspicions that they were about to get some company.

As Piper stood, she mentally ticked off the seconds. When she got to twenty-eight the peace was shattered by Sarda's crisp and urgent: "They've arrived."

All eyes turned to the viewscreen as a ship larger than the *Millennium* appeared in space. Like the smaller ships it appeared crystalline, tapered at one end and ready for business. It shone like gold, and so did the energy bolts it loosed on the Federation ships.

Both ships rocked under the impact. If unprotected, the two ships would have been floating debris. As it was, their screens flared into violet. Their returning fire of phasers and photon torpedoes also impacted on the Tholians' screen. It seemed like a stand-off.

The *Millennium*'s fighters leapt away from their mother ship and kept the smaller Tholians busy, and soon the sky was filled with criss-crossing beams of light.

"Status report!"

Scanner sounded worried. "Warp drive is down, auxiliary power at eighty percent! Shield one is down to fifty percent! Shield two and three are still fully charged."

Piper waved acrid smoke away from her face. All around her people were coughing and eyes were weeping. The exhaust fans were straining to remove the fumes of burning wires and opticable. The situation irked her in that,

as long as the warp engines were down, she was denied the *Millennium*'s megaphasers, which would have been handy in this situation. "Keep firing torpedoes, maximum yield. Keep life support systems at minimum levels except Sickbay and redirect energy to the phasers. Evasive manoeuvres. Emergency power to shields. Crash, get me the *Hathaway*."

The *Millennium* leapt nimbly out of the way of another bolt from the larger Tholian vessel, but they managed a glancing blow with another.

The stars appeared to whirl as "Ish" flung his fighter around whilst trying to keep the enemy in view. He did his best to avoid focussing on the stars as he did so, the voice of his Academy instructor ringing in his head. "If you want to hurl, stargaze while you fly."

Teeth gritted; he pushed his fighter's abilities to the limit. Grudgingly, he had to admit that the Tholian pilot he was chasing was good. He was not only keeping "Ish" and his wingman, "Hunter", from getting a good shot, he was still managing to fire the odd bolt at the *Millennium* whenever he had the chance.

However, Ish had finally worked out the Tholian's fatal flaw. He noticed that, whenever he finally got a torpedo lock on the Tholian vessel he juked right to break it. He relayed the information to Hunter. "Watch for it. As soon as he moves, fire."

Then came the Tholian's final mistake when he levelled out for one second. It was enough for Ish to get a torpedo lock, but he did not reach for the firing button. He simply waited

for the enemy pilot to juke right.

Which he did – and found himself in Hunter's sights. No sooner had he begun moving than he slammed into the photon torpedo Hunter had fired on reflex. The Tholian vessel spun about in space, ionised gas jetting out from multiple cracks before it completely disintegrated in a small ball of brilliant light and burning plasma.

“Let's find another victim,” Ish said with cold cheer, casting an almost worried look at their mothership that was now sporting multiple scorch marks from energy that had leaked through her shielding.

Much the same was happening on the *Hathaway* as her sister ship. Panels were sparking and repair crews were rushing to repair the damage. Unlike the *Millennium*, as long as they were still ensnared in the web of tractor energy there was nowhere for them to go.

Captain Poulson was barking orders left and right when Piper appeared on his screen. “Ready when you are, Captain,” she said cheerfully.

Poulson simply nodded and gave the order.

At the rear of the engineering hull of the *Hathaway* their tractor emitter lowered near the Tholian's glittering web. Space crackled as energy was drawn from the ensnaring field. On the ship's forward hull all three of the phaser pods erupted into red fire as the raw energy being drawn from the web was directed at the Tholian ship. The enemy's shields flared just as the *Millennium* was rocked by another barrage.

Piper struggled to her feet. The blast from the last bolt still shaking the ship. Blood oozed from a gash in her left arm, and she tore off a strip of her uniform to form a simple bandage. She cried "Damage report!" as she bent to help up a fallen crew member.

Sarda, shaking his head to clear a haze of pain, regained his seat and coded in the question. The answer did not please him. "Heavy damage to engineering decks twenty-nine and thirty. Moderate damage to port warp nacelle strut. Auxiliary power estimated failure in ten minutes."

Piper flicked her gaze over to Amantallash who responded as if spoken to. "Shield one and two are now depleted. As for shield three, forward shields are down to twenty percent, aft shields at thirty percent. Port torpedo launcher damaged, still firing from starboard. Phasers at your command."

The captain had a choice to make. If she used the phasers much more the *Millennium* would soon be without power and at the Tholian's mercy. Yet, as she watched the viewscreen, she saw that the photon torpedoes were not enough to defeat them. The concentrated fire from the *Hathaway* was wearing down the Tholian's shields but how long they lasted was debatable. All this contemplation took no more than a second.

"Fire phasers one, three and five. Keep two and four in reserve." She sat down painfully in the Conn and watched as her orders were carried out. The beams from the three phaser pods attacked the Tholian Mother Ship's forward shields at the same point as the *Hathaway*'s as the photon torpedoes the

Millennium kept launching kept the rest of the ship busy.

Sarda spoke up over the din of repair crews working. “The Tholian vessel has discontinued firing. They are attempting to shore up their defences. The enemy fighters are focussing their fire on us. They are taking heavy casualties from our fighters.”

Piper smiled. The Tholians were on the back foot now. She almost cheered when she saw a volley of torpedoes unleashed from the *Hathaway*. The Tholian's forward shield went down and now their weapons played over the surface of the alien vessel, scoring the gleaming hull wherever they touched. The Tholian ship slowly began to retreat.

“Phasers down to thirty percent, Captain,” the security officer reported, concerned.

“Keep firing,” she barked in return. “Status of the Tholian web?”

“Nearly depleted, Captain,” Sarda answered. “The *Hathaway* is free to navigate.”

Remembering an old favourite movie, Piper thinned her lips and quoted: “Let's call it a draw. Signal the *Hathaway* that we are preparing to withdraw.” She could almost feel the ease of tension on the Bridge as the Tholian ship put more distance between them. “Don't relax, people. They aren't finished with us yet.”

Almost as if on cue the Tholian mother ship released a number of the smaller vessels which took potshots at the Federation ships, guarding the larger ship as it retreated. The *Hathaway* used the last of the web's energy on the Mothership then slowly began picking off those that were left. The

remaining eight Starfleet fighters stuck to their targets and began mopping up the rest.

“Cease fire with banks one, three and five,” Piper ordered, and none too soon. The status readouts on her chair arm revealed that they were critically low. “Cease firing torpedoes and keep firing phasers intermittently with the remaining banks. Keep emergency power on the shields and channel what's left of auxiliary power to the impulse engines.” She paused for a breath and wiped the sweat from her eyes. “Helm, bring us about, full impulse power.”

Lieutenant Commander Krashtallah put down his earpiece and spoke up. “Captain, the *Hathaway* is asking if they can join us.”

Piper spun about in her chair and grinned at her friend. “Tell them they are welcome and then dispatch a full report to Starfleet Command. And while you're at it ask them what happened to the backup I requested.”

Krashtallah grinned back, baring his fangs in delight. “Aye, sir,” he purred.

Piper need not have asked. Before them a starship almost as big as the *Millennium* dropped out of warp and sped past them in pursuit of the Tholian ships, firing phasers as soon as it was in range. Piper barely had time to glance at the ship as it went by, and she recognised it as the *Federation*-class Dreadnought *Star Empire* which she had commanded years before. Sarda turned and glanced at Piper, wondering if she had recognised it. She nodded and smiled. If any ship had to come to her aid, let it be the *Star Empire*.

Jason Nunn turned to report. “Captain, we are now at

.25c and heading back into Federation space. Auxiliary power is down to five percent. Respectfully suggest that we shut down the engines and coast at this speed."

Piper nodded. She looked speculatively at her Navigation officer. "The *Hathaway* is still with us, Captain," Carman reported. "We are currently on a trajectory toward Starbase seven-three. The fighters are still with us and are boarding."

The captain was satisfied. "Very good. Shut down auxiliary power and divert emergency power to life support." She stood then and walked to the turbolift. "Mister Krashtallah, you have the Conn. Sarda, come with me."

The crew moved smoothly to man the now empty positions and Crash began organising repair details.

Piper leaned on the railing when the doors closed, and the lift began descending. Sarda reached out and helped up his commander and only then noticed Piper's wound. Sarda ordered the lift to divert from Engineering to Sickbay, but Piper refused. She stood up straight on her own and disengaged Sarda's hand from her arm.

"Sarda," she began sternly then changed her tone to a more friendly one when she realised it wasn't necessary. She could feel his concern for her through their link. "I'll be all right. Merete will have her hands full as it is. She doesn't need me taking up space when she may have more critical cases to look after."

Sarda was not to be out logicked. He stopped the lift and broke out the turbo-lift emergency kit. He untied Piper's makeshift bandage and sprayed an antiseptic one onto his

friend's arm, staunching the flow of blood more effectively than her tourniquet. He offered her a mild analgesic which she reluctantly accepted. Only then did he order the lift on to Engineering.

“What should I expect when I get there?” Piper asked, feeling a little better for her friend's ministrations.

Her Vulcan friend looked pained for a split-second then resumed his usual mask. He may have covered it up physically, but Piper could never miss the pain in his soul. Their link was too solid. “We have sustained hull breaches on deck twenty-eight to thirty.” He paused for a beat, then added solemnly: “Six crewmembers were lost when that area decompressed.”

Sarda, as well, felt Piper's pain. She prided herself on having the lowest attrition rate in the Fleet. She hated losing people. He continued, trying to distract her. “Food replication has been damaged as well as uniform recycling. Full assessment is not possible until those areas can be sealed and repressurised. It will take some time to remove the emergency bulkheads to those areas.”

Captain and First Officer shared a look. It was times like these that their feelings tended to intermingle through their unintended Vulcan marriage link, brought on by a shared psychic trauma induced during a mind meld. Only a select group of friends knew of their condition, and they intended keeping it that way. The last thing they needed was unwanted scrutiny from people who didn't understand.

What they felt right now was grieved that their magnificent Starship was wounded. This ship had become

more than a means to an end – a tool for completing missions. It was home. And the Tholians had messed it up.

The turbolift stopped with a slight jar at the Engineering level and Piper had to push aside the door to get out after it stuck halfway. She stepped out and looked around her at the heart of her ship.

“What a mess,” was all she could utter. At the moment she was a mixture of angry and dismayed. Panels had been blown out, deck plates warped and opticable hung everywhere. The walls were scorched in several places and there was minimal power to the section as evidenced by the reduced lighting. She noticed that her medical staff was as efficient as ever as all the wounded had been evacuated and those with minor injuries had been treated.

Piper and Sarda stepped forward for a visual inspection of the warp core. It no longer pulsed with power but that was an illusion. If all was sound in the core, they would be able to start up soon. Sarda unlocked the dilithium chamber and made a quick visual inspection of the crystals. A nod from him was all the reassurance Piper needed. They were intact.

“Scanner!” Piper called, wondering if her friend had survived unscathed. A thud and the sound of shuffling brought her over to the Auxiliary Power controls where the engineer was busy repairing some of the damage. Legs first, he wriggled out of the workspace beneath and peered up at his boss.

“I hear ya, Piper. What can I do for yer?” Judd was a tad irate, dishevelled and dirty and save for the portable bone knitter around his ankle, he appeared fine.

Piper knew better. Scanner rarely ever referred to her by her first name anymore except in times of exceptional stress. "How does it look?" she asked, quietly.

Judd sat up and indicated the mess around him with a lost expression. "It's goin' to take a load of chewing gum and sticky tape to put this lot back together again." The pain in his voice was all too evident; he loved his ship.

Sarda knelt next to his friend and lent him a supporting hand, letting a comforting feeling through to Judd through his touch. Judd looked up gratefully and accepted the help upright. "Thanks, Points," he said, a hint of his old humour returning. Scanner allowed Sarda to help him around as he gave his superiors a full report.

It would take several days to repair the main systems. Once auxiliary power was restored, they would be able to erect a forcefield along the hull breach and get to work repairing the wall plating and food replicators.

"Warp drive is going to be the problem, Cap'," Scanner said, leading them over to a diagnostics panel and offered each of his superiors a seat, which Piper alone accepted. Sarda simply wanted to be handy in case Scanner fell off his seat.

Judd sat down heavily and punched up an exterior view of the *Millennium*'s port warp nacelle strut. The hull was scored and some of the plating blown away, revealing the superstructure beneath. Scanner focused the picture on the rupture revealing damage to the warp transfer conduit. "Ah can repair the damage in space all right, but ah need a gravity well to align the warp engines again. It'd also help with the exterior repairs. It's easier to move in a micro gravity than it

is in open space.” Scanner switched off the display with a disgusted click as if the ship had somehow betrayed him.

“So, you need me to find you a planet, eh?” chirped Piper.

“Yeah. Something around one planetary mass should do,” said Scanner, matter-of-factly, as if Piper could simply pick one off the supermarket shelf.

Piper looked up at Sarda, an inquiring look in her eye. He tilted his head to one side, considering. “I would have to consult a star chart, Captain.” He nodded at the two of them then left for the Bridge.

Piper stood and helped Scanner back to the Auxiliary controls and watched him slide back under. “How long till we have Auxiliary Power restored?” she asked as his head disappeared.

“Sixteen hours, Cap’,” came the muffled reply as Scanner resumed his work.

Piper grimaced. Sixteen hours of helplessness. Their only protection, the *Hathaway* cruising alongside them. It was humbling for the fleet’s mightiest ship to rely on another for protection. Shaking her head, she turned and fought off the feeling of sadness that threatened to overtake her. She stepped into the turbolift and with one last look at the wreckage left for sickbay.

Chapter Two

Rogen was working on a broken arm when Piper strode into Sickbay, acknowledging each of her crew's smiles and nods upon her appearance. He appreciated her attempt to restore morale so soon after a battle. Her real reason for being there became apparent when his eyes came to rest on her bandage. He quickly set the crewman's arm and placed him in a regeneration booth as no more portable models were left. Rogen smiled and offered encouragement, then turned and guided the captain to an examination table where he removed the bandage and her uniform sleeve.

“Tsk, tsk, Captain,” he said, chiding her playfully. “You really must stop throwing yourself at sharp objects.” He gently turned her arm as he scanned it. The wound was deep but had already stopped bleeding, fortunately.

Piper scowled at Rogen's flippancy. “This is not the time, Doctor.”

Her tone surprised him, but he did not let it faze him. “There is always time for a good bedside manner, Captain. A cheerful patient not only heals faster but is also much more likely to survive.”

The captain narrowed her eyes a little, not sure whether he was being literal or if there was an implied threat there somewhere. Still feeling raw and ticked off at the Doctor, Piper said caustically: “I wish I could say the same for the dead.” A thought came to her. “I thought you were the ship's

psychologist?" she added by way of query.

Seemingly not bothered by the captain's abrasiveness, Rogen shrugged. "I'm also what your people call a "General Practitioner", although I rarely practice these days." He gestured at the roomful of casualties. "My wife thought now would be a good time for me to get some."

The accidental double entendre broke the ice and gave Piper cause to smile. "Practice, you mean," she said to clarify.

If Rogen got the joke, he didn't show it. The captain put her estimation of him up a notch. She was certain his comment was a deliberate ploy to settle her nerves and it worked.

Feeling a little more like herself, Piper asked: "What is the official report on our casualties?"

The Doctor's grief was real. He hated loss of life as much as his wife. It was a feature of their species. The Palkeo Est had a great reverence for the sanctity of life. Rogen paused for a moment to internalise the pain then answered her, his voice rough.

"Seventeen dead, thirty injuries with four still on the critical list. Of those only one is not expected to make it – Captain." Rogen turned back to his work and finished sealing her wound. Piper flexed the arm, feeling the sensation return as the temporary anaesthetic slowly wore off. Rogen made way as she hopped off the bed. He was surprised by her next request.

"Take me to them."

Rogen's eyebrows shot up, but he just nodded and beckoned her into the darkened next room which was being

used as a make-shift post-operative ward. There he explained what was wrong with each patient. He stepped up to the last one and looked up worriedly at the still fluctuating monitor readings.

“Ensign Dare has massive internal injuries, and third degree burns to forty percent of his body.” Rogen had to work at remaining clinically detached as he looked at the broken body he had helped reconstruct. “Fortunately, his brain is undamaged and if he lives, he will be able to function again with the help of surgical implants.”

Piper stepped past him and bent to see her crewmember more clearly. She tenderly stroked his cheek, brushed a lock of hair out of his eyes, then straightened to a more military stance. “Get well, soon, Mister,” she said gently, yet with a hint of her usual authority. “You’re needed back at your post.”

Is that a tear? Rogen wondered as Piper swivelled and made her way to the exit.

“Captain?”

Piper stopped and waited for the Doctor to catch up. She stood, hands clutched behind her back, and waited for him to talk.

Rogen was for a moment lost for words; the moment had thrown him. Then he remembered what he had stopped her for. “Captain. I apologise if I may seem out of line, but if you need any further help, I am a qualified psychotherapist.” His unspoken question hung in the air between them and for a moment Piper seemed genuinely interested. Then the hard commander’s veneer came down again and she turned once again to leave.

“No thank you, Doctor.” She strode from the room but paused for a step in the doorway. “But I will take it under advisement.”

On the Bridge, Sarda and Carman consulted the library computer for a chart of the sector. Taking into account the *Millennium*'s momentum, they discovered a suitable world more-or-less on their flight path and still within Federation space.

A smile creased Carman's thirty-year-old Grecian features, letting his natural handsome warmth show. “The Captain will like this one,” he said.

Sarda nodded absent-mindedly and turned off the display. “It is adequate. Class H, but not uninhabitable. What is important is that it suits Commander Sandage's requirements.”

Lieutenant Valastro smiled and tapped the monitor. “And it's unexplored,” he pointed out with delight. He noted Sarda's faraway look. “Does it remind you of Vulcan?” he asked, curious.

The comment brought a raised brow to Sarda's visage. On the inside, he was anything but calm. He yearned to return to his homeworld with every fibre of his being. “There are certain similarities.” It was all he would volunteer.

Knowing that was all he was going to squeeze out of him, Carman turned and resumed his station at Navigation. “I recommend we give the world a survey while we're there,” he said formally, then with a little more cheer: “It'll give us something to do while Engineering is fixing the ship.” He

took the liberty of punching up a chart of the world they would be seeking on the main viewscreen. "Not much detail," he muttered, disappointed at how fuzzy it looked. It looked like an out-of-focus image of Venus. He noted it was rendered by a long-range probe that took it whilst passing by at a distance. He gestured at the data, and lack thereof, with disgust. "All it tells us us that we'll survive on the surface." All the same, a smile tugged at the corner of his mouth. The explorer in him was fascinated. "Oh, well. It's about time we did some seeking out of a new world and civilisation for ourselves."

Sarda found himself unable to comment otherwise. He, too, had been bored by the lengthy patrol, but of course he dared not show it. The only person who had an inkling of his sense of drudgery was the captain, and that's only because she could not help but hear his thoughts and feelings. All the mission had achieved for him personally was a chance to use the *Millennium*'s new and more powerful sensors to probe the enemy's territory. The results had been far from interesting.

The only thing they revealed was what was *not* there. It was known only to the Captain and her First Officer that the *Millennium* had been tasked with finding the *Ingram*, the starship that had been the first-of-class for their type. The *Ingram* had been lost and presumed destroyed during her initial warp trials. Upon further investigation, evidence had been discovered that pointed to her having been stolen. By whom was at the moment still unknown.

The *Millennium* had been tasked with her recovery primarily because she was the only ship in the fleet that had a hope in hell of defeating her. The *Ingram-I* had been designed

to be a combination of Battleship and Aircraft Carrier, with shielding and firepower to spare. With the class' triple shielding and megaphasers, they were predators with razor sharp teeth. The only advantage the *Millennium* carried over her sister ship was the fact the *Ingram* had been taken before she'd had her cloaking device installed.

The fact the *Millennium* had a cloaking device was still top secret, and Piper was well aware how it might be received by their neighbours if the word got out. So, the Captain used it as a weapon of last resort.

Although Sarda would not admit it and their search had so far been fruitless, it had been an interesting exercise in itself. Deducing the reason behind the starship's disappearance was proving to be an excellent opportunity to extend his abilities.

Now they had a new mystery. Perhaps there was a lost civilisation on this planet that had yet to be uncovered. They may have created technologies that could be of value to the Federation.

Sarda caught himself. He had obviously been swayed by Piper's emotionalism and letting his imagination run away with him. If he didn't watch it, he would wind up thinking like a human. He found the thought mildly distasteful.

So, instead of replying to Mister Valastro's remarks he hit the Conn intraship control and summoned the captain to the bridge. Naturally, the change in course needed her approval. He found his attention drawn to the Helm officer who was assisting with the ship's repairs.

Jason put down his sonic screwdriver in disgust. His

head was buried in the circuitry beneath his helm control panel, and he had been busy replacing fried components in one of the boards when he yanked it out and threw it on the floor.

Just then Piper strode on to the bridge and scowled mockingly at her junior officer. "Are you vandalising the Bridge, Mister Nunn?" she asked, curious. She found it hard to resist baiting the lanky young officer.

He looked up sheepishly and picked up the board he had removed with a complete lack of dexterity. "No, Captain!" he said, red faced. "Permission to leave the bridge?"

Piper just nodded and watched him go with an amused smirk playing around the corners of her lips. She looked around the rest of the bridge crew who were gawking at her openly. She looked down at her bright red, form-fitting jumpsuit and answered their unspoken question over the ship's P.A. system. "This is the captain. Uniform recycling is down so uniforms are optional until the unit is repaired. The food replicators are also damaged so food rationing is hereby ordered."

That brought disgusted looks from the Caitians as they both detested the protein packets that contained only what you needed, not what you liked.

A glance at them kept Piper's hand on the button and she added: "I know they're not exactly palatable and I'm sure some sadistic chemist at Starfleet Labs invented them because he didn't make it out here, but we're going to have to rough it for a while. Thank you for your co-operation and hopefully things will be back to normal soon." A quick look at the felines, who were looking as if they could rough it with the

best, confirmed that her message had been received and understood.

Her gaze shifted to Sarda and Carman who seemed to be grinning without actually doing so. She stepped over and looked them both in the eyes. "Well, what have you got for me?"

Sarda indicated the planet still on the screen. "It is close to our current course and will require only a five minute, thirteen second burst at half impulse to align us." Piper took in the information displayed as he spoke. "It is class-H and is approximately point nine of Earth for mass." For Piper's benefit he added, "An eighth of Proxima Beta."

The captain had by now absorbed the information and the import of the fuzzy picture. "And it's unexplored," she added wistfully. Something close to joy filled her heart. She finally had the opportunity to do that which had brought her out here in the first place. To perhaps discover a new race and civilisation was more than she could hope for. She stepped a little closer to the screen as if she could get nearer the final frontier with a step.

"What is our E.T.A. at..." Piper looked at the planet's name. "Tau Beta Four?" she finished.

Carman spoke up. "Six days at .75c if Mister Sandage's estimates on repair time are correct."

Piper nodded. As soon as auxiliary power was restored, they could use the impulse engines to accelerate to that speed. "Fine. As soon as Mister Nunn..." As she spoke Jason stepped off the turbolift with the replacement component. ".is finished with his repairs to the helm take us to Tau Beta Four."

She stopped and spoke up for the computer. "I want a staff meeting in the officer's briefing room in one hour." The captain turned back to her second. "Mister Sarda, you have the Bridge. Inform the *Hathaway* of our intentions and pass on my thanks." With that said she disappeared into the turbolift.

When her work was finally done, Merete retired to her office and crawled into a liquor bottle. "God, I'm tired of putting people back together again." She put down her glass with a clunk and wiped her forehead with the back of her hand. She leaned forward and dragged her operating gown off her arms and tossed it across the room. It dropped expertly into the recycler tube and was whooshed away. Realising what she had done, she sat up and made to follow but knew it was too late. Her gown would be floating in space by now and she was running out of fresh ones. To her annoyance, she realised they would have to clean them the old-fashioned way for a while.

"Great, more work," she muttered. She sighed. There was one consolation. "At least I don't have to do it." She slumped back in her chair and stared at the ceiling. The last thing she wanted to do was to make out the death certificates and perform the necessary autopsies. In fact, when it came to the postmortems, there was so little of some of the dead that their bodies could be shipped home in baggies. Even though she was the epitome of the seasoned veteran, the thought still turned her stomach, so she took another gulp of her drink and let the fire run down her throat. She closed her eyes and tried

to relax, so she did not even turn as the sound of the doors opening reached her ears. Before she could check to see who it was, she found her shoulders being massaged and for a moment she forgot her grief. She broke into a broad smile and let her husband continue.

“That feels soooo good. Don't stop, please.” She leaned forward and let Rogen work down her arms and spine, relaxing her tense muscles. “If I were Manny, I'd purr,” she murmured. When Rogen finally stopped, she looked up at him as if begging for more.

Her husband shook his head. “If I keep going, we're going to wind up on the floor and I don't think that's a good idea.” He pulled out his vest top and let some cool air in. “As it is I'm going to need a cold shower.”

Merete smiled and threw her arms around her lover. She breathed in the scent of him and smiled in contentment. “Thank God I finally found you. I was beginning to think I would die an old maid.” At Rogen's confused look she elaborated. “A human expression. It means remaining unwed.”

“I see.” He ran his fingers through his wife's hair and smiled. “No danger of that, now.”

Merete hugged harder. “None at all.”

Rogen remembered what he had come to talk about. “I thought you should know that I've got all the serious cases sedated and they're resting peacefully. Nurse Stone is looking after them, but she's about as tired as I...” he looked down at his wife, remembering they were now a married couple, “...we are.”

Merete nodded. She expected as much.

A thought came to Rogen's mind. "Oh, I almost forgot to mention. I patched the captain's arm as well..."

That got Merete's attention. She sat bolt upright. "Is she okay?" she asked, suddenly fearful.

Her reaction surprised Rogen but had to remind himself that he had only known his bride for six weeks. "You're very close," he said, doing his best to sound compassionate, but neutral.

His wife rolled her eyes. "If you'd been through what we've been through together, you would be too." It sounded like a line even to her own ears. She wondered why she was so defensive. This was no way to be with her husband, she decided. "Years ago, I let Piper down, and she not only forgave me, but gave me the opportunity to make it up to myself and my friends. In a very real way, I owe her my life." At that point, she went into detail regarding her role in the Rittenhouse affair many years before, and her betrayal of her friend, the then Lieutenant Piper. How Piper had not only gotten her fixed up when she had been wounded but been by her side to help her get over it. She finished with a still concerned: "How is she?"

He put her at ease. "She's fine. Just a gash to her upper arm. It won't even leave a scar."

Merete's relief was fairly palpable. "Thank God."

Rogen ran his hand down her cheek and gently caressed her chin. "Piper's very lucky to have a friend like you," he said, trying to lift her spirits.

His wife slumped back in her chair once more, bone

weary. "More like the other way around, my love," she said. "I know she'll never let *me* down."

The psychotherapist filed that little piece of information away for another time. He had the distinct impression she still hadn't forgiven herself. Remembering, he looked up at the chronometer and regretfully pulled Merete to her feet.

"Whaaaat," she said. "I don't wanna get up."

Rogen laughed at that. "I hope our children don't sound like that," he said.

The comment went over her head. "Just leave me here and wake me in the morning."

To Merete's surprise, Rogen slipped to his side and picked her up his arms, heading for the door. "If we don't hurry up, my flower, we're going to be late for the captain's meeting."

Instead of resisting, Merete simply rested her head on his shoulder. "Wake me up when we get there."

Rogen thought she was joking until he heard her gentle snore as he stepped into the corridor.

The senior staff talked quietly amongst themselves as they sat around the briefing room table. Some were still in uniform whilst others had taken advantage of the Standing Routine Orders and were attired more casually. Crash and his sister had decided to forgo clothing altogether and spent their time picking on each other's fur. Each wore a simple collar with their rank insignia attached. Sarda remained the dignified Vulcan in his immaculate uniform and was talking with dignified enthusiasm to Scanner and Jason Nunn.

Carman was dressed gaily in his planet's style which was strongly reminiscent of Earth's Greece. He was discussing the finer points of art with a now largely conscious Merete who was surprised to find a kindred spirit amongst the crew. She was feeling refreshed after her short snooze. Ghost sat to her left and interjected how she loved the Renaissance period. She still wore her uniform from before with her Fighter Pilot's wings attached to her lapel.

An addition to their group was Lieutenant Steven Goldberg, Squadron leader of the fighter group temporarily assigned to the *Millennium* whilst she was on border patrol. (Their usual squadron was back on Earth receiving refresher training at New Miramar.) Goldberg was of medium height and build, with blond hair and a rakish look that said he'd been around. He wore, of all things, blue jeans and a white T-shirt, and a leather jacket that seemed to have survived since the Wright brothers' days. An old-fashioned set of gold wings were pinned to it, telling all who and what he was.

Their murmuring ended with Piper's entrance. They all came to respectful attention and waited for her to be seated before they relaxed once more.

Scanner looked bemused when he saw that Piper was not *entirely* out of uniform. He noticed her Captain's bars hanging on a slender chain nestled close to her heart. He snickered quietly to himself. Piper looked at him and noticed his attention on her chest. Knowing it wasn't her cleavage he was interested in, she picked up her insignia with a nail and dangled it for all to see.

“You can take away my uniform,” she said. “But I’m

keeping this.”

“Fair enough,” Scanner returned. “We wouldn’t want you mistaken for a regular person.”

Judd’s remark brought chuckles from the rest of those seated. Piper laughed along with them then quietened them with a slightly raised hand.

“Let’s get to business,” she announced. “Mister Sandage, seeing your department is in the biggest mess, let’s hear from you.”

Scanner let his feelings show clearly. “We still have a big hole in the side of the ship and that won’t change until Auxiliary Power is restored. Our current estimate is twelve more hours on that one. As you know, food and clothing are out. We won’t have food for a few more days.” Groans were heard from a few but a quick glance from Piper silenced them. Judd went on and finished his report with an affirmation of their need for a planet. “The sooner we’re in orbit, the sooner ah can get to work on that pylon. The damage is worse than we thought. The power conduit is definitely ruptured, and I need at least a microgravity to fix it quickly.”

Piper nodded her understanding. “Thanks, Scanner. I know they need you in Engineering.”

Judd smiled and left the room, still limping with the bone knitter strapped to his ankle.

The captain turned to her newest officer. “Mister Goldberg?”

The flight officer leaned forward and twitched his upper lip in hello. “It’s Ish, Cap’, as my friends call me.”

Piper ignored his feeble attempt to score points with her.

He was not much younger than her, but if his attitude in their occasional meetings said anything, he was trying to get too friendly for her liking. "It isn't until I say so, Lieutenant."

Goldberg looked as if she had physically slapped him. To his credit, he continued his report. "As you know, *Captain*, we lost two men in the fighting, and two others are in sickbay with minor burns when their ships were hit. It'll take several days to repair the damage to their birds and get the rest up to standard." With a cheerful grin he stated: "Our boys got eight Rubies, though." He knitted his fingers together behind his head, and sat back with satisfaction, his report given.

Piper's eyes narrowed slightly. Was he boasting? She certainly hoped not.

Sarda spoke up in his usual efficient manner. "Your squadron's contribution is noted and logged."

Goldberg looked miffed. "Is that all my men are gonna be remembered for?"

Sarda gazed back at him serenely. "You expect more? Your people did their duty. The loss of two pilots is regrettable, but not unexpected, given the high attrition rates in their chosen roles."

Still not happy, Ish was going to add more, but he caught the captain's scowl. He decided to save this argument for later.

The captain shot Ghost a look that told her she wanted a word with her later regarding her subordinate's behaviour. Understanding, Ryan gave her an almost imperceptible nod.

Piper turned to the Doctor. "Medical?"

Merete turned professional as she delivered more bad news. "As you know, we lost seventeen crewmembers in the

fighting. Four are still on the critical list," she looked Piper in the eyes, "Ensign Dare is still with us..."

Piper smiled encouragement. "Good."

Merete continued. "Although I give him about two hours."

Piper's pain found her eyes. She was responsible for the lives under her command, and she was proud of her Starfleet record, but she could tell you the names of every lost soul. "Damn," she cursed quietly.

The *Millennium* crew sympathised. They were more than just a group of people serving Starfleet, they were family. In the cramped conditions of a starship there was no room for animosity, you either got along or you were transferred.

"I expect the other three to be out of ICU in the next two days." Merete looked at her hands for a moment and seemed to look within. "Fortunately, those who perished died quickly. Strangely enough, almost all of them requested to be consigned to space."

Piper nodded. "We'll perform the ceremony for those lost at twelve hundred tomorrow." She glanced at Crash. "Commander, please inform the crew it will be held under the Oak."

The "Oak" was a tree that had been transplanted into the *Millennium*'s capacious Recreation Deck located at the rear of the Primary Hull, port side. It was a popular place for the crew to relax and be reminded there was more to the universe than metal walls and recycled atmosphere.

Crash nodded, silently. He was getting used to the notion that greater responsibility also often brought more

difficult duties for him personally.

Piper turned to a lighter subject. "Navigation?"

Carman spoke up in his accented Standard. "We still expect an ETA of six days to Tau Beta IV." He looked around him at his friends. "Anyone for tennis?"

Amantallash curled her tail in delight. "Any time, Carman," she cheerfully challenged.

Piper watched the verbal banter, not willing to tarnish the morale boosting humour Carman was so good at.

The navigator looked over at the security officer and waggled a finger at her. "I donna play against people who use a racquet with a tail that can cover the entire court."

Amantallash merely teased Carman with the tip of her tail in front of his nose. He made to grab it, but missed as she nimbly pulled it away.

Sarda tapped the table with a light pen to restore order. "Mister TandroVerandi." Rogen looked up at the sound of his name. "Please furnish us with an estimate of the crew's morale."

Rogen cleared his throat and rubbed his stubble in thought. "I would say those who did not personally know the deceased crew members will fare well. I've heard some of the crew referring to the "waxing" we gave the Tholians. While I fear that some of the crew are overconfident in the abilities of this ship, I believe that, in general, their confidence is healthy and not unfounded." He stopped for a moment and consulted his datapadd. "However, there are a few who are not coping at all. One in particular, Mister Daryn Iona, is distraught and unable to function since his wife died in the first attack."

Rogen looked around him at the sympathetic looks of his friends. "I have relieved him of duty pending extensive counselling which I intend to begin as soon as possible."

The captain nodded. "I'm glad we've got you here. I'd hate for a good officer to be left behind just because we'd have to leave him at some spacedock facility." Her report received, she turned to her First Officer. "Mister Sarda, any news from Starfleet regarding our recent trouble at the NZ?"

Sarda looked noncommittal. "Nothing as yet, Captain. Although one can speculate that there will be an official complaint made against the Tholians, nothing will of course come of it. We have no trade with them and nothing with which to "squeeze them" as you humans might say. While it is useful to mention the treaty of 2265, it was made with only one faction of the Tholian government, and the Federation Council have long held the belief that they never intended to honour it. So, there is no formal agreement between the Federation and "The Territorial Annex of the Tholian Assembly", just a mutually accepted sector of space..."

"You mean no-man's land," jibed Nunn.

"...where parties from either side of the dispute are not welcome." Sarda gave Jason a cold gaze that told the young lieutenant that only a wasp would have the ill manners to interrupt him. Chastened, Jason stared at the nails of his clenched hands.

Piper suppressed a grin and turned to the rest of her crew. "Open discussion is called for regarding the Tholian attack. Any thoughts, gentlebeings?"

Amantallah growled, showing her teeth in barely

suppressed anger at the boldness of the Tholians. “An invasion, of course.”

Crash tut-tutted his sister. “Shrallah, there was not a sufficient force for an invasion of any sort.”

Carman nodded agreement as he rubbed his ever-present five o'clock shadow. “We were out in the middle of nowhere. There wasn't a habitable planet for light years in any direction.”

Jason's blue eyes brightened as he took up the train of thought. “Yeah, the Rubies need a hell of a hot planet to live on and hot methane environments are few and far between.”

Ghost nodded absently. “I've read their worlds look more like Dante's Inferno rather than Eden.”

Amantallah looked confused for a moment, then light dawned, and comprehension reached her eyes. “The target was us.”

Piper looked around her at the eyes that spoke agreement. “The target was the *Millennium* and the *Hathaway*, two of the Federation's newest classes of star cruiser, the *Ingram* and *Constellation*.” Shock graced the faces of most of the crew, with notable exceptions being Sarda and Crash. It seemed the notion had occurred to them as well.

Sarda stared gravely at his superior. “You are suggesting that they require our technology, for security or intelligence purposes.”

Fidgeting, Merete stared Piper in the face. “They're preparing for war.”

The Doctor's comment made the entire room uncomfortable. Outraged mutterings were heard by many,

however “Ish” seemed to be the only one pleased with the notion. The captain noted his reaction and filed it away for future reference. She then decided to defuse the situation, tapping on the table with a single nail until all was quiet.

“We cannot be certain *what* the Tholians were up to, and as we have reported to Starfleet Command the entire situation is now in their hands.” Piper let her words sink in, then continued. “The minutes of this meeting have been taken and our speculations will be forwarded to Command, with my recommendation for immediate action.” Piper paused for a moment, inviting further comment. When none were forthcoming, she stood and finished their business with a brisk “dismissed”.

Chapter Three

With Alpha shift over for the day, the crew relaxed around the ship in varied ways that suited their lifestyles. Some read, some chatted, some worked off the stresses of the day with exercise or gymnastics, while Piper and Sarda's recreation this day was taking a more interesting turn.

Those using the combat exercise mats respectfully made way as the ship's commanders stepped up, each dressed in a gi that vaguely reminded one of one worn by Karate experts. However, theirs included thick padding on the arms, torsos and legs. Each carried a helmet and staff. The staves were a lightweight, but extremely solid metal, that ended in a round hilt and ornate bone handle reminiscent of ivory. Andorian symbols adorned their attire, however the Captain's were different from Sarda's as they denoted rank, as opposed to a coloured belt used in many human disciplines.

The Andorian fighting art of Scheel-tah was a sight to be seen as it was a blend of the more traditional martial arts and kendo. Most believed the Vin'tah was used to bludgeon one's opponent into submission, and indeed, it could be used in that fashion. However, Piper's carried a hidden button that retracted the outer casing of the shaft and left a razor-sharp blade roughly a metre long.

For the purposes of their practice, her blade remained sheathed.

As the combatants took their places on the mat whilst donning their helmets, the crew members around them were

laying bets on who would win this round. Although everyone knew that Piper was a Grand Master in the art, it was clear that Sarda had been a very quick study. All the same, the odds on Piper were even, whereas Sarda was three-to-one against.

Once they reached the opposing ends of the hundred-square metre mat, each turned and raced forward, their Vin'tahs flying in blinding arcs. Sarda swung low savagely using his Vulcan strength to his advantage. Piper nimbly hopped over the rod and brought her staff down quickly, but gently, on Sarda's head. Off balance, he had no chance to parry. A gong resounded and the two of them stepped away from each other.

Piper took off her helmet and shook her head in frustration. "No, no, no! Sarda, be graceful. Don't bludgeon." Replacing her helmet, she added: "Remember, you're only interested in the torso and head. When we're scoring points, nothing else matters. Never mind that's where the kill shots are."

Changing tactics, Sarda did not return to his corner and struck without warning with a blow that was aimed at her left ear. His aim was true, yet his blow was parried with a deft twist that brought his Vin'tah over her head. Piper then struck back and this time her friend was completely on the defensive as she struck repeatedly from all directions, driving him backwards on the mat. The staff blurred as it flew through the air and only Sarda's Vulcan reflexes kept her at bay.

The Captain suddenly feinted to the left and Sarda,

expecting the next blow to come from that direction swung to the right. With the Vulcan pivoting on his right foot, Piper swung around and landed a blow on the back of Sarda's right knee, bringing him to the floor. A quick thrust at his chest and the match was over. Credits were exchanged as Piper removed her helmet and helped her friend to his feet.

"It seems I have a lot to learn," Sarda said and bowed in the Vulcan manner, which Piper returned. Their outward display of respect was reflected though their mutual feeling of admiration through their link.

"Not as much as you might think," Piper said, giving him some credit.

They moved over towards the Oak and sat down on a recreation of a nineteenth century park bench, complete with varnished wooden slats. Piper mopped the sweat from her brow, took a deep breath and let the tension of the day leave her. Exercise always helped her burn off any excess frustration, and there had been plenty of that today.

Sarda, on the other hand, simply closed his eyes for a moment in quiet meditation, took a deep, cleansing breath, then opened his eyes again. To Piper's eyes he seemed ready for another day of trauma. She gave him a mock scowl.

"Your recuperative powers never cease to amaze me, Sarda," she said, giving him a gentle stir.

Sarda shook off the comment with a small lecture for his friend. "In the ancient times before Surak, if you could not recover quickly enough, you were dead. If the competitors were evenly matched, combat could have continued for days."

Her eyes widened a little as Piper considered such a world. She could see it in her mind, shirtless Vulcan males circling one another, waving their lirpas over their heads, trying to slice at each other with their razor-sharp tips. Suddenly, she realised the image was not her own, she was recalling one of Sarda's memories as he was thinking of it. "We're doing it again," she projected into his mind with a little cheer.

Without actually doing so, Sarda gave her a light chuckle. As Piper had access to his mind – whether he wanted her to or not – there was little need for typical pretence. "I am not certain we have actually verbalised a word since we sat down."

The thought gave Piper a start. She had to agree, she could not actually recall saying a word. She recalled the image and the hate she saw in the fighter's eyes. She knew from experiencing Sarda's own powerful emotions that, if unchecked, the Vulcans must have come close to exterminating themselves. "I'm surprised there's any of you left," she said without heat, only sorrow.

Sarda's distant stare answered Piper. Once more, Piper found herself perceiving Sarda's thoughts of that time long ago when Surak had taught peace through embracing logic and reason rather than passion. There had been much opposition, but the majority had, thankfully, accepted the truth. A people ruled by feelings would find itself tossed about as a sailing ship at the mercy of the wind.

Putting aside their emotions did not mean they were not still passionate. They simply didn't indulge in that part

of their personalities – at all, lest, like an alcoholic being offered a whiskey, they would fall off the emotional wagon and run amok.

“We have survived,” Sarda said in the privacy of their thoughts.

The Captain stood and looked down at her friend with something akin to pity in her eyes. “I can understand the need, my friend, but at what cost?” she asked rhetorically, silently. With a sigh, the first actual sound she had made since she had sat down, she turned and flipped her towel over her shoulder then padded over to the change rooms for a shower.

A shadow of pain passed over Sarda's face as he watched her go. They both knew that Vulcan's price had been very high.

Jason squinted down the barrel of the rifle at the target. Carefully, ever so carefully, he squeezed the trigger. Suddenly, just before he could fire, something disturbed his prey and it vanished among the long grasses. He followed the rustling and tried to get a bead on it once more, then fired quickly. He slid back the bolt-action, ejecting the spent cartridge, allowing a fresh one to take its place, before pushing it back in and locking it in place. The whole action took less than two seconds.

He snapped off one more shot, the bullet going slightly wide of the target.

“Bloody hell!” he shouted angrily. If this had been home in Merrijig, Australia, he would never have missed.

The rabbit would never have known he was there. Aggravated, he swung around to find Carman grinning like a Cheshire cat beside the shooting gallery door. "What the hell did you do that for?" Jason snapped, petulantly.

Carman just shrugged and went on grinning madly. "Better luck next time," he said cheerfully. He looked towards the far end of the gallery booth where the three-dimensional image of a thick forest was fading away. He scratched his head, wondering. "Why are you shooting at long eared rodents anyway?"

"You know as officers we have to keep practising..." Jason changed his tone to that of a sergeant-major type instructor he'd had at the academy, "...to maintain the high standard that Starfleet expects from its officers."

The Alpha Centauran's face filled with memories, fond and wanton. "I see you had Commander Armstrong for weapons training, too."

Jason snorted in derision. "If there was one class I could have missed, it would have been his. What the hell do I need to learn about weapons when I grew up in the High Country?"

Curious, Carman had to ask what he meant.

"The High Country in Victoria, Australia. You see, I was taught how to use a rifle when I was old enough to carry one." Jason handed the navigator the antique Jungle Carbine .303 rifle he had been using, which Carman handled reverently. "Dad showed me how to load it, clean it and fire it without missing."

Carman inspected the gun as would a veteran, checking

every little detail and marvelling at how the rifle still operated smoothly. He noticed the rounds had been replaced with special blanks that responded realistically that the computer could register and render as real shots. He glanced up at the Aussie in query. It was an unusual weapon to have in one's personal arsenal, to say the very least.

“The rifle's been in my family for generations,” he said fondly. He laughed as a sudden memory asserted itself. His father, handing him the gun at his graduation, warning him that he might need it someday. Jason had just laughed and shook his father's hand, thanking him for the gift.

Resetting the computer, Jason reloaded and turned towards the imitation forest once more. Carman was amazed at the sounds of so much wildlife, and the noisy sound of a Kookaburra's call startled him. Bellbirds cried their mating calls with a beautiful brief shrill that rolled around and through the men.

Once again in the virtual distance, a rabbit poked his nose out of a burrow, quietly sniffing the air. He moved forward a foot and had no chance as Jason picked it off with an expert shot.

Carman found himself mildly repulsed at the arbitrary killing of a wild creature, even if it was a computer-generated simulation. Upon seeing his friend's expression, Jason explained.

“For five hundred years we've been paying the price for some idiot Englishman's idea to introduce rabbits to the countryside, and after all these years we still haven't been able to kill them off.” He scowled, remembering generations of

damage done by the feral pests. He remembered another kind. "They're as bad as Cane Toads and the only thing *they're* good for is golfing practice." Carman was shocked at Jason's advocacy of genocide, the younger moved to placate him.

"You see, rabbits aren't native to Australia and all they've ever done is eat, dig holes and breed ever since." He grimaced. "Believe me, they do a hell of a lot of it. They eat crops, grass, whatever's available and return nothing. Gawd, in some places they don't even leave enough food for the animals that *are* native to eat." He hefted his rifle then, for emphasis. "So, when I do see a rabbit, he gets a bullet from old Bertha, here." He patted the gun affectionately. "And there's one less of the bastards." He gave a brief, feral grin. "At least they don't taste too bad."

"I see," said Carman, slowly, unwilling to commit himself to agreeing with Jason's seemingly barbaric line of thinking.

Jason just laughed and slapped his mate on the back. "You don't have to, just accept it as the way it is."

Carman grinned. "You're determined to beat me over the head with IDIC, aren't you?"

Lieutenant Nunn shrugged. "Hey, if you don't understand them, don't knock them."

The two friends laughed out loud and left the gallery to hunt up some food of the ration pack kind.

"Dang it all to hell!" Scanner threw down his laser welder in disgust, got up from under the auxiliary control

panel, and soundly kicked it, letting out a resounding, satisfying metallic thud. Two seconds later the pain from his injured ankle reached his over-taxed brain, resulting in his hopping around the engineering control room in agony, and loosing a string of expletives that would make a Klingon politician sit up and take notes. Once the pain had receded to something approximately one step down from bamboo torture, he sat and decided to take a more rational approach to the problem. He thought.

As he mapped out in his mind the many energy conduits that made up auxiliary control, he failed to notice a ghostly apparition float across the deck and come to rest beside him. It was only when he put out his arm to retrieve his welder that he came upon something warm, soft and furry and for a moment he was back on in Tennessee sitting on his bear rug in front a warm fire, cooking marshmallows.

“If you keep your hand there you're going to get people talking,” purred Amantallah.

Instead of recoiling, Scanner changed his motion to one of stroking, and before she knew it, Amantallah was purring loudly. Scanner had owned a cat when he was young, and he knew just where to scratch.

The security officer batted away his hand before she found herself asking for more. Of all the humanoids on board, she found Scanner understood her the best. He seemed to know what to do and say at just the right times to make her feel completely at ease and so she liked to be with him. In fact, she spent more time with Scanner than her own Shrallal, her brother Krashtallah, but they had only started talking

again after many years and their relationship still had a long way to go.

Judd ushered her to the console and asked her opinion. He began to explain to her what was wrong, and she warmed to his talking to her as if she knew exactly what he was saying. Unfortunately for her, she had never been able to grasp quantum mechanics and had to be content to enter Starfleet in a field other than Engineering or Science.

They wandered over to the Engineering replicator and ordered up beverages for each. Whilst the industrial-sized machine had been designed to create components for the ship, a simple modification had widened its abilities to refreshments. At the moment, it was the only one functioning in that capacity onboard.

Delighted they had something other than a ration pack to eat from, they sat down in Scanner's office and continued their discussion with the Engineer calling up schematic diagrams on the tabletop. He raised his hand to point out a certain ODN junction and found it entangled in Amantallash's tail.

Embarrassed, she snaked it away, but Scanner gently caught it before it disappeared and wrapped it around his wrist once more.

Scanner looked up into Amantallash's eyes and quietly laughed at the situation. "If Caitians could blush, you'all'd be cherry red right now." He smiled and patted her tail, which resembled a feather duster, and smoothed out her fur. Once more, the female felinoid began purring.

"Judd," Amantallash asked, quietly, so her voice would

not carry. "Would you tell me about your family some time?"

Scanner understood something about Caitian customs, and so he saw her question for what it was, a prelude to a relationship. But what kind of relationship could a human and a six-foot pussy cat have together? he wondered to himself. Ever the optimist, he thought: There's only one way to find out.

"Any time." Nonchalantly, he turned back to his schematic. "How about after beta shift in the bar?"

Amantallah smiled, showing only a hint of her gleaming white teeth. "It's a date."

"Good," grinned the Chief Engineer to the Chief Security Officer. "Because I just worked out how you can help me fix this ODN conduit."

Crash was mildly startled when the lighting on the bridge returned to normal levels. It was getting late into beta shift and for a while he had forgotten that it was not yet night on board. His feline eyes took in what humans considered dark with ease, and he had felt comforted by his ability which exceeded those of the others on the bridge. Still, he stood and tapped the intercom to Engineering.

"I take it Auxiliary Power has been restored, Scanner," he rumbled in a satisfied tone. He glanced up at the bridge chronometer. "And in record time. Are you preening for promotion? Or are you out to surpass Captain Scott for efficiency?" He toggled the main viewer on and saw the chuckle from Scanner.

"Nah, Piper's pushed me to finish the job yesterday so

often ah've gotten into a habit.” Scanner turned slightly, revealing the other occupant of his office. Crash's whiskers arched forward in curiosity. His Shrallah famously hated Engineering. “Your wayward sister helped a lot. Ah wish I had a tail like hers. But, knowing my luck, ah'd have burnt it off years ago in a plasma converter.”

Amantallah looked Scanner over and shook her head. “I don't know where you'd put it, anyway.”

Now this is curious, Crash thought, as he carried on his usual banter with the engineer. His Shrallah's body language was all wrong. Her words are professional, but her body language was telling a whole different story. Amantallah seemed interested in the Commander in a way entirely different to the rest of the crew. Then again, Scanner seemed to have a way with the two Caitians that few others on board did. He knew how to read the two of them a lot better than most of the crew, except for Captain Piper, but she seemed to be able to get into everyone's soul.

“Anyhow, mah boys and girls should be able to carry on without me for a while,” came the thick drawl Scanner fell into when relaxed. “You never know, they might have the old girl going again proper bah the time we make planetfall.”

Nodding, Crash absentmindedly smiled agreement and shut off the viewer. Curious, was the only word that seemed to fit. Very curious.

Merete stepped out of the sonic shower and padded onto the thick carpet flooring in her C.M.O. quarters. There was something about a shower, whether wet or dry, that made

you feel like a new person, and she shook out her hair in glee at the fresh feeling that washed over her. She stopped and gazed for a moment into the face of the married woman looking back at her from behind the mirror and liked what she saw.

From the bed came the sound of a low whistle that Merete recognised but could not put her finger on. She turned an inquiring glance at her husband who was eyeing her with pleasure. Caught, he smiled and explained.

“I picked it up at a hospital on Earth. The guys seem to like whistling at pretty girls, to show appreciation, I think.” The last bit he wasn’t too sure about.

Rogen’s eyes took in her pearly skin, from her eyes down her frame, and then her back as she turned to fix her hair in the mirror. It was still all so wonderful and new. Their new marriage felt slightly surreal to him, but delightful all the same. As he admired her naked form, he paused as he noticed a small scar near her spine he had not noticed before. He got up and silently moved over to her and lightly traced the line on her back with a fingertip. She shivered with mounting tension, until he asked her where she got the scar.

Merete bit her lip and suddenly found herself in the communications room of the *Star Empire*, being held by Piper. She watched as Piper raised her hand and saw the pink blood that had oozed from the wound she had just received after a panel blew out behind her. She remembered how she had betrayed her friend and how, even after she had pointed a phaser at Piper, she had helped her to sickbay and in her recuperation afterward. There were few friends in the

universe like Piper, and the guilt remained with her today.

Rogen saw the faraway look in her eye and knew she was somewhere else entirely. He just waited and put his arms around her and held her tight. His warmth brought her back to the here and now and she turned in his grasp, so she could see his loving eyes, and so he could see the solitary tear in the corner of hers.

“Do you want to talk about it?” he asked quietly, without a trace of duress.

His wife nodded and steered him over to the bed and lay down next to him, making sure he kept his arms around her. Then she slowly began telling him about the story of the *Star Empire* and her small part in it. Rogen listened, and instead of turning on the professional councillor routine he saved for his patients, held her close and took the next few hours to talk quietly and reassure her that it was not her fault, that he was quite certain that Piper had forgiven her and that she should stop blaming herself. Anyone in her position could have been swayed by Admiral Rittenhouse's arguments. She had been vulnerable and had been used by him. If anyone was to blame, it was him.

After a number of hours of talking, crying and consolation, Merete quietened down and gave her husband a weak smile from the heart. “Okay, I'll try to stop blaming myself.” Her smile widened a little. “Thank you,” she murmured. She leaned into him and gave him a light kiss. He returned it in kind, then both gave in to passion and spent the rest of the night as newlyweds often do.

The *Millennium*'s bartender, Gillian, had her hands full. At one end of the bar, Carman and Jason were getting happily plastered, telling the tallest stories she had ever heard. The one about the Admiral's daughter and the zero-gravity chamber seemed more than a little far-fetched to her. And naturally, Jason had to outdo that story with something so outlandish as to only by topped the story that went around her home world of Argelius several years ago of how a formless entity had visited their world and used other people's bodies to commit terrible murders. Perhaps I should tell them that story, she thought with a thin smile. It just might shut them up for a little while at least. She liked Jason and Carman, but seeing grown men get drunk and then let their testosterone speak never did much for her. A quiet drink among friends to share one's soul with another was more her style.

She left them to their fantasies and moved over to where Judd and Amantallah were talking about their families. A curious thing to discuss, she thought, if you did not know the Cait. She knew better.

“Can I fill your glasses?” she asked, innocently.

The pair were so engrossed in each other's personal history that it took a moment for either to even register her presence.

“Yes?” Judd stuttered, then he realised why Gillian was standing there, looking at him with her sapphire blue eyes. While not attracted to her, Gillian's natural beauty was breathtaking, with her opaline skin and long, braided black hair and even though she had been on the ship for some time now, he was still dazzled by her. “Oh, yeah. Fill 'er up,” he

stammered. Amantallah, unaffected by the humanoid woman, simply nodded the same and Gillian took away their glasses. They immediately turned their attention back to each other and Gillian heard pieces of a childhood story on Cait. She took particular note that Judd's drink was not his usual brew, but a fruit juice of questionable origin. Probably from somewhere in the Caribbean, she thought.

His choice of drink was in deference to his companion for it was well known that Caitians dislike even the odour of alcohol. She turned back for a moment to watch them, then opened the fridge under the bar, took out the ingredients she sought, before noticing that for a moment Amantallah had forgotten herself and slipped her tail around Scanner, then quickly whipped it away when she realised what she was doing.

Gillian grinned to herself at them then saw that the bar door was open, but no-one was entering. Great, she would have to notify Judd's staff that the doors were stuck again. She was about to call them when she noticed Crash surreptitiously step in and take a seat in the dimmest corner of the room. She followed his gaze and saw he was staring at Scanner and his sister. His eyes moved away from them for a split second and alighted on herself, then darted away when he found he had been discovered.

With Judd and Amantallah sipping on their new drinks and talking about the ground cars in Tennessee, Gillian wandered over to where Crash was trying very hard not to be noticed. She stopped next to his table and waited for him to acknowledge her. For a few seconds, he kept staring at the

passing starfield before he gave in and gave her a quick “go away” look.

Unable to resist, she asked: “What will you have?”

Crash bared his teeth for a split second then remembered himself and ordered a Catnip. He looked back at his sister once more and found her sniffing the air then turn and look directly at him. He suddenly found it difficult not to feel guilty for spying on them.

Gillian just smiled sweetly at them both and stepped behind the bar once more to prepare Crash's drink. She watched as he tried in futility to convince his sister that his presence was completely innocent and that he really had come to see the stars passing by. Amantallah was not buying, even at half the price. Still, Amantallah found herself unavoidably racked by a huge yawn that Caitians do so well. Judd was momentarily taken aback by the display but found himself yawning in harmony.

“Ah suppose we'd better call it a night,” he said, standing. The note of regret in his voice was unmistakable.

Amantallah poured off her stool, stretched and agreed wholeheartedly.

Judd was about to offer to walk her back to her quarters when he noticed Crash's “don't you dare” look. Instead, he walked with her to the door and said a quick good night then took off in the other direction to the Security Officer. Crash watched his sister walk off down the corridor for a moment then sprang for the doorway and padded, silently, on all fours behind his sister, just to be sure.

At his sudden motion, Judd and Carman ceased their

waffling and stared after the huge black cat.

“I wonder what that was all about,” Jason slurred. It quickly became a case of “out of mind, out of sight” as he shrugged and turned back to his friend and continued to tell his story of how he had single-handedly taken on a group of drunken Klingons and left them groaning on the floor without his getting a scratch.

At the other end of the bar, Gillian just stood and polished the mahogany bar, smiling to herself. *The Millennium* was never a dull place.

A moment later the doors slid aside once more, and Ish swaggered in. He stopped just inside and looked around him in the dim light. He saw who he was looking for in a booth, and Ish slid onto a seat facing his immediate superior. He gave her a look that spoke of overwhelming arrogance, and more than a little lust.

If it hadn't been for the respect he held for the legendary Caitlin “Ghost” Ryan, he would have made a play for her.

“Thank you for joining me, Lieutenant,” Ghost said, keeping her tone formal. She was a good judge of character and had not missed the lasciviousness he had directed her way.

Ish could not help but roll his eyes. While he respected Ghost's flying skills, he found the fact they were using titles pretentious – as they were the same rank. “Thank you for inviting me – *Lieutenant Ghost*,” he answered with more than a touch of sarcasm. “What can I do for you?”

Caitlin gave Goldberg a steely gaze. When she spoke, her friendly Irish accent took on an dose of acid. “Whether

we're the same rank or not, Ish, you answer to me." Ish seemed to want to interject, but she cut him off. "The Captain and I agree that you need an attitude adjustment. You're a good pilot, one of the best I've seen, but where the squadron leader goes his people follow – even if it's into the deck. And that's where I see you're going."

Goldberg scowled at her. "That's easy for you to say, Ghost. If you hadn't become another paper pusher, you'd know that pilots put their lives on the line every time we fly. We keep on the edge. It's what makes us good."

At that, Caitlin gave him a dark chuckle. "If I hadn't kept so close to the edge, I wouldn't be stuck on the bridge instead of flying." Her introspection ended and she fixed the younger man with a stare that looked straight into his soul. "I know where you are and where you're going because I've been there. In my case, I wound up injured. You're so far over the edge I'm worried you're going to wind up a flying coffin – and you're going to take your people with you."

Ish sniffed, offended to the core. "That won't happen to me."

"Ha!" Ghost gave him a cheerless smile. "You're so arrogant you've forgotten you're just a man – and men are very breakable."

At that, Ish leaned towards her and snarled: "Some women too. Go back to your cushy Bridge, Ghost, and leave the flying to those who haven't lost their nerve."

Even though she had expected such a comment from him, it still cut Caitlin to the core. She was still a damn good pilot, even if she couldn't fly any more. As Ish rose to leave,

she slapped the table with an open palm. The sound drew everybody's attention. "Don't you walk out on me, Mister!"

Stunned, Ish stopped and dropped back onto the cushion. "What else do you want, *Lieutenant*?" he snapped.

"You forget yourself, Lieutenant Goldberg," she said with quiet authority. "You and your squadron are serving on the fleet's flagship, and a black mark on your record here can finish your career. The Captain and I have the ability to make or break you." Caitlin saw by the look on his face that her comments had hit their mark. "Now, you're a good pilot, but a Squadron Leader needs to be a leader as well. Try to remember the people who are following you will wind up with you. It's up to you whether it'll be the frontier, Mars defence, or flying garbage scows." Before Ish could say a word, she gave him a curt: "Dismissed."

Understanding where he stood, Goldberg stood up and exited the room knowing that he would be watched from now on. He just wasn't sure he gave a damn.

Piper awoke early as the door chime sounded. She sat, rubbing the sleep from her eyes and squinted at the chronometer. Oh-five-hundred. Wonderful. She'd had enough time *getting* to sleep, the adrenaline in her system not giving out for hours after her head had touched the pillow.

Reaching out beside her, she threw her purple cabin caftan over her head and stood, trying to appear at least partly orderly. "Come in," she ordered. She intended to let her visitor know she did not appreciate being roused early.

The cabin door slid aside, and Doctor AndrusTaurus

stepped into the room, looking like heck. Concerned for her friend, Piper led her to a chair and sat next to her. “What's up?” she asked. “Haven't you slept?”

Merete shook her head, no, then cradled her head in her hands for a second before she looked Piper in the eye. To the Captain, she was deeply distressed. “I was just down in sickbay. Ensign Dare is still alive, but not improving.”

The Captain folded back in her chair, the weight of her command being heavy at times like these. “Is there anything we can do?”

Merete looked up at the ceiling, thinking. “Are the new shuttlecraft equipped with warp drive?”

Piper was momentarily thrown by the apparent change in subject. Then light dawned. “I see. You want to move him to a starbase.” Piper gnawed a nail for a second in thought then turned on her desk computer. “Computer, what is the nearest starbase and expected flight duration at warp two?”

The answer was instantaneous. With its mechanised female human voice that always reminded Piper of the *Enterprise*'s Doctor Chapel, the computer replied: “Starbase three-nine at warp two would take thirty-two point three hours.”

Not good. Piper frowned. “Would Ensign Dare survive the trip?”

The Doctor nodded. “He's stabilised, but I've reached the limit of what we can do for him, that's why I want to move him and give him the best chance we can give him.” She ticked off points on her fingers as she informed the Captain

of her plans. “I’m already getting a portable ICU unit prepared. I’ve got Nurse Stone putting together supplies for the trip. I’ll be sending Doctor Harper with him just in case.” She sat back, convinced she was prepared. “He should be ready to be moved in an hour.”

Piper nodded in agreement. It seemed Merete had covered all the bases. “Okay, go for it.” She stabbed the communications button. “Piper to Shuttlebay Two. Have the *Tyrannosaurus Rex* preflighted and ready in one hour for a two-day flight at warp two.”

“Aye sir!” came back the crisp reply.

The Captain scowled at the grille. “It’s nice to see someone’s alive at this hour,” she said with a touch of sarcasm. It seemed like there was never enough time for the Captain to get a good night’s sleep. She glanced irritably at Merete but gave up, she was fast asleep.

She sighed, got up, grabbed her pillow and put it gently under Merete’s head. She lay back down on her bed, hoping to get half an hour’s more sleep, but when Merete started snoring, she resigned herself to her fate, showered, and readied herself for the rest of what she knew would be a trying day. She dressed in another of her prolific jumpsuits – this time aquamarine – and put her Captain’s bars back around her neck so the insignia sat just so, brushed her hair and put on a pair of sensible shoes. She stepped back from the mirror, checked to see if she looked as far from appearing like a Starship Captain as she could, realised she had succeeded then stepped over to the door.

Before she left, Piper put a holotape of Altair Four into

her private projector and switched it on. She grinned as the whole room transformed into a landscape from Merete's home, then she programmed the computer to wake the Doctor five minutes after she left.

She smiled as she walked down the corridor. Perhaps today was not going to be so bad, after all.

One hour later, Piper watched as the final preparations were made for the *Tyrannosaurus Rex*'s journey. Doctor Harper had jammed the shuttle with just about everything he could possibly need, leaving little room for the pilot and himself to move.

Piper stepped forward for one final look at the waxen face of her junior officer. He looked no different from the day before, leaving her no doubts that their decision was the right one. She stared at the piles of equipment around him and could not help but ask: "What, no room for the galley sink?"

The middle-aged human male, Harper, chuckled. "No one could ever accuse me of not being a good scout. I'm always prepared." He slapped the case in front of him to get the pilot's attention. "I'm ready when you are."

The young pilot who had requested this assignment, a friend of Dare's from the academy, turned back to the Captain. "Permission to disembark, Captain?"

Piper nodded assent. "Granted." She stepped back as the rear door began to rise. "Good luck!"

Harper threw her a jolly wave just as the door closed with a clang. The Captain joined Merete, who had only just arrived, to watch as the shuttle lifted off the floor and floated

through the doors. It slipped down under the engineering hull and vanished in a rainbow of coruscating light as it leapt into warp. The two continued staring out the door at the stars until Piper raised her hand to let the Shuttlebay operator know to shut it.

As they turned to go, Merete stopped Piper with a jab in the ribs. "Thanks a lot for the surprise," she said with a smile. "I go to sleep in your cabin and wake up at home. I thought I was still dreaming until I tried to push past a leaf and fell over it instead." Merete shook her head in disapproval as Piper laughed so hard, she had to hold her sides. "I don't know why I ever gave you that tape." She watched Piper try to collect herself, then burst out laughing once again. Merete grinned, snickered, then laughed along with her.

When they finally composed themselves, they moved past the *Banana Republic* and its pilot, who was always tinkering with it, towards the turbolift. Piper asked after the rest of her injured crew as they proceeded to the bridge.

"They're all doing fine. Hopefully we'll have some of them back at their posts in the next few days."

Merete looked cheerful; Piper noted. She was decidedly happier than she had been only an hour before. She knew how death affected the Palkeo Est, and now Dare was on his way and their surviving crew were doing better things were looking up for her.

"And how is married life treating you?" Piper asked, attempting to sound off-handed.

The Doctor was not fooled. "So, our commander is not

only our leader, but our yenta as well? Perhaps we should start calling you the Love Doctor.”

That got her an elbow in the ribs. “No, you know what I mean...”

Merete sighed blissfully. “There is no greater adventure than marriage.” It was clear Merete believed it wholeheartedly. “Rogen is wonderful to me. He treats me like a god.” She sighed once again, her smile broadening. “I never knew what I was missing until now.” She looked at the platinum bracelet Rogen had given her as part of their bonding oath. She toyed with it and handled it so reverently that Piper imagined what it meant to her. The look of joy in her eyes made her a little envious, but Piper knew that Captains were really married to their ships, and few had room in their lives for other commitments. She was grateful when the lift suddenly stopped and the doors swished open, so she could distract herself and hopefully put it out of her mind – permanently.

Sarda stood respectfully. “Good morning, Captain. I trust you slept well.” A number of “good morning, Captains” came from those around her.

“Good morning, people,” she answered jovially to her crew, but the look she gave Sarda told a different story. He made no reply, but the comforting feeling she always had in Sarda’s presence in the recesses of her mind intensified. With her proximity intensifying their link, he could feel her weariness.

She gave him a cheering smile in return, sat and listened to his report, and drummed her fingers lightly on her chair

controls as he spoke. The *Millennium* had been accelerated to .75c upon restoration of auxiliary power, and their E.T.A. had been brought forward by one day as a result.

“How are the repairs to our hull proceeding?” She glanced down at the miniature chart on her armrest. Three and a half days to go. Wonderful. She would have her hands full just keeping those crew members not involved with the repairs to the ship amused. Morale was one of the most important aspects of her work. She sighed quietly. A Captain's work was never done. It was the price of success.

“A force field has been erected along the outer hull and work has been done to clear the way for new material.” Sarda made it sound like he was reporting on stock market fluctuations.

“You mean they're cleaning up the mess,” Piper said a little testily.

Sarda frowned. “I believe that is what I said.” Humans, he thought to himself. So illogical.

Piper stood and stretched. Even after a couple of hours sleep, her muscles were crying out for rest. Nothing like activity to freshen you up, she thought. “Well then, let's go check it out.” She tapped the helmsman on the shoulder. “You have the bridge, Mister.”

The ship's commanders reached the first emergency bulkhead to find it had already been cut through, and the cutting team were just finishing slicing through the next. They stood and watched as the last part was burnt away and the door fell away from them, landing with a resounding

clang. Piper took her hands away from her ears and stepped through the hole...into open space.

For a wild moment that was what it appeared to the Captain, but as her eyes adjusted to the dim light filtering through from the corridor she began to make out the damage. She looked down at her feet and noticed there was very little of the deck plating remaining and even less of the machinery the room used to house. Her gaze was drawn to the sight of open space, a view challenged by few others on the ship. Only a slight haze was noticeable in the force field that separated them from oblivion.

Sarda joined her a moment later and shivered in reflex. He would not admit it, but for the heat loving Vulcan, the cold room seemed freezing. His flesh had instantly turned ashen in response to the cold, and it was all he could do to stop himself stamping his feet.

Piper was furious at the Tholians for doing this to her ship. Fists clenched, she stepped forward and gazed past her feet and down two decks. Repair parties were just setting up there as well. Outside the ship, she could just make out the details of suited workers, patching the outer hull. Soon, the outward signs of the damage would be hardly visible. All the better.

The Captain's communicator chirped and Piper ripped it from her belt. Her tone would have killed an ensign. "Piper, here. What do you want?"

Scanner's ever cheerful voice cut through the cold. "Now ain't you bitin' today?"

Piper collected herself. "Sorry, Scanner." A little more

light-heartedly: "It looks like you've got your work cut out for you."

"No kiddin'. Look down."

She did so and made out Scanner's madly waving form two decks below. "I see you," she said. "How long before we get the food service fixed?"

"Gimme a week," came his hopeful reply.

Knowing Scanner, it will be about three days, Piper thought.

Sarda voiced the next question. "Mister Sandage, do you have an estimate on the repairs to the uniform recyclers?"

A grim chuckle crackled from the communicator grid. "Forget it. There isn't enough left of it to build a toaster."

Sarda raised a brow. "Why would you wish to build such a device?"

The Commander sounded naive, but Judd knew he was only baiting him. "To cook that godawful stuff you call Vulcan bread, Points, that's why. It's the only way to make it the least bit edible."

"That only proves what I have said all along," Sarda argued. "That humans, especially North American ones, have no sense of taste."

Piper was hiding her smile behind her hand as the two continued their never-ending fight.

"Why you pointy eared, blue eyed...." Scanner began, when Piper cut him off.

"Thank you for the report, Commander. Piper out." She cut communication with a snap of the wrist.

The Captain took one last look at the damage then

stepped back into the corridor, telling herself that it would all be fixed soon. The *Millennium* was her ship, and the sooner she was back to complete operational status, the better.

She sighed. Now to tell the crew they had to clean their clothes the old-fashioned way. Given the recyclers were a popular mode of taking care of uniforms, the laundry was still often used by the crew. Not everything was well received by the machinery and not everything came back to its owner resembling what was sent.

She sighed to herself. *That* news would never be received well, she thought.

After that, she had to carry out the memorial service. She hated having to perform them. The dead needed to be honoured, but it was always difficult having to face a crew that missed their deceased mates.

The next few days were generally uneventful. The service for the dead had taken place formally, and most of the crew not on duty had respectfully gathered on the Recreation Deck to hear the Captain's memorial. There were many stiff upper lips, tears shed, clenching of teeth, pride in those who had fallen in battle, and general melancholy. Those few who had requested it, and whose remains had been recovered, were consigned to endless travel in photon tubes as they were shot out into space, to explore the galaxy forever.

Once it was all over, Piper had noticed her crew seemed to be dealing with their loss a lot better. These memorials provide a kind of closure for the crew, she thought. One chapter needed to close before another one opened.

Scanner's crew worked around the clock to seal the hull breach and restored the food replicators one day before planetfall. The Captain recommended they receive commendations for their efforts in her log. Still, even though solid food was coming out of the food slots, that did not mean it was always what you asked for.

Krashtallah spat out his dinner in disgust. He snarled at the meat that looked so tasty but had the consistency and flavour of lettuce. "Scannerrrr," he growled at the engineer sharing his table.

Judd merely shrugged his shoulders. "I see the food dispenser still needs adjustin'!"

Amantallah tore at her meal in delight and rebuked her brother's attitude. "Krashtallah, would you prefer to still be eating ration packs?"

At that, her brother tilted his head to the side and seriously considered the question.

Manny shook her head and grinned at Scanner. "Judd, this is the best food I've ever tasted!" she said enthusiastically. She looked down at her meat, which looked unfamiliar. "What is it?"

"Beef Steak," the American answered with pride. "Prime cut, and grain fed." He tried to be modest. "Well, at least as close as I can get with a replicator. I brought a bunch of food matrices on discs with me so I can enjoy my favourite foods whenever I want." He gave her a sly grin. "I even managed to recreate a good twentieth century burger."

His companion had absolutely no idea what that meant, but she was glad he was sharing it with her. She found herself

warming to Judd, even when he talked about things that went straight over her head.

From his end of the table, Crash sniffed his sister's food, and got up to replace his own and try out this strange human food for himself.

Judd watched him go and leaned over to the Security Officer. He spoke quietly and the Caitian had to flick her ears forward to hear what he was saying. "Have you noticed Crash is hangin' around us like a bad smell, lately?"

She sighed and glanced out of the corner of her eyes at her brother, who was ordering food and threatening the dispenser to get it right or else. Her Shrallal was making his scent known everywhere. Especially where Scanner and she usually met.

The penny dropped. Her eyes rounded and she turned back to Scanner quickly. "My brother is being a *marragnall*."

When the universal translator gave up on the word, she tried again. "I believe you would call it a... chaperone?"

Judd found himself roaring in laughter. Amantallash backed away from his tirade in confusion, and before they could discuss the situation further, Crash had returned with a new plate. He stared, perplexed at the chortling human, but decided he could care less, as long as he stayed away from his sister.

Crash lifted his steak with the tips of his claws, sniffed it, then took a cautious nibble. The flavour leapt into his mouth and attacked his taste buds, tantalising his tongue. Before he knew it, he had devoured the entire piece and was thinking of seconds.

He looked at the engineer, this time with gratitude. “I had no idea Terran food was so good! Perhaps I have misjudged you.”

Judd found himself laughing once again, but this time in irony. “I see the way to a woman’s heart is through her brother’s stomach,” he muttered to himself. “Excuse me,” he said, giving Manny a quick bow and nod to Crash. He then wiped his face, stood, and left for his quarters.

Crash merely watched him go, wondering what he meant. His curiosity turned to suspicion when he saw the joy in his sister’s eyes.

Chapter Four

Captain's Log: Stardate 8495.2

The Millennium has finally made it to the Tau Beta system. Unfortunately, our long-range scans have shown our grand adventure to this system to be a fizzer. The surface is barren and the atmosphere only a Vulcan could love. Still, the Chief Engineer requires us to establish orbit to expedite repairs. Besides, if things get boring, we could always go and build sandcastles.

Deserts. Piper had no love for such desolate places. She had been raised on a lush world, jungles covering almost every stretch of open space. Life of every variety was abundant there, with the sounds of wildlife always your companion. Even the thought of moisture in the air was enough to make her a little homesick. Whilst in space, Piper had to content herself with being able to retreat to her quarters where she could engage the hologram of Proxima Beta, courtesy of her friendly, neighbourhood Vulcan.

In comparison, deserts were the absolute antitheses of Proxima. They were places Piper could never be comfortable in.

A feeling that was not her own made itself known to her and she glanced over at her Science Officer and swore she saw something akin to longing in his eyes. She reflected that, at times like these when he was faced with a world so similar to Vulcan that he seemed homesick himself.

She knew it wasn't easy on him, being an outcast. He had not been back to see his homeworld for many years, and the only time he had come close was when his sister, T'Zar, had visited him in Old Silicon Valley during his short stay there.

Petite and graceful, T'Zar had been visiting Earth on exchange from the Vulcan Science Academy and had taken the opportunity to see her only brother. They had spent a day together, talking about his family. He had listened as T'Zar updated him on what was going on at home which was in the valley of Lyr Zor. She had told him his family were still as intractable as ever regarding his "aberration" - his choosing to leave the traditional role for children of the Lyr Zor by joining Starfleet. To add insult to injury, his talent for weaponry design had been noted and encouraged – the ultimate shame for pacifist Vulcan parents.

Piper knew that T'Zar had promised to see Sarda again, but the chances of his meeting her again were slim, since she had to do so in secret, lest she become outcast as well. With her brother, T'Zar had demonstrated she felt for him and missed him.

On the other hand, Piper could not imagine what it would be like to be shunned by her own family. She was very close to hers, with her parents and siblings very supportive in her bid to join Starfleet. Her parents had sat up nights with her, drilling her on all kinds of information from biology to physics to chemistry to psychology. Her love of history had presented itself and she had become something of a scholar on the subject. Even her brothers and sisters had played trivia

games with her – games designed to increase her knowledge of other worlds. Even though the games got harder every time they played, and Piper nearly always won, they kept on encouraging her.

When the day had finally come for her to leave there had not been a single dry eye and she could not remember how many times she had hugged everybody.

The only way she could commiserate with Sarda was to imagine them gone. The thought gave her a cold, empty feeling in the pit of her stomach. A feeling of no longer being complete, of isolation, even amongst her friends – her extended family – who travelled the stars with her. She thought to herself: if that sensation is anything like what Sarda feels, it must be hard for him to go on with no-one to make proud of your achievements, no support from home. Her heart sank. He had no-one to go home to, either.

Inwardly, Piper reached out and tried to comfort him in the recesses of her mind, in some way to make him feel like he had family here so he should never feel lost.

In response, Sarda's blue eyes made contact with Piper's emerald and for a moment their thoughts were silently shared and each of them understood the other.

“Captain.” Piper's gaze was torn away by the helmsman's eager tone. “Coming up on Tau Beta Four.”

The captain nodded and watched as they approached the dead world – such a disappointment. “Reduce velocity, one quarter impulse. Bring us in slowly. Keep our shields up, though, we're still not in the best shape for a fight.” Piper almost did not bother to ask, but regulations required a scan

of the planet and the surrounding system. "Sarda, is there *anything* interesting out there?"

Her Science Officer continued his scan, unconsciously shaking his head, confirming Piper's suspicions. Suddenly he stopped, and looked again. Piper, her curiosity piqued, joined him at his side.

"Found something?" she asked.

"One moment, Captain. I am continuing scans." Piper dragged a chair over and sat and watched as he manipulated the controls.

Carman reported: "Entering orbit."

Piper poked her head up. "Park us in a geostationary orbit above the site Sarda is scanning."

For a moment, Lieutenant Nunn wondered how he was supposed to know that when the co-ordinates appeared on his display, courtesy of Piper. "Aye," he said.

Piper was getting impatient. "Well, Sarda?"

The harried science officer looked up at his superior with a look of "if-you-left-me-alone-I-could-get-this-done-faster".

Piper just put up her hands in defence and backed off. "Take all the time you need, Commander." That did not stop her from taking some kind of action. "Open hailing frequencies, Crash. See if whoever Sarda has found is listening."

Krashtallah arched his whiskers in amusement and made the call on all channels and frequencies. He showed no surprise when his only answer was static. "Nothing, Captain."

Sarda stood, indicating his readiness to report. Piper

just looked at him, askance. What he had to say shocked the crew.

“There is evidence of human life below, within a small area of vegetation. There appears to be only one fresh water source and one collection of buildings, which is centrally positioned. I would estimate six hundred inhabitants at this time.” He touched a control, and a single red dot appeared on the dark side of the planet. “Their existence was not easily detected at first due to our distance and the fact the settlement is presently on the dark side and will be for the next two hours.” Sarda raised a curious brow. “It is situated at exactly forty-five degrees south. With an axial tilt of eighteen degrees, the area would be very mild, seasonally.”

The captain was curious. “Did you say exactly?”

Sarda seemed almost incredulous that she question him. “I did.”

“And this is the only source of water and food on the planet?” she continued.

“It is.”

“Terraforming,” Piper stated.

“It is the most likely cause for this phenomenon.”

“But this planet is listed as uninhabited,” Piper thought aloud. She abruptly sat in the centre seat and stared at the colony in darkness below. “Regardless of whether they are an Earth colony or not, the Prime Directive is still in force here.” She made a snap decision. “Lieutenant Earhaht to my ready room.”

Sarda stepped down next to Piper. “You intend to send the Lieutenant down for reconnaissance,” he stated.

Piper nodded. "She shouldn't be too easily noticed. We'll beam her down outside the area of vegetation and hope no-one spots her." She tapped her fingers on her chair arm, considering the situation, then looked up at Sarda. "Did you find anything else down there?"

"Aside from a few small oceans, nothing as yet, Captain. I have only scanned for lifesigns at this time. I have yet to search for anything beyond those parameters."

Piper's eyes were drawn back to the screen. Something about this place was bothering her. "Keep scanning, Sarda. See if there's anything else down there."

The Captain stood as the elevator doors parted and the ship's Horta, Earhaht rumbled through. For a metre-wide lump of rock, the Lieutenant moved quickly. She stopped next to the ready room doors, waited for Piper to pass, then followed her inside.

Sarda watched the doors close behind them, wondering if Piper was being rash. He looked back at the screen once again and felt uneasy about the situation. There was something wrong, but so far, he had too little evidence to speculate, and to accept the notion of a hunch would be against his Vulcan nature.

It was night when Earhaht materialised a half kilometre from the edge of the vegetation. She moved forward slowly, trying to make as little sound as possible, just in case someone was on guard.

The Captain had said that there would not be any as there was no-one else on the planet to guard against. So, she

encountered no resistance as she moved toward what her sense of perception interpreted as wheat. The silicon life form took up a position in a collection of like-sized rocks, then produced her tricorder from under a fold of granite.

Curious, she thought. It *is* wheat. She scanned further to reveal bananas, apples, grapes, oranges, maize and an assortment of other crops, all terrestrial in nature. There was no doubt left that the colony originated on Earth, and she relayed her findings to the ship.

Her mission was still far from complete. She had been told to study the inhabitants and discover whether it would be a violation of the Prime Directive to reveal their presence. As a previously unknown colony, they may have travelled here in secret just so they could stay away from the rest of the galaxy, in which case they may have developed a culture all their own, and they had every right to go undisturbed.

Dawn was still hours away, although Earhaht required no light to be about her way. Her kind had always lived underground and had no concept of light until the original *Enterprise* crew encountered them. Even then, Hortas had little use for illumination.

Earhaht had time before the natives would begin their daily chores. She realised she was hungry and decided to snack on the rocks around her. She found the igneous formations delightful but kerbed her feeding. She did not want to gain weight.

Sarda continued his scans for some time, finding more and more of interest. There was a residual radiation in the

atmosphere that could only be attributed to atomic fission – nuclear weapons. However, it was in trace amounts and so the war that had raged here must have taken place millennia before.

He was also finding remains of ruined cities. “Captain?” He needn’t have bothered calling. Piper had felt his excitement at his find and joined him.

“What is it?” The prospect of finding something new was like an addictive drug to the Captain. She just couldn’t say no.

Sarda indicated the screen and then began filling her in. “There was a war here, Captain, perhaps 2.5 millennia ago given the degree of radioactive isotopes in their troposphere.”

Piper’s brows shot up. “Wow.” She glanced at the viewscreen that was still displaying the ruined world. “Looks like they wiped themselves out,” she said with a tinge of sadness. There had been plenty of examples of species immolating themselves all over the galaxy. All the same, the dead could still tell some tales. “What else have you got?”

Once more, Sarda pointed, indicating a place a quarter of a hemisphere away from the settlement. “There was once a city, here, Piper,” he said, the use of her first name the only indication of his own feeling of elation at the find. He zoomed in the image. “As you can see from these distinct lines, there was once an advanced civilisation with an excellent system of roads.”

Piper’s eyes became saucers. Digging up the past was one of her passions. “We should check it out,” she said. “The city is hundreds of kilometres from the settlement. We could

beam down a team without violating the Prime Directive," she said with confidence.

The twinkle in her eye told Sarda she intended to go down with them. He also knew there was no way he was going to convince her not to. "Be careful," he said through their link. "There is something here I do not like."

That got him a raised brow. "A hunch?" she replied in kind, gently teasing.

"No." His lips raised in the corner a micrometre. "Just a feeling."

"Understood," she told him. "I'll be careful."

Piper materialised in the centre of a city that had been dead for a *long* time. By her side was Amantallah, her ever-present guardian on away missions, and a team of five from various science disciplines aboard ship. They immediately fanned out in all directions and began taking scans.

The Captain looked over at the battered remains of what must have once been a sky-scraper, but now only resembled an oversized shattered tooth poking out of the ground. "I don't need a tricorder to tell me this place was bombed to hell," she said. She shook her head in amazement and indicated for Manny to follow her. "It never ceases to amaze me just how many different species have done this to themselves at one point or another in their histories."

Her bodyguard didn't answer at first, just looked and listened, her eyes and ears darting this way and that. Usually, she didn't mind silence, it gave her a better opportunity to do her job, and yet it quickly became clear that any living threat

this place may have once harboured was dead aeons ago.

“We never had that problem on my world, Captain,” she ventured after a quiet half-minute.

When Piper looked at her incredulously, she added: “We had some strife, to be sure, but we had a great spiritual awakening about two thousand years ago and we never looked back.”

Surprised, Piper tipped her head to the side, amazed. The universe never did cease to offer her different perspectives. Before she could ask further, Manny looked up from the tricorder she was using and held up a closed fist. Obediently, Piper halted.

“Captain, I don't think we should get any closer.” She looked up at the sand-dusted, yet still visibly black and pitted, remains of what looked like a building made out of stainless steel. “My readings show this building is a lot more brittle than it looks.”

The sound of Manny's projected words reverberated off the walls, and pieces of metal flaked off the corners and dropped to the ground.

The sight gave Piper an idea of just how brittle this building actually was. “Let's back away,” she said, already moving, “*very quietly*.”

Amantallah needed no encouragement, and did so, using the soft pads on her feet to keep her movements practically silent.

All the same, more and larger pieces of the building kept toppling off it, starting a cascade of debris that resembled a building under demolition in slow motion.

Throwing caution to the wind, the pair turned and ran. As she did so, Piper pulled out her communicator and called the rest of her party. “Everybody, *stay away from the buildings!*” she said, putting as much impetus into her voice as she could whilst running flat out.

Now about two hundred metres away from the ruin, Piper turned and realised they had exceeded the safe distance they needed. She stopped and watched as the remainder of the building seemed to slowly implode. Beside her, Manny watched in wide-eyed amazement as it crumbled into dust.

“I gather they don't get much wind here,” she said, gob smacked.

Piper let out a quick “hmm” of agreement before reopening communications with her away team. “Check in, everyone,” she ordered.

One by one, her five team members reported in their status as okay. One mentioned he had seen something similar as another building had crumbled before him. “Let's keep it simple this time, people,” Piper said as she sat on a nice, solid rock. “Take images, samples and scans. Don't under any circumstances try to enter any of the dwellings.”

Her people acknowledged their understanding and resumed their work.

“I wonder what it was all about *this time*,” Piper said, grimacing. “All this death and destruction had to be for *something*.” She chuckled. “The worst excuse I've heard yet was over a question of manners.”

Next to her, Manny sat down on her haunches, all the while looking about her. “I wonder what that could be....” her

voice trailed off as she continued looking around her, her pupils dilating even though the suns were high in the sky.

Piper's hackles raised as she recognised her Security Officer's state of mind. The fur on the back of her neck was standing up. The same was true of her tail. "What is it?" she asked.

Manny just shook herself and tried to calm herself. "I don't know, Captain," she said honestly. "Maybe it's just a case of nerves, but I can't help feeling like something is watching us."

While Piper was inclined to shrug it off as dead world nerves – the same sensation one got when alone in a graveyard at night – she, too, couldn't help but feeling like *something* was scrutinising them.

"I don't believe in ghosts," Piper muttered to herself, but her ever-observant companion heard it.

"Neither do I, Captain," Manny said, sounding like she was trying to convince herself of the notion. "So, why do I feel like I'm surrounded by them?" She shivered again involuntarily.

Trying to lighten the mood somewhat, Piper simply shrugged. "Perhaps it's just the fact we're probably standing on the ashes of a thousand souls who died in their war. Either that, or we really must get out more often."

Manny rolled her eyes at the Captain's sad attempt at humour. "Is it permitted to disapprove of one's Captain's bad jokes?" she asked, mock serious.

Piper grinned. "It is. Fortunately, you don't have to worry about that with me," she said with a light chuckle.

The Security Officer's whiskers arched forward in amusement. "I'll take that under advisement," she said.

The humour broke the mood; however Manny's fur did not sit completely. There was still something bugging her about this place, even though it was barren, warm, dry and decidedly deserted. "Captain, I don't see any reason why we need to stay down here. Respectfully recommend we return to the ship and allow the rest of the team to continue taking samples."

Given their discussion, Piper decided it was just nerves they were feeling and agreed. Right now, the pair of them were nothing more than fifth wheels. Her team could finish the job without them. "Agreed," she said with a nod, then she made the arrangements.

In orbit, the *U.S.S. Millennium* moved in a gentle arc above the planet directly over the settlement. Impressive as she was in her size and bulk, the damage to her outer Engineering hull was still extensive and obvious. There were still places where plating needed to be attached – especially on the port warp nacelle pylon, which Scanner had decided to leave alone until they reached the planet.

Judd had spent some time organising his people to retrieve replacement panels from storage, and they had already made their way out of the ship using one-man repair drones carrying the parts they needed.

However, even with the tiny shuttles and repair drones, there were still some jobs you could only do in a space suit. These were left to the boss and his assistant, Ensign Jenny

Rapid, a short, buxom redhead with a wicked sense of humour. Even given their difference in rank, the Ensign still gave as good as she got. The latitude was due to Scanner's respect for her abilities and insight – not because of her natural good looks.

Judd struggled with his suit at the port airlock in the Engineering section, close to the affected areas. He noticed to his chagrin that Jenny was standing nearby, already suited up and ready to go. She just stood there with a big, cheeky grin on her face that spoke volumes.

Helping Judd with his equipment was Lieutenant Amantallah. She had taken her break time to come down and see him off, although Jenny could not understand why. The pair of them were like matter and antimatter to her. Not a good mix.

Manny snapped shut the locks on Judd's gloves and checked the seal. Jenny noted she was being very attentive to them. "There," she said. "How long do you think this will take?" She wasn't worried about the time it would take to repair the ship for its sake. Her thoughts were for Judd's safety.

Scanner picked up on that and smiled to himself. Her concern for him was touching. "It'll probably take hours, hon," he said with his usual cheer.

"Are you going to be all right in zero-gee for so long?" Manny pestered gently.

Judd's smile turned into a huge grin. "I've clocked up a lot of frequent flyer points doing this, Manny. Ah'll be fine."

The snowy feline turned and picked up Judd's helmet

but was almost hesitant to give it to him. Judd, perplexed, just looked at her askance.

A glance at Jenny from Manny was enough for her to get the message. Jenny simply turned and began examining the rivets in the corner of the room.

For once in Manny's life, she was afraid. Her feelings for this marvellous human had become overwhelming recently, and now he was about to do something potentially dangerous filled her with dread. She hesitated, not knowing what to do.

Fortunately for her, Judd understood. Confidently, he leaned forward, drew her to him and planted a kiss on her cheek.

As if the floodgates opened, Manny passionately rubbed her cheek against Judd's and gave him a lick there for good measure. Although she was personally unfamiliar with the human custom of a hug – she had seen it performed enough times to recognise one – she had no idea just how good one felt until that moment in Judd's arms. She wrapped her arms around him and returned the embrace, even entwining her tail around his torso.

The moment couldn't last. "I've got to go to work, sweetheart," Judd said quietly. "I'll see you when I get back." He slackened his grip and let her step back, however she remained inside their personal space.

The delight Manny felt shone in her eyes and her whiskers were quivering. "You will, Scanner, you will." Ever so carefully, she placed the helmet over his head and locked the seal. Once the warning lights on his arm control pad

turned green, both of them knew he was ready to go.

Judd gave her the thumbs-up then turned towards Jenny who was still studying the exit controls in the airlock. "Come on, you," he said. "We've got some work to do."

Without saying a word, Jenny simply turned and gave him one of her cheeky looks. She didn't have to say a thing, he knew, but it was clear she was happy for him.

Once Manny closed the inner hatch and sealed it, she watched them as the air cycled out to be replaced by the harsh vacuum of space. She found it hard to let him go now she had shown him how she felt. As a psi sensitive, she knew she had felt Judd's love for her as well. In that moment, as they embraced, she felt it as a real and tangible thing. It was glorious and wonderful, like bathing in joy. It was something she wished she could immerse herself in every minute of every day.

She returned to reality and reflected that, for her people, now the next step was courting. She wondered if it was the same for humans. She told herself she would look it up as she watched the outer door open and Scanner and Jenny step into space.

The locals arose before dawn, as they always did, to begin their daily chores. The cows had to be milked, the chickens fed, and so on. They bumped into each other in the dull light of first light, always apologetic, and went about their assigned business. One of the elderly, a man clearly in his seventies, ambled out of his dorm and took a seat outside on a hand-made rocking chair to coordinate as was his job, now his

body was telling him that, after a long life of service, it was time to retire. Although his many talents were rarely called upon, he still sat there keeping a fatherly eye of the business of the day.

Everyone knew that his eye was sharp. There would be no slacking off in the fields by any of the men. If any were tardy there would be no yelling, only a little less in his evening meal.

For a moment, he turned his almost bald head towards the stars as he always did first thing, savouring the vastness of it all. He almost did not see it, his eyes weren't what they used to be, but yes, there it was. There was an extra star in the sky, and it was moving. Something in him leapt for joy, but he kept quiet, now was not the time. If things were not handled properly, that star would not be seen again, and he would be stuck on this accursed planet forever.

However, his were not the only eyes to behold this unusual sight.

In her Ready Room, Piper sat in her chair and quietly drummed her nails on her chair arm. It was fast becoming a habit. Since she had returned from the planet, she had taken the time to go to her cabin and change into something decidedly less dusty before taking a break and getting some lunch. Once completed, she went to the Bridge to find Krashtallah in command as Sarda had business elsewhere.

The reports coming in from below were intermittent at best, but so far, the message was clear: the colonists were humans and they had not been there too long. She had made

the decision long ago to make contact, but she wanted more information before she acted and so she was forced to play her own waiting game as Earhaht made her observations.

The archaeological team had found nothing new as yet, but they had noted the system of roads were not only on the surface of the planet, but beneath it as well. They had found some fascinating tunnels that still contained ground cars, but they were so unstable they dared not venture into them. They did, however, request the use of one of the *Millennium*'s smaller shuttles so they could explore further, which Piper agreed to.

She signed the requisition form she had been filling out with a flourish and handed the padd to Yeoman Carver, who passed her another. The young woman had taken Piper's criticism to heart on their first meeting, and she had really shaped up, as she had no doubts that the captain would ship her out otherwise.

Piper ran an appraising eye over the girl and wondered whether she was officer material. She had the authority to recommend that Carver attend the academy and take the officer training course, but Piper knew she was not yet ready, and she had not quite convinced her of her change for the better.

Still, Carver's short, black hair was well kept. Her uniform was without blemish and her shoes were mirror finished. Her brass shone with pride and Piper knew that even though the uniform recycler was dead, the yeomen maintained her uniforms personally.

For a moment, Piper found herself feeling a little

shamed by her assistant. Here she was, sitting in an emerald-green dress more suited for dining than running a ship. Her feet were adorned with green running shoes and her insignia was still dangling from a gold chain around neck. As she had ordered casual attire herself, she had found herself gazing into the mirror and deciding that, since she *was* the captain, if she was going to *have* to wear civvies, she would still be at her best. So, she had placed a matching cyan headband in her hair, which she was immediately grateful for, as it did a wonderful job of keeping her unruly fair hair in check.

She mentally shook off the feeling of embarrassment and continued writing when her ready room door chimed. Immediately grateful for the momentary diversion from the dreaded paperwork, she dropped the padd on the desk, sat back in her chair with a sigh and pronounced “Enter”.

Merete stepped into the room and took a chair beside the Yeoman. “Piper, I thought you should know. I've temporarily relieved Sarda of duty.” She continued as Piper sat bolt upright in her chair, shocked. “I think he's spent too many hours at his post,” the doctor said, trying to play it down. “Crash noticed he seemed to be dozing and called me. I've put him to bed for the next twelve hours with a clear don't-you-dare-disturb sign on the door. He should be right as rain in the morning.”

Piper frowned. Merete did not sound convinced, and neither was she. It was completely out of character for her First Officer to neglect himself like that. It simply was *not* logical. For him to perform his duties properly he had to be well rested and able to function. Besides the fact that if it had

happened to anyone else on board they would be up for a reprimand. She looked into the back of her mind to that place where Sarda always seemed to lurk, egging her on, and found nothing, which disturbed her more than anything else. On an irrational impulse, she stood, stepped around the desk and tugged Merete out of her chair and through the door and straight into a turbolift, with Carver looking on in disbelief.

“What is it?” The look on Piper’s face worried the doctor more than anything else.

“There’s something wrong with Sarda.” When Piper saw her friend’s incredulous face, she threw up her arms in frustration. “How do I explain? I don’t know, I just know there’s something wrong with Sarda.”

Merete leaned back gently against the wall and thought to herself for a moment. Finally, she could come to only one conclusion to explain Piper’s behaviour. “You *have* linked with him,” she said, quietly.

The captain was about to deny it, stopped and wondered why she was lying to the doctor. It was the first time she had admitted it to anybody other than Sarda. She chided herself on her lack of faith in her dear friend. “I’m sorry, Merete. I’m afraid we are.”

The Doctor smiled as the doors opened. “I’ve known since it happened,” she said. “The signs were all there.” They stepped out and made a beeline for Sarda’s cabin. “I wouldn’t worry about it,” she continued in hushed tones. “If anything, it’ll make the pair of you an even sharper team.”

“Who else knows?” Piper asked as she walked briskly down the corridor.

Merete flashed her an almost embarrassed smile. “Just you, me, Sarda, Manny, Crash and Scanner.”

The captain rolled her eyes. “Anybody else?”

The doctor chuckled. “No, that’s it. There was no way you could keep it from Manny, she shared minds with you when it happened. As for Crash and Scanner – well, neither of them are stupid. You should consider their silence on the matter a compliment. Their love and respect for you has kept the matter between us. We know that it could cause problems for you with Starfleet.”

Piper gave a brief smile. “Right now, I’m more worried than complimented.” They stopped before Sarda’s door and Merete tapped the door chime.

There was no immediate answer, which was also out of character.

She tapped again, but Piper was in no mood to wait. “Computer, door lock override, verification: Piper Beta Seven.” The doors obediently parted and they stepped in, their eyes having to adjust to the dim light. The heat assaulted both of them, but they welcomed the homely temperature. They rushed to Sarda’s side as he was resting on his meditation stone and Piper shook him to rouse him.

“Sarda! Wake up!” The Vulcan did not move. Piper’s worried gaze shifted to Merete as the doctor was already scanning her patient.

“He seems to be in some kind of coma,” was all she could tell her friend. “It could be a Vulcan healing trance,” she suggested hopefully, but she failed to disguise the scepticism she felt.

Piper shook her head. No, this was deeper. She had seen her friend use the trance once before to heal an internal wound, but he did not seem as deathly then as he did now.

Rashly, she moved around to the head of the stone and placed her fingers on his cool temples to try mental contact. She usually heard his thoughts without it in close proximity, but this time she heard nothing. She strained in her mind to call to him, thinking as loudly as possible, hoping it might help. She closed her eyes to help concentrate when she heard his voice within her, strained and weak. "Piper."

"I'm here, Sarda," she thought back, trying not to let panic overwhelm her. "How can I help you?"

"Piper," returned the whisper within, trying desperately to communicate. "There is danger..." Then the link broke so suddenly that Piper fell backwards onto the floor, her brow dripping with sweat. Merete was ready and helped her to a chair.

Worried, the doctor held Piper's chin in her hand and looked into her eyes while scanning her. "Did you get through to him?"

Piper nodded weakly, focussed and stared into Merete's eyes, fear and concern on her face. "He tried to warn us of something."

Incredulous, Merete asked: "Of what? There's nothing around here that can harm us."

"I don't know." Still weak, Piper shook her head to clear her thoughts. "All he said was "danger"..." Then the fear for her friend penetrated her heart and she stumbled to his side. "Sarda!" she cried with all the anguish of a lost lover, as she

tried in vain to rouse him.

Merete took Piper's arms and dragged her back, surprising the captain with her strength. "Stop it, Piper! There's nothing you can do for him." She unceremoniously dumped her in a chair then ran her medscanner over Sarda's head. Her heart sank as the flat brain activity lines confirmed her fears. Sarda registered no higher brain functions, although his autonomic systems had not given up. Merete frowned, that couldn't be right. His body was not slowing down at all and appeared to be as strong as ever. Very odd. She put it down to Vulcan metabolism and put down her scanner as the doors parted for the nurse with an anti-grav stretcher she had called for.

Quickly, they rolled Sarda off his stone and took him away to sickbay, Merete casting one last, worried, look at the captain as she stepped through the doors. Her friendship with the Vulcan obviously went a lot deeper than she had realised. No doubt enhanced by their Vulcan marriage link.

Piper hardly noticed them leave as her grief for her best friend threatened to overtake her. For a time, she wept for him, she had seen him go in her mind – as if to his grave. He seemed to be enveloped in a black void that smelled of death, although he had fought it to the last.

What was most jarring for her was having the psychic link she had shared with her First Officer for months suddenly broken. It was as if a part of her being was now missing and she literally felt incomplete without it. There were times when their thoughts practically united in a situation that called for action, and she had found their solutions came quickly and

were always effective. Now, without him, she felt diminished.

She took a moment to put the situation in perspective. She reminded herself that their link was only a recent thing, that she had been a successful starship captain for a number of years, even when she wasn't serving with Sarda directly. She *could* do this without him. She had to if she was going to get to the bottom of whatever had taken him from her so she could bring him back. No matter how uncomfortable knowing she was permanently linked to a man she liked, admired and considered one of her closest friends, but did not love romantically, she missed having him in her head. Yes, she would soldier on without him.

She just knew she would rather do it *with* him.

Piper levered herself off the floor and made her way to her cabin and cleaned up, preparing herself for a visit to the planet below. Remembering the heat, she put on a cool set of clothes, then made her way to the Bridge. The answer to many questions would be found below – possibly even the problem with Sarda. The sooner she got onto it, the better.

Crash's eyes were narrowed at the chair communicator, not liking what he heard. He made his displeasure plain in his voice as he listened to Commander Sandage's report. Judd was still outside the ship in an environment suit that had not changed much in design in three hundred years. And the Chief Engineer was making his feelings known as well.

“Ah know we've gotta have her going again soon, but it'll take me a while to fix this mess.” On the small screen Judd grimaced as he cut away some more of the damaged hull.

“Give me two days, then we should be under way again. But I ain't makin' any promises.”

Crash growled quietly to himself. Until warp power was back online the ship was open to attack. Impulse power alone was not enough to fight off more than a scout ship. Apparently, Judd could hear him growling because he bit back: “You want to try this?”

For a moment Crash was tempted to argue the matter further but gave up and nodded at his compatriot. “Good hunting.”

Judd only grunted and switched off. “Humans,” the black cat muttered.

Amantallash appeared at his side. “I'm sure most of them don't understand us either, Shrallal.”

Crash tilted his head to the side in a gesture that he'd learnt from the humans he professed not to understand. “All except Judd, I suppose,” he taunted.

The white felinoid shook her head in wonder. When would her brother stop watching out for her like a newborn cub? She had passed the age of maturity. If anyone knew that, it was her twin.

“Yes, he would. He knows me pretty well, now.” The security officer gave her annoyed sibling a playful growl and took her place at the security console.

Crash smouldered for a few moments then gave it up for a lost cause. “Science. Relative time on the planet?” he asked out of curiosity.

The ensign at science worked feverishly at the controls, not wanting to disappoint the fearsome second officer. In a

frightened tone he answered: "Approximately one hour until the sun reaches its zenith over the colony, sir."

Krashtallah's stomach growled in reply. He had been sitting there for hours, no wonder his tail was giving him hell. He got up and stretched just in time for Piper to storm onto the bridge. Before he had a chance to report she was issuing orders. "Mister Amantallah, Mister Nunn, Mister Valastro and Doctor TandroVerandi report to the shuttle bay in five minutes for landing party duties." She turned on Crash. "Mister Krashtallah, as Mister Sarda is unwell and confined to sickbay you will be in command of the *Millennium* while I am away." She deliberately withheld the truth from them in the hope that she could find the cause and the cure for him below on the planet as she knew it was.

Crash was bewildered, but he did not let it show. He simply nodded and said, "Aye." He sat down once more to mind the store as Piper stepped quickly into a turbolift, followed by Nunn, Valastro and Amantallah who had all been on duty.

The three junior officers had many questions, but one look at their commander's stern face chased away any ambitions for enlightenment. They just remained still and tried not to draw attention to themselves.

When the lift arrived at the shuttle bay Piper stormed out and straight into Rogen and Merete who were waiting for her just outside the lift doors. They stumbled and in a grope for each other's hands to steady themselves wound up on the floor in a tangle.

Piper finally regained her footing and scowled at the medical officers. "What the hell are you doing?" she snapped.

Rogen looked huffy but Merete stepped in before he could say anything. She took the captain by the arm and dragged her into the control booth which was unmanned, out of sight of the crew. Piper rounded on her mercilessly. "What do you think you're doing, Commander?" she demanded in her angriest tone.

Merete simply stood, eyes slightly narrowed, and quietly waited a moment for her friend to calm down. When the embers in the captain's eyes showed no sign of cooling, she reached into the medical pouch she always carried and took out her hypospray and set it for a mild sedative. Before the Captain could object, she injected it into an arm that was angrily crossed across her breasts.

"Hey!" she shouted. Then the tranquilliser took effect, and she took a deep breath, calming considerably. She was beginning to see the wisdom in the doctor's actions.

"There," Merete said in her most motherly tone. "That's better. When you get down there it'd be better if you greeted them with a smile and not a phaser."

Piper leaned against the console and took a moment to collect herself. Afterward, she grinned sheepishly. "I stand corrected," she said quietly, with humility. She gave Merete's arm a squeeze. "Thanks." She made as if to leave when Merete's eyes stopped her. "What is it?"

The doctor sounded hurt. "Why aren't I going? I'm the Chief Medical Officer, not Rogen, and it's procedure to take the CMO on first contact missions."

Piper raised a brow in astonishment. Could her friend be making an emotional case to protect her husband from personal harm? Admittedly, she *was* right. The CMO of a Starship did usually accompany first contact missions, but not for medical advice.

Merete saw the look and gave her a knowing smile. “No, I’m not trying to protect him, though that is my first instinct.”

Piper smiled in return, pleased that Merete was not making decisions based on her feelings for her husband. “You know the reason C.M.O.s go on first contact missions is because they are usually the best psychologist on board. But this time, you’re not.”

Understanding dawned on the doctor and she stepped aside. “Fair enough, then.” She gave the captain a quick hug. “Good luck.”

Piper returned the embrace. “Take care of Sarda for me.”

She turned, left the booth and stepped over to the *Banana Republic*, Merete following her. “All aboard!” she shouted, and her crew took this as her cue to board the vessel.

Rogen was stopped for a moment by his wife who wanted a kiss goodbye from her husband.

At Piper’s side, Amantallah tsked the couple playfully and said so only the captain could hear, “Can’t they keep that sort of thing for their cabin?”

Piper grinned and reflected on her own future. She, too, could be married one day, if she found the right man. But she noticed in herself a growing desire to have children before it

was too late. Coming from an old-fashioned family, she wanted to be married first instead of making a withdrawal at a sperm bank.

She conveyed her thoughts to the Caitian who only nodded with a far-off look in her eye. If Piper didn't know any better, she'd bet Manny had already found Mister Right. She ruffled her Security Officer's fur and brought her back to reality.

“Secure the vessel, Mister Amantallah.” She covered her mouth with her fist and coughed loudly. “Mister TandroVerandi, if you would care to join us? We have a new world to discover.”

Rogen perked up and finally let go of his wife. He stepped into the shuttle with one last look at his partner and took his seat. Piper gave a cheery wave to Merete, turned and closed the shuttle doors. She took her seat at the helm and activated the pilot's controls. She loved to fly, and her junior officers were not about to get in her way.

Piper touched a control and the shuttle bay doors parted silently. With a deft touch, she raised the shuttle off the deck and flew the *Banana Republic* out into space.

On the bridge, Crash watched the captain, his sister and friends fly towards the colony below. He understood Piper's wish to meet them in a shuttle. It was doubtful that anyone down there had ever heard of a transporter, let alone seen one operate. It was easier for them to be greeted in a way they were accustomed to. Besides, it didn't hurt to keep one's claws hidden. If a foe doesn't know about them, they can be used to

your advantage.

Before he turned back to his work, he said a silent prayer for his sister's sake. He did not like this place.

Chapter Five

The *Banana Republic* bucked a little as she was buffeted by the upper stratospheric winds. The captain brushed a control and the ride smoothed considerably.

Carman sat by her side, scanning the terrain below for a suitable landing spot near the settlement. He was also keeping an eye on the weather. On a new world, anything could happen and if there was one thing a desert world could produce well, it was thermals – torrents of heated air rising quickly – to take even seasoned pilots by surprise and have them all wishing they had not had oysters for lunch.

In the back, the Doctor was enjoying the ride. He had not been out of the Academy for long and the chance of an away mission did not come often to psychologists. He looked through the windscreen at the sky of a new world and marvelled and wished for the tenth time he could have Merete with him to share this with.

Lieutenant Nunn glanced at the look of awe on the Doctor's face and smiled to himself. This was not his first away mission, and he knew that there could be all sorts of nasty surprises in store for them. He had lost one or two friends from the academy because they were not too vigilant and had paid the price. He ran his fingers down his pant leg and patted the antique Derringer strapped to his ankle. Satisfied that he was prepared for the worst, he took out his tricorder and ran a self-diagnostic on it again, just in case.

Amantallah sharpened her nails.

The shuttle glided slowly over the settlement,

displaying their Starfleet insignia, at about one hundred meters to announce their arrival, then set down not ten meters from where Earhaht was waiting, still hidden. A cloud of dust was raised by the manoeuvring jets which settled quickly. Not wanting to waste a moment, Piper shut down the shuttle's systems and popped the hatch.

Amantallah was the first to exit the craft as was her duty. She scanned for weapons of any sort, then called: "Clear."

Piper stepped out next and took a gulp of fresh air. It was always fascinating to discover some planets had a smell that none of the natives were aware of. This planet was so bare it lacked this quality, and the hot, dry air only served to parch the throat. However, she did note the smells were different here than they were in the ruined city where there had only been dust and decay. Here, the scent of wheat ready for harvest carried on a gentle breeze, along with corn.

The rest of her crew followed her, making their own, similar observations.

A crowd was beginning to form at the edge of the wheat field. They were clearly humans, young and old, who had obviously lived off the land all their lives. They were dressed in woollen garments dyed and knitted by expert hands, and although they were a bit dirty, they were well presented. Each held a farming instrument, carried in an almost off-hand way, which the *Millennium* crew knew was exactly the opposite.

Piper stepped forward to introduce herself. "Greetings from the United Federation of Planets. I am Captain Piper of the *U.S.S. Millennium*, a Starfleet vessel, orbiting your world.

We come in peace and hope we can meet on friendly terms to perhaps open a dialog."

Not a soul moved, and things didn't change for several minutes. The *Millennium* crew was beginning to get uneasy when the crowd parted, and an elderly man stepped through and walked straight up to Piper as if he owned the world.

The craggy, yet strong man stopped at a respectful distance and came to attention as well as he could. In a raspy voice, he addressed himself formally. "Commander George Samuel Kirk of the late *U.S.S. Republic* at your service, ma'am."

Piper smiled in greeting and stepped forward, her mind trying to digest the information. Kirk? *Kirk!* Could he be related? "At ease, Commander."

Kirk relaxed gratefully and extended the hand of friendship. "I never thought I'd see another member of Starfleet again. It's been a long time."

Piper returned the handshake warmly. "It's good to meet you, too, Commander. We have a lot to talk about."

An odd look came into Kirk's eyes for a moment that left Piper wondering. "Yes, we do, Captain." He turned to the others and shooed them off. "Go on! There's nothing left to see. You've all got work to do."

Obediently, most left to continue their chores. A few stragglers remained to watch, mainly young children who managed to get away from their parents to gawk at the newcomers. A couple others, not much younger than Kirk walked over to meet Piper as well. They introduced themselves as fellow crew members of the *Republic*.

“Well, Captain,” said Kirk in appraisal, patting the shuttle. “I see Starfleet has come a long way. Is she capable of warp drive?”

Piper relaxed and gave them a tour of the shuttle under the watchful eye of Amantallah. She was not convinced they were all they made themselves out to be.

Jason brought another of the villagers, who had introduced himself as an engineer, up to speed on modern techniques, while the Doctor watched the whole thing in wonder whilst taking copious notes.

Opening an exterior panel, the captain broke out two chairs and placed them next to the shuttle out of the direct sun. She offered Kirk a seat then relaxed next to him. “Commander, you realise I have to verify your identity before I can take you completely into my confidence.”

Kirk nodded. “I understand. We never took anything at face value in my day, either.”

“Good, I’m glad we understand each other.”

A gentle breeze blew up some dust onto Piper’s shorts and she patted them clean. Kirk watched and a look of longing came into his eyes. The captain just raised a brow in question.

“I see uniform regulations have slackened since my day,” he remarked.

A laugh escaped Piper and she shook her head at his quizzical look. “No, they haven’t, and it’s a long story.”

George humped in good humour. “I hope to hear it.” Then his mood seemed to shift again. “I was wondering, Captain, if you would be able to get me news of my family.”

Ah, ha! The fifty-credit question. “I’ll see what I can

do. Their names?"

"Winona, my wife, and Sam and Jimmy, my sons. They were living in Iowa on...." he stopped for a moment at Piper's shocked expression. Comprehension dawned and he looked at her in awe. "You know them!" He gave a small chuckle. "Small universe," he muttered.

Piper was not sure how to tell him all of it. There were many stories, and not all of them happy. But the look of pleading in George's eyes took away her doubts.

"You could say I'm a friend of the family. I've known the Kirks for years." The joy of discovery was radiating from the man before her. Questions he had harboured for years were finally going to be answered. "Winona lived a happy life, still running the farm in Iowa. She died six years ago from natural causes. She went peacefully. She was quite a woman."

The captain was surprised that George actually smiled as he nodded absently. "I knew she could look after herself. I'm glad she did well." He stopped and eagerly waited for her to continue.

"Sam died fifteen years ago in a plague, his wife and son survived him."

Sorrow for his lost son was momentarily replaced by joy. "I have a grandson?"

Piper grinned. "Yes, you do. Peter's got a family now, and he's making a career of his own in Starfleet."

Pride made the man before Piper smile broadly. He seemed like a man who wanted to pass out cigars on the news it was a boy.

“And Jimmy?” the old man asked.

Piper grinned and put George's fears to rest. “Captain James Tiberias Kirk is doing well. He..”

“Captain,” George whispered. “Did you say, Captain?”

Nodding, Piper continued. “Yes, Captain. He was an Admiral for ten years, but being deskbound just wasn't Jim's style. I served under him when he was the captain of the original *Enterprise*.”

The queer look returned to the Commander's face. “What registry?” he queried.

“NCC-1701. He now commands her replacement, 1701-A.”

“Ahh, what a small universe it is, indeed,” he muttered.

“Commander?”

The aged veteran smiled that he had a surprise for her. “I served on her, too, when Jimmy was just a kid. Captain April and I took her out on her first mission. In fact, it was Robert who gave her the name.”

Piper raised her brows in surprise. “It *is* a small universe.”

Kirk looked hopeful. “Could you get a message to Jimmy to tell him that his old salt of a daddy is still kicking?” George seemed to catch himself, then. “No, you'd better not.” The odd look that reminded Piper of a hunted man returned. His eyes darted about for a moment, then returned to the woman next to him.

He started tapping on the chair arm in an odd rhythmic action that reminded Piper of something from long ago. He continued on for a moment about his family, but Piper could

not remove her attention from the tapping.

Realisation dawned. Morse code. Knowing she was as rusty as an old water hopper, she tried to interpret his message while still carrying on the conversation.

Y.O.U. M.U.S.T. L.E.A.V.E. D.A.N.G.E.R.

She tapped her reply. W.H.A.T. D.A.N.G.E.R.

C.A.N.N.O.T. S.A.Y. W.O.U.L.D. T.A.K.E. T.O.O.
L.O.N.G. M.I.G.H.T. B.E. D.I.S.C.O.V.E.R.E.D. L.E.A.V.E.
B.4.2. L.A.T.E.

C.A.N.N.O.T. R.E.P.A.I.R.S. I.N. O.R.B.I.T.

H.O.W. L.O.N.G.

2. D.A.Y.S.

George balled his fist in frustration, then continued.

P.R.O.T.E.C.T. Y.O.U.R.S.E.L.V.E.S.

Piper nodded, then stood. “I’ll need a blood sample to complete your verification.” She turned and beckoned to Rogen. “Doctor, I need a blood sample from this man for DNA identification.”

The ever-enthusiastic psychologist was only too eager to comply. He waved for Kirk to stay seated, and before he knew it, Rogen had taken the required sample and patting his arm. “There you go. Captain, I’ll run this as soon as we get back to the *Millennium*.”

Piper decided to answer the Doctor’s unspoken question. “Yes, we’ll be leaving shortly. Have Mister Nunn pre-flight the shuttle.”

Just as she decided to move a thought struck her. She took her seat once again and the look she gave Kirk told him to do the same. “I’m wondering, when we break orbit, do you

want to come with us?" she asked aloud, whilst tapping on her armrest: "W.H.O. E.L.S.E. K.N.O.W.S. A.B.O.U.T. T.R.A.N.S.P.O.R.T.E.R.S.?"

The old man's headshake answered both questions, although she was not convinced of the first. Those who once dream of the stars rarely leave them.

Still, she had an advantage that the general populace was still unaware of transporter technology. All the better.

"Captain," started George, looking for the right words. "Most of those here came from or are descendants of the Luddite rebellion of the 2260s."

Piper nodded; she knew the reference.

"They don't like you or what you represent and would rather be left alone. When you return," and Piper understood that he knew she would, "the reception will not be as easy. I don't know what you're looking for here, but I hope you find it." Once more, the hunted expression returned, and the wizened old man looked around him once again. He still did not find what he feared, but Piper was sure it was there.

She helped George up and packed away the chairs while the whine from the shuttle began to rise. Her crew were already assembled inside and were waiting for her. She looked once again at George and smiled. "We'll be back tomorrow. Please tell your friends we're no threat."

"Don't you worry, Cap'." Kirk ushered his friends back while Piper boarded the shuttle. Just before the door closed, she noticed one of the children, a little girl, standing just inside the wheat field, watching her with the most piercing eyes she had ever seen. Irrational fear found a place within her, but she

brushed it aside, curious that a child could have this kind of effect on her. She waved to George then closed the door.

As the *Banana Republic* took off and passed overhead, George noticed the child and turned away, returning to his chores. Later, there would be hell to pay.

Chapter Six

Captain's Log: Stardate 8496.5

Our trip to the surface was enlightening. We've finally solved the mystery of the U.S.S. Republic's disappearance and we will soon know whether Commander Kirk is who he says he is. I am holding off notifying the families of those below until we've determined his identity, which I believe to be only a formality.

I am also taking Kirk's warning seriously, and have raised the ship's shields, just in case. Unfortunately, we can only maintain minimum shielding for any length of time.

Commander Sarda is still in a coma, and Doctor AndrusTaurus is not too optimistic.

The Tyrannosaurus Rex has sent a message that Ensign Dare arrived and is receiving the best of care. Doctor Harper will be returning to the ship in the next few days.

Scanner finished his day's chores on the nacelle strut and returned to the comfortable confines of the Engineering section. Somehow, he always felt as if he was coming home.

The damage to the strut was extensive, but not too difficult to fix. He had busted a gut out there, and he was looking forward to a nice, hot shower. Give it another forty-eight hours, and his crew would have the ship ready for at least warp four. Then they could take her to spacedock and do the

job properly. The next shift was already out there, continuing his work, as they would around the clock.

Stretching, he gave his final orders, patted the warp core as if it was a favourite pet, then turned to leave. He was surprised to find Manny waiting for him beside the turbolift.

She had gone off shift an hour before, and had passed the time in the bar, staring down at the planet, wondering what Commander Kirk was so worried about. She had been startled at what she could only describe as a presence as she had let the planet fill her mind. Her tail bristled and the hair on her back had stood on end as it had when they had been exploring the ruins. Still, she managed to shake off the feeling of dread.

Afterward, she had downed the rest of her Catnip and scurried down to engineering to wait for Judd. The experience had so unnerved her she felt she desperately needed some companionship. When she saw him coming toward the lift she relaxed, feeling safer in his company, even though she was the formidable Cait Security Officer and he the human Engineer.

Amantallash purred with pleasure as Scanner scratched her behind the ears and gave her a hello hug. She returned it warmly, being careful to keep her claws sheathed, and deciding she really liked the human custom Judd had introduced her to.

They stepped into the lift without a word and exited together at the Officer's Mess. After a hearty meal, and a lot of talk about their day, they returned to Amantallash's cabin to learn some more about each other.

Manny wondered whether she could trust Judd enough

to tell him of her experience in the bar as they spoke. Thinking it the acid test, she jumped in the deep end.

“Judd, I'm worried about Earhaht.”

The engineer was curious. “Why's that? There's nothin' the locals could do to even scratch her! That is, unless they've got a sledgehammer...but she'd more likely eat it before they could do her any harm.” Scanner's usual light humour was infectious.

Manny arched her whiskers in amusement at the reference. It was well known that the Horta loved snacking on iron. She said it gave her a more reddish hue to her plates. She made an effort to get back to the subject. “No, I don't mean the people.” She looked uncertain for a moment then took the plunge. “While I was in the bar, I let the planet fill my mind, and I sensed something. Something... dark.” She fought for the right words to express her feeling. “Something that's very unhappy with our presence. And powerful.”

Judd was sceptical at first, but then he also remembered what Sarda had told him about the time he had played Manny at chess. When she'd gotten mad, all the pieces fell over by themselves, and if there was one person you could implicitly trust, it was the Vulcan.

It was possible that Manny was a seer, he thought to himself. He had been out in the stars long enough to know some races were definitely psi sensitive. He hadn't heard of a Caitian sensitive before, but that did not mean they didn't exist. Besides, one look into his friend's trusting, blue eyes made him believe. He could see she needed him to believe her, to trust her, and he really wanted to. So, he took a leap of

faith.

Slowly, he said: "Okay. I believe you."

Manny's joy pervaded the room and filled Judd. Before he could move, she had wrapped her arms and tail around him and smothered him in white fluffy happiness. "Thank you, Judd. I needed that."

Judd wondered whether he should extricate himself from her grasp. After all, they were of different rank. However, he had to admit to himself that he had become very fond of his kitten, and he loved having her around. Nobody seemed to mind, either. Even Jenny had laid off ribbing him about kissing Manny earlier in the airlock.

Duty decided for him when he said: "I think you should tell the Captain."

The happy Cait let go and backed off a little. "You're right," she said with a nod. She still felt some trepidation, however. "I just hope she believes me."

The engineer took a paw to comfort her. "If she has any doubts, I'll vouch for you."

Amantallash smiled, touched by his sincerity and purred. "Thanks."

Scanner looked up at the chronometer on the wall and saw it was getting late. Piper was probably already in bed by now, and, given the trauma of the day, the last thing he wanted to do was disturb her. Instead, he moved over to Manny's desk and called up the Beta shift Communications Officer and told him to put him through to Earhaht.

"Commander Sandage," came the quiet reply. "What can I do for you?"

Scanner had to smile to himself at that. Earhaht had no doubt programmed her voder/communicator to broadcast only, not to make a sound, and yet she was still whispering. To someone on the planet, they might simply hear the sound of a rock grinding against another.

“Earhaht, I don’t know how to describe this issue to you, other than to tell you we have intel that there may be a hostile, non-human entity on the planet. Watch yourself.”

“Aye, Sir. Thanks for that. I will keep watch and inform you if I see anything out of the ordinary.” Even with the threat notice, Earhaht was nothing but confident.

Judd mulled that over for a second, then said: “Negative. If you see a hostile, call for emergency beam out. This may be too much to handle, even for a scary person like you.”

The Horta laughed at that. It was well known that she had a silicon exterior, but inside she was a huge marshmallow. “Roger, sir. Will do. Earhaht out.”

Judd sat back in his seat, pleased with himself. With Piper and, undoubtedly Crash, resting, he was next in line in the chain of command with Sarda unwell. It was within his purview to give such orders. He felt better now the warning had been given.

To his surprise, his actions were rewarded by a huge, furry hug and a lick on the cheek. “Thank you, Judd,” she said gratefully. “I really appreciate it.”

After that, the two got back to enjoying their evening discussing the similarities between the Caitian and human lifestyles. Scanner was in the middle of the story about the ground car he had souped up as a youngster when

Amantallash got up to put away his glass and her bowl. When she returned, she found Judd quietly snoring on her settee.

Not wanting to disturb him, the snowy feline took a blanket out of a drawer and placed it ever so gently over her dear friend. She stroked his hair, surprised at how soft it was in comparison to her own fur, then gently pursed her lips and kissed his cheek. It was not something that came naturally to the Cait, but for Judd's sake she had been practising the motion in the mirror after having observed other humans doing the same. She found the action pleasantly intimate, like a lick on the cheek.

Padding into her bedroom, she returned with the round mattress cushion she slept on, put it on the floor next to the settee then curled up on it and closed her eyes. She did not even mind when Judd's hand dreamily slid down onto her back. Before she knew it, she, too, was blissfully asleep.

The dinner fires crackled as the last of the day's meals were being consumed. Well, it looked like they were, but in truth the fire was actually a holographic display – one of their few remaining technologies brought from Earth. The Luddites permitted it because it reminded them of home. The Starfleet crews and their offspring wanted it for exactly the same reason.

If there was one thing this world did not have, it was trees. The only ones that existed at this point were fruit trees that had been imported during their journey here and as they were busy growing food for the colonists, they were anything but expendable.

Meals were held inside at this time of year. In the summer months, when the planet's orbit had shifted closer to this system's second sun, the days were very long and the nights practically non-existent. The heat of the day tended to linger during those months, and the air inside in the evenings was stifling.

During their "winter", when they actually had nights, meals were held indoors when the temperature dropped precipitously – often below freezing.

Tonight would be one of those nights. The locals knew it from experience.

On the "Dust Bowl", as it was less than affectionately called by the colonists, it was customary for the community to eat first before discussion, and an uncomfortable silence reigned. Still, that did not stop the younger, more idealistic of them from casting dirty looks at the elder Starfleet veterans.

Their childish antics did not bother George. The sooner the meal was over, and they could stop glaring, the better. He was more concerned with *It*. He knew it was there. *It* had revealed itself a couple of times in the last fifty years. He was sure *It* had brought them here, and *It* resided with them, using the settlers as voices when it wanted to be heard.

And *It* had shown its power. Why else was he languishing in this God-forsaken sandbox? Once the *Republic* had lost her nacelle and impulse power, the ship had limped into orbit using the manoeuvring jets and their momentum. George had known that she would never leave orbit again and so had ordered the ship be evacuated to a spot on the planet that science told him would give them the best chance for

survival. They used the shuttles to bring everyone down, as the *Enterprise* was still the only ship with the new long distance, high-capacity transporter capabilities.

Moving the people had been easy. Even their livestock and plants were not too much of a hassle. The real problem was moving the ship's store of water down. Science had reported that the planet's water table was pretty deep, and they would need every drop from the ship. Weeks of hard work had accomplished the task, and finally George had found himself the only one left on board. Those lost had been consigned to the depths of space, including the captain.

The ship had been stripped of all that could be used and what was left was not much. Still, he had a duty to perform. Although the *Republic* could probably remain in orbit indefinitely, she might be salvaged by the Klingons or Romulans, and he could not chance that. Never mind that keeping her in orbit was like hanging out the dinner sign to invaders. So, he took the two self-destruct keys, and sent her to oblivion.

The ship's death was spectacular as George watched from a safe distance in a shuttle. It occurred to him then to try to make it back to civilization in the little craft, but there was no way he would survive the twenty-year voyage at sub-light. So, Commander George Samuel Kirk watched as piece by piece the ship disintegrated and fell into the atmosphere, burning up on re-entry. A tear threatened to escape from his eye as he realised, he had never lost a command before. He made his decision, then, to make the best of a bad situation and somehow make this fledgling colony work.

And now, irony of ironies, he found himself fighting to leave. He wanted to return to the stars once more, be reunited with his son and meet his grandson. He was getting old. His time was running out, and while he knew he had obligations here, he wanted to see the family he had lost once more.

The debate began civilly but had soon degenerated to a slanging match. The children of the original settlers, and those that were left, had no intention of leaving their home, as was their right. But, they had no desire to let anyone else leave, either.

To make things worse, the prejudices of the fathers had been passed onto the sons. They were quite vocal in their distrust of the Starfleet vessel orbiting above. Some said they were here for conquest, some said to brainwash them with their technology, while others were just plain scared the only life they knew was about to change forever.

He gave them some time to talk and vent their feelings, then Kirk decided enough was enough. He stood, folded his arms, and waited for silence. It took a minute, but eventually even the highest spirited of the youngsters quietened down. “That’s better,” he said, his old voice still projecting strength and discipline. “Now, could we hear some constructive arguments, or are we going to act like a pack of uncivilised children?”

A tall man in his forties, Jared, stood and said simply: “I don’t trust Starfleet.”

George smiled to himself. Technically, he was still Starfleet. “Then, Jared, you don’t trust me – or the rest of my crew. I would have thought the years we had been here would

have taught you a few things about us."

Sarah, a young mother still nursing her baby, spoke up. "Father Kirk, you can't know if they've changed in the last thirty-odd years. They could have become conquerors since then." A few hearty "hear-hears" were raised in agreement.

Kirk pierced those who had spoken with a look. "The woman I met today is made out of the same stuff my old captain was. I don't believe for an instant they are here to conquer us. And besides, there's not much to conquer." George could see that he had swayed a few, but the majority was still adamant in their distrust of their visitors.

Another man in his early thirties, Simon, stood up. George was wary of this slim youngster; he was clever and seemed to like arguing for the pure amusement of it. "What if they intend to colonise this planet themselves?"

The answer to that challenge was simple. With every confidence, George said: "General Order One, the Prime Directive, wouldn't allow them to. It stops them from interfering with growing cultures, like ours, and putting another colony here would be doing just that."

Simon remained standing. "And if they try to leave some of their technology?"

"Same thing, they can't interfere."

The young man was not convinced. He hefted a hammer high in the air and spoke up so all could hear. "I say we drive them away if they come back." He was answered by cheers from some, and grunts of assent from others.

The meeting was degenerating again, and George moved quickly to stop it. "And what would that prove? What

would pitchforks do against their shuttles? Do you think you can defeat a man carrying a phaser pistol? Have no doubts, although they come as friends, they won't be defenceless."

He paused for a moment to let his statement sink in, then continued in a softer tone. "If there was anything your fathers taught you, it was respect for others. Although they come from out there," and he pointed at the ceiling, "they're still people like you and me. We should welcome them as friends and show them our hospitality while they're here. And if when they leave, we still want to be left alone, we can tell them and they will.

"One thing you can keep in mind as well. Although most of you have shunned technology, I know that Starfleet is generous. If we opened a dialog with them, they would be willing to offer support in the form of medications and supplies. They may even be willing to give us what we need to properly terraform this planet. Think of it! Forests could be planted around the world, changing the climate so rain could actually fall again! We wouldn't need to constantly irrigate our crops! Once the work would be completed, they would leave us to continue on our own. You have my word on that."

George Samuel Kirk's word was good enough for most of them. For the others, they would follow the majority decision.

Never mind the carrot of medical aid had its allure. They had lost some good people over time due to preventable disease or injuries that could have been healed through the simplest of medical techniques. Not to mention the odd

woman who had died in childbirth. George could see the elders mulling that one over.

That was when Simon stood up again, with that look in his eyes George had come to recognise. *It* wanted to speak.

“Our fathers worked hard to make this colony work,” *It* said, a little more emotionally than Simon normally would have. “We don’t need outsiders to come, polluting us with their ideas and dangerous machines. We can make do on our own and turn this world into a paradise with everyone as brothers and sisters, working together for the good of all, without their complicating technologies that turn man against man in an insane quest for power. The wars they have fought are testimony to their savagery.” He thumped the table with a closed fist to emphasise his point.

“I say we should send them away, now, before the rot sets in and we are fighting each other with more than words. The peace we have known for all these years will be shattered if we don’t act to preserve what we have.”

“By having a little war of our own?” George shot back. “Fighting fire with fire just creates more heat.”

Simon/*It* stood his ground. “There are ways.” Even his eyes took on a sinister look.

“No,” said George with finality, feeling stronger than he had in a long time. It felt good to stand up to this thing that had brought about their fates. He balled his hands into fists and leaned across the table, making sure everyone caught his eye. “If we use anything other than words, we have learned *nothing*.” George turned to address the others. “Your parents left Earth because they wanted to make a life for you that

excluded violence and hatred, to give you a higher sense of morality and justice. To live lives free of complication and strife by living in harmony with your environment. If you agree to what *Simon* is saying, you are turning your backs on everything they stood for and believed in.”

The Luddites looked down in shame, chastised for the aggressive attitudes they professed not to possess.

Simon/It simply stared at George with undisclosed hatred. Kirk had won this round, but the fight was not over, not by a long shot. Abruptly, *It* left him, and Simon, looking a little bewildered, sat down.

George simply shook his head sadly and left the table for his room aboard one of the converted cargo carriers they used for shelter. The fight had sapped his strength, and he was looking forward to a good night's sleep before the challenges he would have to face the next day. He stopped for a moment in the candlelight of his room and looked at his wizened hands. Nope, he was not as young as he used to be, he thought ruefully.

It was late in the evening when Krashtallah tapped Piper's door chime. He was greeted by the captain in her usual purple caftan, rubbing sleep from her eyes, looking more annoyed than she really was.

“What is it?” she asked, a little impatient to get back to bed. She scowled at her visitor. “I really need to put a sign on this door. “Enter at own risk”.”

Crash looked a little uneasy, his tail kept flicking this way and that, and that piqued her interest more than anything.

“Captain, could we speak in private?”

“Of course.” Anything her acting First Officer had to say in private must be important. She stepped aside and ushered him in, offering him a chair. He just started pacing on all fours, looking for the right words. He fairly radiated worry. Piper just sat while she waited.

Finally, he stopped. “Captain, I am concerned with the activities of certain individuals on this ship. Their actions could impair their efficiency and compromise their duty.”

The Caitian had the captain’s full attention. “Who are they?”

Crash seemed even more uncomfortable, and if his tail moved any faster, he would soon do some damage to her quarters. “Captain, this is a very delicate matter.”

It was well after her bedtime and Piper was getting impatient. “Who *are* they?”

“Scanner and Amantallah,” he blurted out.

“*What?*”

Krashtallah decided he’d go the entire mile. “Captain, I believe they are beginning a relationship that I think will only be detrimental to the efficient running of this ship.”

Piper was not sure she believed what she had heard. “What was that?” she repeated.

“I’ve found them flirting, Captain. Word has gotten around they may have been *intimate*.” It was clear the situation was really bothering the Cait and that he was deadly serious, of that Piper was certain. She never imagined what complications might be involved having siblings serving under her. Now she was getting an idea.

Piper found herself marvelling that life kept throwing her weird situations. "Well," she started, "We'd better nip this in the bud right away."

The acting First Officer was delighted. The captain actually agreed with him. He had been worried she would not agree with his line of thought.

Piper stood and dragged him to the doorway. Firmly, she said: "Commander, it is not yours or my business what your sister and Scanner do in their spare time. They are responsible adults, which is something you keep forgetting about Manny in particular."

The black cat tried to sway her. "But..."

"For goodness' sake, stop acting like her father," she rebuked. "She can take care of herself." She stopped in the doorway, her hand keeping it open. "Now, Crash, I can't order you to stop interfering in their relationship, but I *am* asking you to. What they have could last or not, but at least they have the right to try. And don't forget, the pair of you have only just reconciled. Don't mess up the progress you've made by interfering in her love life. There are few things that women like less." She attempted to cheer him up. "Don't worry, I've known Scanner a long time, and I know he would never hurt a fly."

Crash turned and padded off, muttering under his breath: "It's not flies I'm worried about."

Piper merely shook her head in amazement and went back to bed.

In the dim light of her cabin, Merete fondled her

husband's hair while he slept with his head on her chest. Their lovemaking had left her exhausted and wanting for sleep, but the patient waiting for her in sickbay kept her awake in her thoughts.

Sarda was still in a coma, and she still had no idea why. The Vulcan just lay there as if he was asleep. The lifesigns monitor showed that everything physical was working fine, he just would not wake up. She had applied all kinds of treatments from the ultra-modern to some home remedies her mother had taught her as a child and still nothing moved his flat alpha wave chart. His condition did not even suggest pulling the plug on life support, his body was doing fine on its own. As long as she kept feeding him intravenously, he could live on indefinitely.

Vulcans! Who could understand them? Still thinking of other treatments she could try, sleep finally caught up with her and she dreamt of Altair IV, her family and of how Rogen would be accepted with open arms when they returned.

This night, Carman and Jason drank slowly, talking little, while watching the repairs to the nacelle pylon from the bar's observation windows. One neat feature of the glass was that it could be configured to give the viewer an image from any direction outside the ship.

They had been joined by Ghost, who was sipping on a Guinness. Her neatly-trimmed black hair framed her thin face and sharp nose, which was looking down on the antics of some of their companions. She tried to keep her attention elsewhere and so she joined the ship's helmsman and navigator in their

perusal of the repairs.

It bothered them that their mighty ship was vulnerable while warp drive was down, but at least they had some defences, and Ish's fighter squadron in reserve.

Lieutenant Goldberg was also in the bar, drinking up a storm with his fellow pilots and hitting on the female officers. Few were having any success and the bartender, Gillian, was doing a good job keeping them under control, whilst maintaining the general air of joviality.

Still, the navigator, helmsman and pilot controller did not approve of their last line of defence being inebriated. Caitlin was especially annoyed considering her earlier lecture. Goldberg seemed to love pushing his luck. The situation was compounded by the fact Doctor AndrusTaurus' sobering pills took time to take effect. If the ship suddenly came under fire, the fighter jocks would be in no condition to defend the ship.

Indeed, they were more interested in defending each other than looking after the *Millennium*. At times, they only seemed to care about the Starship because their small vessels lacked warp drive, for increased manoeuvrability. Whilst on board, they either spent their time in the bar or in the main landing bay, trying to squeeze a few more kilojoules out of their fighter's engines.

Carman had finally had enough for one night and got up to leave. He gave Ghost a nod, then headed for the door. Jason decided to follow his friend's lead and downed the last of his beer before he got up. They were halfway out when one of the pilots spoke up.

“Hey, Nunn, how about you join us tomorrow for flight

training?"

Jason stopped, genuinely interested. He was a good pilot and knew it. He had managed to keep the *Millennium* out of the Tholian's line of fire for most of the battle, and it was not easy flying a Starship as if she was a crop-duster. What he heard next changed his mind.

"Yeah," said one of others. "You could fly one of those lumbering shuttles and we could use you for target practice."

Jason saw red. He managed to take two steps toward the mouthy fighter jock before Carman caught him and held him in check. "It's not worth it, Jason." Caitlin had joined him as well, and a glance at her shake of her head gave him her opinion as well.

"Yeah," challenged the impetuous flyboy, who had moved forward to meet the helmsman. "You might get hurt and run home to your Mommy, Piper."

Jason could smell the alcohol from this poor excuse for a Starfleet officer, he was so close. Now, there were a lot of things he could tolerate, but insulting his captain was not one of them. He neatly stepped out of Carman's grasp and flattened the mouthy ensign with one solid punch.

As the other pilots rushed to his defence, and Carman, Jason and Caitlin adopted fighting stances, a loud, deep voice growled. "Don't even think about it."

All eyes turned to the open doorway, which was filled with a huge, angry black leonine cat. With claws on parade, Crash entered the room and stepped between the pilots and the *Millennium* crew. He spoke slowly and with menace. "The first person who makes a move will answer to me." He made

a show of his teeth as he spoke, gleaming white and sharp as needles. When no-one moved, he smiled coldly. "Good," he said, letting the word rattle in his throat. "Now, Ensign..." Crash reached forward, caught the smart-mouthing ensign under the collar and lifted him off his feet with one arm.

The young pilot stuttered in plain fear. "Ensign Sydney, s-sir."

Krashtallah bared his teeth and growled once more for effect. "Ensign Sydney, you are confined to quarters until further notice."

Lieutenant Goldberg stepped forward and finally made his presence known. "For what? He didn't touch *him!*" He made a crude stabbing gesture at Jason.

Crash made a face somewhere between a snarl and a smile. Either way, it was impressive. "He did, however, insult the captain, and we tolerate no such insubordination aboard this ship." He sent the ensign staggering towards the door with a flick of his wrist. "Lieutenant Goldberg, you can accompany him. Consider yourself under house arrest."

The leather adorned Squadron leader drew himself up to full height and faced the Caitian off. "For what?"

"For conduct unbecoming an officer of your rank. You saw what a junior officer under your command was doing and did nothing to prevent it." His denunciation of the pilot's actions was deadly. Almost as an afterthought, he added: "Oh, and for being drunk on duty."

"What?!" Goldberg was incredulous. "We aren't even *on* duty!" He tried once more to get his comeuppance. "Besides, you don't have the authority."

This time Crash's smile was genuine. This had been a long time in coming. He had disliked the smarmy pilot since the first day he had met him and told him the *Millennium* was a nice "boat". Since then, the man's casual disregard of protocol had grated on him. So, he took great delight as he said with playful snarl: "As acting First Officer of this ship, I can do anything I like." He turned to address the rest of the pilots. "As from four hours ago, this ship was placed on yellow alert and that means your squadron is as well. You are to remain on call, and sober, for the remainder of the alert. Is that clear?"

The remaining pilots nodded their assent and quickly scurried out of the room, leaving their beloved commander to fend for himself.

"Report to your quarters, Lieutenant." Crash's tone of command was unquestionable.

Goldberg stepped back and moved towards the door. "The captain will hear about this!" he shouted just as he passed the doors.

Crash's whiskers arched forward in amusement. The rest of the *Millennium* crew smiled along with him. It was common knowledge what the captain thought of "Ish". He was not going to get very far. He looked down at Caitlin and shook his head. "Sorry, Ghost. Are you able to replace him with anyone?"

She gave him a wry smile. "If it comes down to it, I'll lead the squadron myself," she said with her lyrical lilt.

The acting First Officer nodded then rounded on the helmsman. "Explain yourself, Mister."

Jason fell on the only defence he could think of. "You heard what he said about the captain." He knew it was pitiful, but he had to try.

Crash could see that the human knew his error, but he could not let him off Scot free, no matter what the offensive ensign had said. "Mister Nunn, you should have known better. However, I am going to make allowances for your noble motives. I hear Mister Sandage needs an extra hand in engineering. Report there for one shift starting Gamma shift."

Jason checked the wall chronometer. "Gawd, that only leaves me an hour to sleep!"

Carman tugged on Jason's jacket. "Then you'd better move now, or you aren't going to get any." He quickly dragged the younger officer out the door and off to their shared quarters.

The incident over, Crash took his usual seat at the bar and ordered a Catnip for himself.

"Thanks for coming so quickly," said Gillian as she placed his glass before him, straw in place as Caitians could not sip from a glass. "I was worried we'd have a bloodbath here."

"It was fortunate I was already on my way here. I could use a drink myself." Crash quickly upended the glass and swallowed the contents, sugar-straw and all.

Gillian gave her one of her trademark smiles that could warm a Klingon's soul. "It's a good thing you don't like alcohol, or you'd have to confine yourself to quarters."

Crash just purred in return and ordered another.

Aside from Piper, the nearest thing the *Millennium* had to an archaeologist was Ensign Rani Singh, a native of old India on Earth. She was average in every way: height, weight, looks, but not in intelligence. In that department she scored aces. Her wit was razor sharp, and her mind even sharper.

She was a latecomer to Starfleet. Initially, she had followed her family's tradition of taking Professorships in history at one of Earth's great Universities. However, unlike her ancestors, she had the wandering spirit. Not long after she received her first doctorate, she began field work researching first the history and origin of the Alpha Centaurans, who she concluded had been seeded there by the Preservers, and then she moved even farther out.

Her work came to the attention of Starfleet, and they offered her a commission. After brief consideration, she accepted and completed the four-year course in three years. However, her insatiable desire for learning took her into other fields, and it wasn't long before she added a doctorate in astrophysics to her resumé.

It was in this capacity that she came to the *Millennium*, which had the biggest mobile astrophysics laboratory in Starfleet.

She soon found a kindred spirit in the captain, and it wasn't long before the two of them were discussing historical parallels. She also came to recognise the captain was onto something giving classes to her people in history. She agreed with the axiom that those who did not learn from history were doomed to repeat its mistakes.

Now she was brushing up on her archaeological

disciplines as she had been left in charge of the groundside investigation of the planet.

Realising very quickly just how brittle the remaining structures were, she had taken to scanning them from a distance whilst seeking out more solid ones. It was proving an uphill battle, but the information she had collected was far from useless. She had already formulated an hypothesis that this was indeed an advanced civilisation – possibly on the cusp of space travel when it ended, suddenly and with great violence.

Like the Romans, they had an excellent system of roads, but they did not travel much by sea. Possibly because of their lack of depth. Most of their beaches one could wade out into for a mile before it got up to your neck.

They utilised advanced forms of communications, and computers.

She had even found a couple of fairly well-preserved skeletons she'd had beamed up to the ship for Merete to examine.

The one thing she had yet to fathom was what these people used as a power source. Their planet had very little in the way of oil to extract, indeed it seemed that they used it only for the manufacture of plastics. They had no trees, and what uranium they'd had they had used to destroy themselves.

There was very little in the way of wind, and the ocean currents were barely enough to keep them from becoming cesspools.

Once the suns went down, Rani was not willing to leave her new field of discovery, she had decided to rough it and

sleep on the planet. While her companions were beaming back to the *Millennium* to sleep on their comfortable mattresses in their air-conditioned rooms, it didn't take Rani long to break out the pop-up tent, air bed, sleeping bag, thermal blanket and rations.

As night fell, she created a small fire using combustible fire blocks and good, old-fashioned matches which she always carried with her. She cooked her instant meal over the flames, along with some marshmallows she'd had beamed down, and enjoyed a pot of tea boiled in a can.

She sat back on the shuttle's step and enjoyed the hot tea as it slid down her throat. The air was getting quite cold and, even though she had decided to rough it, she was glad she still had the shuttle to keep her warm if it got too chilly. She examined her fifty-two-year-old fingers and flexed them. They had started getting a little stiff these days, especially when the temperature dropped.

“Damn,” she muttered to herself. “I hate getting old.”

She looked into the night sky and marvelled at how clear the stars were, but she knew she shouldn't be surprised on a world with little in the way of clouds or smog. She looked around and, after a moment, spotted the *Millennium* not far above the horizon to the east. It was comforting to know it was there, even though she knew there was nothing to fear on this very dead world.

She took out a torch and spent an hour reading about the latest discoveries in Antarctica before the hard work of the day finally caught up with her and she decided to get some sleep.

It was as she put down the torch that she was hit with a

revelation. She suddenly realised what this planet's people had used as a primary power source. It was so obvious to her now she almost slapped herself for not realising sooner. She decided she would report it to the captain first thing in the morning.

It took only a moment to divest herself of her uniform and slip into her beloved pink silk pyjamas before she stepped into her tent and crawled into her sleeping bag.

Placing her hands behind her head, she gave a smile of sheer bliss. "I don't know if you're listening, Mum," she said, talking to her mother who had died of a heart attack the previous year, "but you were wrong about a life in Starfleet! It doesn't get better than this!"

Exhausted from the exertion of the day, Rani quickly fell asleep, not realising that the events of this night would challenge that belief.

Chapter Seven

The morning found Scanner waking up wondering where in the galaxy he was. The familiar thrum of the impulse engines maintaining standard orbit relaxed him. Good, he thought, I'm still on the ship. So, where am I?

He pushed himself up, but, being unfamiliar with the furniture, he slipped, fell, and rolled straight on top of Amantallah.

It was a good thing she was already awake and waiting for him to rouse. When he dropped, she caught him neatly in her arms and stopped him damaging anything delicate. If she had still been slumbering, she would probably have awoken, slashing wildly at a would-be attacker, as she had been trained to do as a youth.

Scanner looked wide eyed at his girlfriend, then the previous night came back to mind, and he grinned sheepishly.

“Good morning, Judd,” Manny purred. “I think it's a little early in our relationship to wake up this way.” The twinkle in her eye gave away her true intentions.

The human could think of nothing to answer her jibe with and could only return the greeting. “Good mornin', sweetheart.” Still, he did nothing to remove himself from her grasp. In fact, he relaxed into it a little, and Manny found it hard not to stroke his hair.

Coming to his senses and realising the situation was fast getting out of hand, Judd stood and helped up his companion. She seemed a little sorry he had moved, but the growl from her stomach gave her something else to think about. Hunger,

like yawning, is contagious first thing in the morning, and so they both headed for the shower. Judd had forgotten where he was.

Amantallah stopped before the cubicle with a look of “where do you think you’re going?”

Scanner stopped short, gave her an embarrassed smile, pecked her on the cheek, and left for his own quarters to shower. Nothing needed to be said. They knew they would meet in the officer’s mess for breakfast.

Things were somewhat different in the ruined city. Rani Singh woke, stretched, and smiled. Today was going to be a good day.

The first thing she noticed when she looked around was that she wasn’t in her sleeping bag. She wasn’t even in her tent. Where there should have been sunlight, she saw only the interior of her shuttle.

Her first thought was: “How did I get here?” She wondered for a moment whether the sleepwalking she had done as a child had led her to rouse and make her way into the shuttle to keep warm.

She discounted the notion as the reality of the situation became clearer to her. As she stretched, she found her arms and fingers were quite sore. Distracted by the pain, she checked them and found them not only bruised, but bloodied.

The usually unflappable Rani began to feel the first pangs of panic. Nothing was as it should be. She got to her feet and checked the rest of her body. Aside from dirty feet from the dust outside, she only had the odd small cut. Her

favourite pyjamas had seen better days. Somehow, they had gotten torn in places where she was glad she was alone – as she wasn't wearing underwear.

The fact they were ruined just added to the distress she felt. Suddenly, the need to check in with the *Millennium* became overwhelming. She stepped forward to the shuttle's control console and found things here were not as they should be either.

She ran her hands over the controls, finding there wasn't a single console that had not been smashed. She brushed some of the less damaged areas and found, to her dismay, they were non-functional as well.

“Computer,” she said, the fear she felt causing her voice to quiver. The machine remained silent.

“Computer!” she cried louder, even more agitated. There was no reply.

Rani plopped herself down on the seat, which unceremoniously dumped her on the floor as its damaged back snapped off. The unexpected thump drove the air out of her lungs, and it took her a moment of frantic sucking to take in a lungful of precious ether.

Frightened and angry, she spat: “Is there nothing on this ship that still works?”

Rani rolled over and moved over to the rear of the cabin. Knowing a little about engineering – from the required courses at the Academy – she opened the inspection hatch to check the engine relays and duotronic chips.

She gasped as she found every one of them had been ruined – smashed beyond repair.

“What is going on here?” she asked, fear tightening her throat to the point where it came out as a squeak.

She jumped as a sound of tapping came from the door. She backed away from it, terrified that the creature that had done this to her vessel might have returned. She looked around for a phaser and found it damaged as well.

The tapping came again. She found it odd that whoever it was didn't just open the door, but she had forgotten that the shuttle's power was out.

Now frantic for her life, she found a bar on the floor – a leg from a chair that had been broken off – and gripped it, ready to do battle. She backed into the corner and watched the door, the bar shaking with her as she trembled.

The emergency door lock in the centre of the door began turning. Once, twice, three times, then the door slid out and down, letting the harsh morning light stream through the door.

“Hello?” The voice was familiar, but to Rani's overtaxed nerves, it sounded alien and frightening with its odd timbre.

A large, feline being stepped through the door, wearing nothing but a belt holding several pieces of equipment, including a phaser.

Pushed over the edge, Rani charged the intruder, bar held high, and tried to bludgeon her. Seeing her coming, Amantallah simply dropped back, reached up, and caught the bar, twisting it out of Rani's hand. She kept coming, so Manny simply caught the smaller human with her right hand as she tossed the bar behind her to free her left, which she then applied to gripping Rani's other arm.

“Ensign Singh!” she said with every ounce of authority

she could muster. "Control yourself!"

It took a moment for true recognition to come to Rani, but even then, she just shook as the adrenaline in her system did its work. Fear was not a constant companion for her, and this morning's drama was more than she was prepared to handle. "Lieutenant Amantallash?" she said when she could finally get the words out – and even then, they were almost unintelligible.

Manny's eyes went wide as she took in the dishevelled appearance of the Ensign. Her clothes were torn, her hands bloody, and she looked terrified. "What happened here?" she asked. "Were you attacked?"

Thinking back, the last thing Rani remembered was going to sleep the night before. "No, I...." she struggled to understand and failed completely. "I don't know."

Lieutenant Brankovian, Manny's second in Security, a tall, lanky Andorian whose blue skin and antennae tended to distract one from the fact he was a formidable being, stepped up behind Amantallash. "Is everything alright, sir?" he asked.

Manny waved him off, thoughtful of Rani's state of undress. "Find some clothes for the Ensign."

He nodded. Andorians were known for their gentlemanly attitude towards women. "I'll see if can find her uniform in her tent," he said. He glanced at the tattered remains and grimaced. "At least, what's left of it."

Amantallash turned back to Rani and gently moved her back into the shuttle before sitting her on the floor when she realised there was little left of the seating for her to sit on. Her whiskers bristled when she saw the damage to the vessel,

which she noticed was extensive. “We won’t be flying this anywhere soon,” she muttered. A quick glance at Rani was enough for her to decide now was not a good time to question her. Perhaps Doctor TandroVerandi would be able to help her, she thought.

She flipped open her communicator and called in. “I need to speak to the captain,” she said.

“Piper here,” came the captain’s tinny voice from the miniature speaker.

“Captain, we’ve found Ensign Singh, but it looks like she’s been attacked. Physically she’s okay, but I’m afraid she’ll need to see our psychologist ASAP.” Her voice dropped a little in deference to the still shaking scientist. “She’s in a bad way.”

Piper’s concern could be clearly heard. “I’ll have her transported up immediately.”

“Er, I wouldn’t recommend that, Captain,” Manny said, a little embarrassed. “We need to organise some clothes for her first.” So, Piper didn’t get the wrong idea, she elaborated. “Hers are badly torn.”

“Ah. Call for beam up when you’re ready. I’ll alert Mister TandroVerandi to be ready for her.”

“Aye. Amantallah out.” She snapped shut her communicator and fastened it back on her belt.

For the last minute, she had wondered at the sound of tearing fabric from outside, and now she’d hung up, she could satisfy her curiosity. Brankovian had reappeared at the door with an improvised blanket made up of the biggest remnant of Rani’s tent. He passed it to her with a shrug. “It was the best

I could find," he said apologetically.

"It's better than nothing," Manny said with a quick grin to show her appreciation for his resourcefulness. "I'll take care of this. Call the shuttle bay and have someone come down here and tractor this shuttle home." She shook her head in wonder. "Then I want you to go over this lot with a microscope and find out what happened here."

In matters of detection, there was nobody on board better at solving mysteries than Brankovian. He had once tracked down a thief who had been stealing isolinear relays by finding a single flake of skin and matching DNA.

The Lieutenant nodded. "Understood, sir. I'll get right on it." He stepped outside and began collecting Rani's equipment.

Manny sat on the floor in front of Rani and wrapped the makeshift blanket around her, adjusting it for her modesty. Even though the temperature was soaring with the heat of the day, the poor human was shivering with shock. "I'll get you home," she said softly. She flipped open her communicator once more and ordered their immediate extraction.

As the beam took her, she could not help but feel that something dark had been here. She had no idea what it was, but it felt familiar. The kind of familiar that brought a shiver to her soul.

"What happened down there?" Rogen cast a concerned eye over his patient from the relative safety of his wife's office. Rani lay, still shivering from shock, on an examination table. She was curled up in a foetal position, with Amantallash

standing beside her, gently stroking her hair. Rogen found himself having to re-evaluate his opinion of the Security Chief, who had always given him the idea she was hard as nails and practically feral in a fight.

“I don't know,” Merete answered, confused. “She hasn't said much.” She noticed the way her husband was watching them both. “Manny's got many sides to her. She's like a diamond with more facets than you can see.”

Rogen nodded quietly to himself. “I need to remind myself sometimes that I'm the new one here. You've had a lot more time to get used to the crew, to get to know them.”

At that, his wife gave a small chuckle. “Yes and no. Piper, Sarda and Scanner I've known for years. Others, like Manny and Crash, I've only gotten to know in the last six months since the *Millennium* was commissioned. One thing's for sure, they never cease to amaze me.”

It had been a full half hour since beam-up, and Merete had already checked out her patient. Aside from some minor scrapes and bruising, especially on her hands, there was nothing physical wrong with her. However, the psychological impact of Rani's ordeal was far more devastating, its effect apparent as she lay shaking.

It was difficult for Merete to see the usually unflappable Ensign like this. They'd already had some fascinating conversations, her insight often paralleling their captain. She put out her hand and rubbed her husband's arm affectionately. “I'm sooo glad we have you on board, my love. I think Rani's going to need more than a stiff drink and a good talking to.”

Rogen took a deep breath. “One thing's for certain,

procrastination never cured anybody.”

Merete watched as her husband left her office and walked over to Rani's bed. He simply stood at the end of it and watched for a moment.

Rogen noticed the Ensign was still shaking, balled up in an almost foetal position, clearly somewhere else in her own mind. Not wanting to force her to respond, Rogen simply sat on the end of her bed and waited. He knew that in her current state her senses would be heightened. He had no doubt she was aware of his presence. “I am Rogen,” he stated softly. “I am here for you, to help you. I can assure you that you are safe on board the *Millennium*.” He kept his voice warm, but in a quiet monotone. He wanted her to be at ease. “I am Merete's husband. I think I saw you at the wedding....” Rogen kept on talking, always quietly but in a friendly manner, but in a persistent monotone.

His method was working as he noticed her heart rate drop on the diagnostic board above the bed. Her breathing was also becoming more regular.

“What is it, Brankovian?” Lieutenant Amantallah asked as she strode onto shuttle deck three, located at the base of the Engineering hull. In the centre of the deck sat shuttlecraft six, which had yet to sport one of Piper's peculiar names. “I came as soon as I could.”

The Andorian stepped out of the mini vessel and looked at her in mild surprise. It had only taken her about ninety seconds to arrive after his summons. He chalked it up as another of his Chief's eccentricities. “I have discovered

something peculiar," he said frowning.

Manny's whiskers arched forward in curiosity as she pulled on a pair of latex gloves. "I guess that it wasn't damaged in a sandstorm," she said with a small attempt at levity.

"No." Brankovian shook his head in sorrow. He hated passing on possibly damaging news. "The only fingerprints and DNA traces I have found on *any* of the materials from the last eight hours belong to Ensign Singh."

Amantallash's pupils dilated in shock. She was silent for a moment, then slowly said: "That doesn't make any sense. She was terrified that something was out to get her."

Her second turned his tricorder's readout for Manny to view. "There is no doubt, I'm afraid," he said. Still gloved, he turned and picked up the bar that had been taken from the damaged chair. "The only fingerprints on this are predominantly from the Ensign's left hand." He pointed to one end of the shaft. "You can see here where her grip shifted several times." He turned his attention to the other end. "This is where she gripped it when she came at you. This time she used her right hand. Somehow, she broke the chair leg off and used it to destroy pretty much everything else." He handed her the bar, which she took in her right hand.

Manny casually tossed it in the air and caught it by the tip. It was made out the same lightweight alloy employed in the rest of the shuttle. "Have you ever tried bending one of these?" she asked him. She took a firm grip of each end and flexed her considerable muscles – to no avail. The bar refused to even flex. She handed it back to Brankovian. "You give it

a try."

The Lieutenant was game and tried his best to bend it. Once more, it did not even kink. "If I can't bend it...."

"And I can't bend it," Manny interjected.

Brankovian's eyes narrowed in wonder as he concluded: "Then a fifty-kilo human female certainly couldn't."

A thought came to Manny, and she tapped in a command on her personal padd. Her notion was confirmed. She showed the display of Ensign Singh's record to her second. "Never mind that the Ensign is *right-handed*."

Brankovian nodded. "If she was in control, she would have been wielding it with her right hand, not her left." He looked at her askance. "Perhaps it is the result of a psychotic break."

Manny's tail flicked around in mild annoyance mixed with alarm. "You're forgetting she doesn't have the strength...." Her voice trailed off as her thoughts were leading her to a worrying conclusion. "I need to talk to the captain." Without another word, she turned and made her way to the Bridge.

Rogen leaned forward and listened intently. Had Rani spoken? Once more she whispered the same word: "Sola."

The word was confusing. There were a number of ways to interpret it. In the ancient language of Earth, Latin, the word meant single, or alone. Did she still feel isolated? Was she simply vocalising her recollections from the planet? That she was alone when she was attacked?

She said it again, but this time louder. And again, and

again. Each time getting louder. With each repetition she seemed more manic. She uncoiled herself and reached up, taking Rogen by the shirt front. The look in her eyes was almost hysterical. "Tell the Captain," she said. "Solar!"

Rogen flinched, but reasserted his calm demeanour and gently took Rani by the forearms, easing her back onto the bed. He had seen Merete appear out of the corner of his eye and he gave her a slight nod. As Rogen gently pushed, Rani let him guide her back onto the bed, but once more implored him: "Tell her!"

His wife stepped forward and gave Rani a shot of sedatives, quickly putting her into a deep sleep. "What was that all about?" she asked him.

The psychologist shook his head. "I have no idea. But whatever it is, she believes the captain needs to know." He stepped over to the wall and called the Bridge. "Lieutenant TandroVerandi calling the Bridge. Please put me through to the captain."

Piper stood on the bridge at the start of Alpha shift and had watched as the crews went through the change of duty. The nocturnal Gamma shift staff had efficiently handed over their posts, and soon the entire Alpha shift team were ready for the new day.

The last to arrive had been Lieutenant Nunn, looking a little grizzled from his night's work in Engineering. He had managed to repair one minor system on his own, and he was feeling a little proud, despite his apparent fatigue.

Jason's appearance had reminded Piper of herself as she

had been roused in the middle of the night once again by the persistent and insistent Lieutenant Goldberg. She had listened to his argument, put up with his ravings, and promptly supported Crash in every manner. In fact, she added a guard to his door to make sure he stayed put.

Once she had finished with him, she had shut off the comm screen and fallen asleep, amused, but a little annoyed that she could never seem to get a decent night's sleep on this ship.

Just then the turbolift door opened and Amantallash practically vaulted onto the Bridge. "Captain, could I have a word in private?"

Piper nodded and quickly took her seat in her Ready Room. "Go ahead, Lieutenant."

Standing at ease before her desk, the Security Chief reported. "Captain, I have reason to believe we are dealing with a non-corporeal intelligence that has the capability of "possessing" individuals for its own purposes."

The notion made the hairs stand up on the back of Piper's neck. What she was suggesting was tantamount to saying the planet was haunted by the Devil himself. "What's your evidence?"

Manny quickly informed her of her findings regarding Brankovian's investigation. "There is no way Ensign Singh broke that chair leg, Captain. In fact, the only being on board who has that kind of strength would be Earhaht, and she'd rather eat it, not break it."

The small attempt at levity wasn't missed by the captain. She gave Manny a small smile and gestured to the seat

opposite her. The Lieutenant took it gratefully. “It's still a bit of a stretch,” she said, not uncharitably.

The white puff ball took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “Captain, I don't know how else to say this, but I'm sure there's something down there.” She squirmed a little, then blurted. “And it's not happy we're here.”

Piper was inclined to question that but reconsidered. She was reminded that Sarda lay below decks in a coma of unknown origin. Commander Kirk had mentioned that there was a hidden menace. “Hmmm.” She tapped her fingers on her chair arm, then got up and replicated a fruit juice for each of them. She needed a moment to think. Placing Manny's before her on a coaster, she sat down on the corner of her desk. “I've never heard of a non-corporeal being being able to bend cast rhodium,” she said thoughtfully.

In reply, the Lieutenant drew the captain's attention to her glass as she stared, intently at it. To Piper's surprise, the straw stood upright, then slowly began to stir the liquid. After about ten seconds, it stopped as if its strings had been cut and slumped against the side of the glass. Manny took a gulp of air, as if she had been holding her breath and fell against the back of her chair.

“That took a lot of effort,” Piper said, marvelling. “Didn't it?”

Mentally exhausted, Manny simply nodded.

“I think you just made my point for me,” Piper said, her brows raised. “The laws of physics still have to be obeyed. Where does the energy come from to bend, and break, that chair leg?”

As if in answer, her communicator chimed. She touched the call button. "Piper here."

Doctor TandroVerandi's voice sounded confused. "Captain, I have a message from Ensign Singh – I think."

At the sound of the Ensign's name, the captain perked up. "How is she?"

"Not good, Captain. We will have to keep her sedated for a little while. She's had quite a shock."

Piper nodded absently. She was quite fond of the scientist who had decided to reinvent herself. "You mentioned a message?"

Rogen sounded almost embarrassed. "She told me to tell you "solar", whatever that means."

The captain sat bolt upright then stood and stepped over to the window. Beyond the viewport lay the stars, with three of them in plain view. Bright in the sky over the planet, the trinary system would constantly bathe this world in sunshine. Almost absently, she said: "Thank you, Doctor. Piper out."

Silently, Manny joined her at her side. It was a sight to behold. "May I ask what you're thinking, Captain?"

Piper was shaken from her reverie. "There have been plenty of examples of machines exerting great force over long distances," she said thoughtfully. "Perhaps we're dealing with one of those."

"That wouldn't explain the presence I felt, Captain," Manny offered. "Machines are logical." She gestured at the planet. "Whatever that is down there, it certainly knows a lot about hate."

The captain's eyes became slits. "If it's responsible for

Commander Sarda's coma, it's going to find how much I do as well." She ground her teeth for a moment. "What if it's a bit of both?" she speculated.

Manny's pupils dilated in confusion. "Captain? Are you talking about Artificial Intelligence?"

Piper turned from the window. "Not exactly. It could be a machine that's sustaining a biological intelligence." She bit her lip. "Either way, if we're going to combat it, we need to unplug it." Without another word, Piper strode out of her office and back onto the Bridge, Manny trailing behind her. She looked over at Sarda's stand-in. "Lieutenant Soren," she called to the young Vulcan. "Scan the planet for solar energy collectors. They could take a number of forms, so be thorough."

"Aye, Captain," he replied with typical Vulcan stoicism. His behaviour gave Piper a momentary twinge of grief for her stricken friend. "What shall I do once I've found it?"

Using her long legs to quickly cross the Bridge, Piper said: "Scan for whatever is storing the energy, feed it to fire control, and send it to hell."

The statement caught Commander Krashtallah's attention. He put down his earpiece and moved to join Piper. This emotionalism was unlike her. Standing beside her, he asked with the utmost respect: "Captain, may I ask why?"

Piper took a deep breath as she reminded herself he had a right to know. "I believe a hostile force is using the energy from the sun and is turning it into psychokinetic energy to keep the settlers from leaving. It may also be responsible for Commander Sarda's condition."

It sounded highly implausible to Crash, but his time under her command had taught him that practically anything was possible. She had never led him astray before. She was not going to do so now.

“Aye, Captain. Search and destroy.”

Soren had watched the exchange incredulously. He said in his even tenor: “Captain, would it not be better to study such an apparatus? There could be recoverable technology that would be of great value to the Federation.”

Before Piper could say a word, Crash stared down the upstart Science Officer. “Lieutenant, questioning the orders of a superior officer is not a good idea at the best of times. Leaving one of our crew at the mercy of a force that is injuring him is not the Starfleet way, not when it can be stopped. You can scan it all you like while we’re shoving a photon torpedo down its throat.” He finished his statement with a growl from the back of his throat.

Mildly stunned at the wanton display of emotion, Soren backed down and turned his attention to his equipment. “Scanning. There is a lot of surface to cover, Captain. I estimate this will take sixty minutes to complete.”

“Limit your search to the northern hemisphere,” Piper chimed in. “It is the only part of the planet that is always facing the suns.”

Soren nodded. “Logical. I revise my estimate to thirty minutes.”

The captain gave him half a smile. The young Vulcan had a lot to learn. “Thank you, Lieutenant.”

While they waited, Piper sat in the Conn, and Crash and

Manny took their respective stations. Within moments Crash, once again at his board at communications, listened intently to an incoming transmission. "Captain," he said with urgency.

Piper had been expecting this. "On screen."

The chime of a received transmission being played sounded as Captain Kirk's face appeared on the main viewscreen. The hope and joy in his face was evident as he began speaking. Piper checked the transmission log in the bottom right corner of the screen. It had been sent five hours ago, which meant that Jim had discovered her request for DNA identification only one hour after Starfleet had received it. Not bad.

"Well, Piper, you've done it again. You've found the man I've been searching for all my life. The DNA ID is correct, the man you have there is George Samuel Kirk, my father. I will rendezvous with your ship in two days on the *Enterprise*. I will see you then. Kirk out." The screen returned to the vista of the planet below.

Piper laughed inwardly. It came as no surprise to her that Jim had found out so quickly. Jim had people everywhere who owed him favours.

She also knew the ETA was a little conservative, the *Enterprise* had been completely repaired and was fully capable of a sustained Warp Eight, which meant he would be here in about thirty-eight hours. Damn, not enough time for her to make sure the danger she could feel was lurking nearby was dealt with.

"Crash, send a message to the *Enterprise* not to approach the planet until they receive my signal. Tell them to

keep one light day's distance until then. Signed Piper, Captain of the *Millennium*, blah, blah, blah. Give it all the red tape you think it will take to keep them there." Piper turned away and let Crash do his job.

"Mister Amantallah, Valastro, TandroVerandi and I will return to the settlement. Mister Krashtallah, you have the Conn. I expect you will have the collectors dealt with by the time we touch down." She gave him a grin reflecting her complete confidence in him.

She glanced over at the helm and reflected this time she was going to leave Jason, who looked like hell. She needed everyone on their toes. She had a few hard questions to ask when she got down there and it might not be too easy getting the answers.

The crew members she had chosen were already prepared. They had anticipated her intentions and had dressed appropriately and were carrying all they would need on the planet. They'd had their suspicions confirmed when she had reported that morning wearing a loose-fitting shirt and shorts. She was even carrying an artificial wide-brimmed straw hat, and a pair of sunglasses hung from her shirt pocket. She looked more like she was going to spend the day at the beach than deal with a group of hostile humans.

When Piper arrived on the shuttle deck, she was mildly amused to find Rogen also suitably attired for their mission. This time Merete had remained in sickbay, watching Sarda and futilely trying a few more home remedies.

The crew entered the shuttle once more without preamble and took their seats.

Rogen decided to break the quiet after the *Banana Republic* had returned to space. "Do you think they'll be a little more friendly this morning, Captain?"

Piper turned the controls over to Carman and turned to the Doctor, all business. "No, Mister TandroVerandi, I don't. Yesterday they were startled by our arrival, this time they'll be ready."

Manny spoke up. "But Captain, doesn't the Prime Directive apply in this case? I mean, the majority of them don't want us there."

Piper shook her head. "No, not in this case. The natives know who and what we are, and I believe there are some down there who are being forced to stay. Commander Kirk and his fellow crew members may be old, but they're still Starfleet."

"Captain?" Rogen seemed a little confused.

She sat back in her chair and sighed. "You've all met Commander George Kirk, and you've met Captain James Kirk. Do you think them the kind to settle down and farm for the rest of their lives?"

Gazes turned inward as they considered her question. They, too shook their heads, no. They knew the stars themselves, and there was no way any of them would leave them and settle down.

The captain saw their expressions and knew they understood. Their kindred were being kept from their destinies among the stars by those around them. "I must warn you," she added. "Be ready for anything. There is something on the planet that Commander Kirk fears, and men like Kirk don't scare easily."

Chapter Eight

The *Banana Republic* set down without a hitch, kicking up a small dust cloud as it settled. This time, only Kirk and a woman he had introduced the day before as Lieutenant Julia Carruthers waited for them. The greeting was friendly, but Piper got the impression that the others were trying to avoid her. She voiced her feelings.

Kirk just chuckled. "We had a discussion last night..." Julia snorted, and George scowled at the interruption. "The others have agreed to be civil, but I think they've just taken the easy way out."

Piper gestured toward the shuttle door. "Commander, I need a word with you."

Once inside, out of the sun, Piper got down to business. "Commander, I'm here to offer transportation to anyone who desires it."

Julia was stunned at the thought of leaving what had been her home for so long. George was naturally delighted at the prospect, but instead of saying so, he just looked nervously out the door.

"Commander!"

Scanner was humming the tune to one of his favourite Caribbean songs as he worked with two others on the final physical repairs to the nacelle pylon. His fellows put up with the discordant sound buzzing in their ears out of respect. But that respect had its limits, and very soon one of them was going to say something.

The plasma conduit had been repaired and they were putting the finishing touches to the superstructure. All that remained was the damage to the pylon coolant surfaces, then they could go inside and realign the warp engines.

The Engineering team's work had been exemplary, and he anticipated the ship would be ready for warp within another solar day. One thing that had really pleased him, and Crash in particular, was without the danger of a plasma leak, the warp core was back online and powering the defence systems. The ship could do everything but leave a trail of stardust.

Wishing he could wipe the sweat from his brow, he attached his fuser's magnetic surface to the hull and rested. He took a sip from a conveniently placed straw inside his helmet, then adjusted the tiny tractor emitter on his belt to give him a better view of the planet revolving below.

It was this marvellous vantage point that let him see *something* coming at them from the planet. It came towards them so fast he only got out "What the..!" before the coruscating ball of intense light bounced off the shields a mere ten meters away. The ship shuddered under the hands of Scanner's helpers, then they, too, saw it. A lot of panicked yelling ensued as the ball repeatedly bludgeoned the shields in an effort to reach the ship.

Scanner came to his wits the soonest and called the bridge. "Crash, get us the hell outta here!"

No sooner he had spoken the words than he found himself facing the transporter room wall. He ripped open the catches on his helmet and tore it off as the ship shuddered under another impact. He dropped his helmet, said a quick

“thank you” to the transporter chief, then raced out the door, heading for the bridge.

“Analysis, Mister Soren,” Crash calmly requested.

The science officer matched the Commander's calm and carefully scanned the area of space around the ship. He asked the computer to run every known scan and the results made him raise a brow in frustration. “Commander, whatever it is, it is only registering within the visible spectrum.”

Crash watched its movements on the screen. They were in no danger. With warp power back online, the shields could hold off their attacker indefinitely. His eyes narrowed in thought as he considered their foe. They had tried communicating with it and failed. Shooting at it was pointless, according to the weapon's locking mechanism there was nothing there to fire at. All they could do was watch as it bounced off every shield, looking for weak spots. “Mister Soren,” he said, speculatively. “Would you agree that its pattern indicates intelligence?”

Soren was too much the logical Vulcan to commit himself to a definite answer without sufficient information. Still, he ventured: “Possibly.”

The turbolift doors parted and Scanner panted onto the bridge. “Is it still out there?” he asked between gulps.

The ship shuddered again as if in answer. Crash did not bother answering Scanner, just asked if he and his crew were OK.

“Yeah, we're dandy.” Judd sat down on the bridge railing and continued. “It came up on us fast. If the shields had'na been up, we would'a been vapour.”

“And you were working on the pylon.”

Scanner looked confused. “Course we were.”

Crash filled in the blanks. “So, if the shields hadn’t been raised, we would probably have sustained damage to the port strut.”

Nodding, Scanner was beginning to put the pieces together. “You think it’s the same thing that destroyed the *Republic*.”

Crash flashed some teeth in pleasure. “I’m almost certain it is. Years ago, the *Republic* arrived not expecting any trouble, so she was running with the shields down. Whatever it is out there hit the ship at its most vulnerable spot, the warp nacelle strut. It managed to get close because conventional scanners could not detect it.”

The Engineer looked a little incredulous. “Ain’t you giving it a little bit too much credit? How would it know just where to hit a Starship?”

The feline did not have an answer for that one. All he could say was: “I don’t know, but it is effective.”

“How are we going to get the Captain back with the shields up?” Jason asked.

Crash sat back in the centre seat feeling very much alone. It was up to him to find a way, and right now, he had no ideas, other than to find the solar power collectors and put them out of business. Until he did, he still had to follow protocol and call the captain. So, he gave the order to do so. “Mister Soren,” he added. “Ignore the alien. Focus your efforts on finding the power source.”

Scanner stepped over and leaned on the Conn chair

arm. “What if that thing is listening?” he asked quietly. “If it finds them, they’re dead meat. The shuttle can’t fend that thing off.”

All the Caitian could do was nod his agreement, but he met the Engineer’s eyes and showed him the worry in his own. “We’ve still got to warn them, because as long as that thing is out there, they can’t come home.”

“Commander!” Piper yelled, trying to get Kirk’s attention. If Kirk stared out the door once more, she was going to shut it. “I want to know if any of you plan to leave. I also want to know what it is you keep looking for out there.” She jerked a thumb in the direction of the fields, where once more a few children were watching.

George turned his full attention to his dilemma. He was afraid of *It*, he knew, and realising the emotion he hated himself for feeling it. There was a time when he would have laughed in death’s face and taken the bull by the horns. Now, he was just a tired old man trying to squeeze a few more years out of life. What was worst was he was fearing something he really could not see and only thought existed. No more. It was time to earn his stripes.

“Captain,” he began, knowing his words could very well be his last. “I am looking for whatever it was that disabled my ship, killed my Captain and left us stuck here for all these years.” He paused for a moment, struggling to put a proper description into words, and failed. “*It* appears from time to time by taking over someone’s body and speaking through it.”

Rogen jumped in then. “So, its ethereal.”

The old man nodded. “Yes, that’s the best way I can describe it. I know its capable of almost anything. Including adding to the water supply.”

That drew everyone’s attention. George continued. “You see, when we brought down the ship’s water, we only had enough for one small dam. Not really enough to water us all. A couple of people died from dehydration in the early days. Then, over the period of a couple of weeks, the dam grew in size to the lake that keeps us well and the crops watered. Each day, it got a little bigger. We’d measure it in the morning and then again in the evening and it would have risen by five or six centimetres during the day. But for some reason we could never figure, it never did during the night.”

Julia, anticipating the next question, answered it for him. “We don’t know where the water came from. There is no rain on this planet, and we have to water the crops through irrigation.”

Manny spoke next. “With so little water, how could the soil’s bacteria have survived before your arrival?”

“Another good question,” George grumbled. “Very little of what we planted at first survived. The soil was dead. But once again, as if by magic, the small traces of bacteria and fertilizer we had brought with us seemed to breed like rabbits and before we knew it, we had the best wheat crops I’d ever seen.”

Piper grinned to herself. Trust George to know about wheat. A thought occurred to her. “And again, only during the day?”

Carruthers thought about it for a moment, then nodded.

"Yes, now that I consider it, yes, only during the day."

Tapping her chin with her sunglasses, Piper looked at her new discoveries, then voiced her opinion. "It seems that every time you needed something, it was provided. As if you had a guardian angel."

"I wouldn't put it quite that way," interjected Kirk. "Over the years there have been some 'accidents' no-one could explain. Some who wanted to see if the shuttles could be adapted for a long journey died mysteriously."

The macabre in Manny spoke out. "How so?"

Julia took over as George once more mourned the loss of a few friends. "One or two drowned or fell from a tree or a roof top. All of them experienced people who could look after themselves. There were even a couple of suicides."

George scowled. "Yeah, right," he said, bitterly. "Fat chance. They weren't the type to take the easy way out."

The Captain put together what they knew. "So, out there is a thing that we can't see, borrows people's bodies every now and then, can damage a Starship, and make things appear out of thin air."

"An intelligent thing, Captain," added Manny.

The shuttle's transmitter crackled to life. "*Millennium* to *Banana Republic*." It was Crash's voice, sounding a little harried. "*Millennium* to *Banana Republic*, do you copy?"

Amantallah lashed out with her tail and triggered the interior microphone, then nodded at the Captain. "Piper here," she answered.

"Captain, we are under attack by *something*. It appears to be testing our shields, but as yet has had no luck." The

sound of the ship shuddering again came through the transmission. "I'll give it one thing, it's persistent."

"Ship's status?" Piper barked.

Crash's good cheer showed in his voice. "Warp power's back online, although Mister Sandage has some more work to do before the ship is capable of warp speed. Shields at one hundred percent and holding."

The *Millennium* crew sighed with relief, all except Piper. With the shields up, there was no way back to the ship until whatever it was stopped hammering her. And when it was finished with the ship, it would probably come after the landing party.

The Captain quickly decided on the only course of action open to her. She spoke up for the mike once more. "Crash, get Scanner outside and working on that pylon. I want the ship ready for warp in an hour. Tell him not to worry, with triple shielding, they will protect him." Without waiting for a reply, she stood, took a look outside at the sky, then turned on Kirk. "Commander, I want you to gather all those who want to leave, as quickly as you can, including yourself."

"But..." Kirk objected.

Piper waggled a finger in his face. "And don't give me that "I don't want to leave" crap. I know you want to go home and see Jim. This planet must have been driving you crazy. Now hop to it!" Not bothering to see if he was going to do it, she turned and began giving orders to her crew.

Kirk hesitated for just a moment, then gave up, admiring this woman from the stars. She knew his heart, he was a man born for space, and to remain landlocked for so long made his

bones ache. He felt invigorated at having a job to do and a chance to fight his nemesis for so many years. Excited, he all but jumped out of his chair, took Julia's arm, and dragged her off in the direction of the converted shuttles that had been their homes for so long.

Julia did not mind; she had grown very fond of George over the years. They had become friends and confidants over time, and she felt closer to him than anyone else she had ever known. If he had told her they were going to march around the planet for the fun of it, she would have followed without question. So, when he dragged her from her chair, she did not resist. Besides, she knew he needed her. It would take both of them to round up those they knew wanted to leave.

Amantallah finished broadcasting the messages as ordered, turned and disarmed herself as the Captain had ordered. It had made her hair rise when she had been told to leave her weapons on the shuttle, but she saw the wisdom of it. Whatever it was up there attacking the ship would not be bothered by a phaser. How do you shoot something you could not touch?

Carman secured the shuttle and locked out the controls so only the *Millennium* crew could restart her. He, too, had to disarm himself, but he did not mind, his people were more into the arts than pugilism. They were used to using their mind to its best advantage.

The Doctor kitted himself out with everything he thought he might need. He had filled his pouch to bursting, and still had a few items left over. His grand adventure to a new world was quickly scaring the willies out of him. Right

now, he just wished he was back on the ship, in the protection of the shields. But, if the Captain was right, their protagonist would be here in about ten minutes, that is, if it was not already on the way.

Piper just stood outside the shuttle and watched the scene around her. It seemed to be peaceful, the wheat rustling in the slight breeze coming in from the south. It passed over the lake and the smell of water wafted into her nostrils, reminiscent of the smells from home. The trees nearby swayed slowly, giving shade to a few children clustered beneath them. It was difficult to remain shaded as the twin suns were almost at a forty-five-degree angle to each other this time of year, and even though one of them was only about an hour away from setting, the other was still in the two-o'clock position. It made for short nights and long days, something the crops did not seem to mind, but would take the humans some time to get used to. She looked at Tau-Beta Alpha and noticed it would set soon. She silently hoped she would get to see it rise again after this day. She was taking a huge gamble.

The *Millennium* shuddered again as the being outside shook her once more. Crash was tiring of its antics. It was still pounding the ship over ten minutes after his last conversation with the Captain. Surely it would give up, soon. Besides, if Piper was right, it would.

Jason spoke up from the helm. "Passing over the North Pole."

On the viewscreen their view of the systems' three stars became uninterrupted. It was in this region that the Captain

suspected the solar collectors to be.

“Any luck, Mister Soren?” Crash asked.

For a moment, the Science Officer did not respond. He suddenly looked up and touched a button. A red dot appeared on the planet's surface. “Commander, there is a surprisingly sophisticated solar array at this position.”

Crash's grin became feral. “Good. Weapons, destroy that installation. Mister Soren, scan for capacitors. The energy has to be stored somewhere.” Piper had found the creature's Achille's Heel. Now to complete the Captain's orders.

Two photon torpedoes streaked out from the dorsal and down to the surface. Their detonation could be seen clearly on the screen.

“Well?” Crash asked.

Soren scanned. “There is a powerful force field in operation over the site. Our torpedoes were ineffective.” He tapped another control. “The field is putting out over fifty megajoules. It will take some time to penetrate it.”

Crash growled. It was going to take longer than he hoped. “Weapons, pound that thing with everything we've got.” He was glad the ship was repaired. His whole arsenal was at his disposal. “Hit it with the megaphasers.”

Lieutenant Soren stood up. “Commander, may I suggest a strategy?”

“I'm listening.”

“The installation is a solar power collector. I have managed to find numerous subterranean storage devices. However, we will drain them more efficiently if there was no

sunlight for them to collect."

Crash saw where he was going. "Helm, bring us in over the site so the *Millennium's* shadow falls over the collectors."

Jason was startled. "That will mean taking the ship into the atmosphere!"

The Commander smiled to himself. "Mister Nunn, you've always told me that flying a shuttle in an atmosphere is fun. Now's your chance to do it with something a little bigger."

Nunn rolled his eyes. The *Millennium* was a whole lot bigger. Instead of voicing any more opinions his simply stated: "Aye!"

"In the meantime," Crash said to the Weapons Officer. "Keep hitting those shields!"

As the *Millennium's* outer shields interfaced with the planet's atmosphere, the ship took up a small vibration. In all the excitement, nobody noticed the noise from the alien had stopped.

Within seconds of the *Millennium* passing into the planet's atmosphere Piper saw it. The eyes of one of the children suddenly changed. The little girl stopped playing with her brothers and advanced on the shuttle, walking as if she was a marionette. Piper moved forward, but stopped when she saw the fury in the girl's eyes. She tried diplomacy. She put up her hands to show they were empty in the hope that the gesture would mean something to the creature. "We mean you no harm," she said, trying very hard to sound convincing.

The girl stopped a mere metre away from the Starship

Captain, and although she towered above her, she felt decidedly small as she felt the power this creature possessed. She spoke, but the voice was not that of the child, it was of one who could move mountains. "You are destroying everything we have done here."

"It is not my intention to destroy anything," answered Piper. "We merely came here to affect repairs to my ship."

The girl began to circle the captain, a lion circling its prey. "But that is not all you have done. You broke the harmony that I have nurtured in this place. The people here have become a community, but your arrival has given some of them the wish to leave." She stopped before the woman and pointed an accusing finger at her. "You only want to destroy this place by taking away those rebuilding this planet. We cannot allow that to happen."

Piper stood her ground. "If you have learnt anything from those you brought here," and understanding showed in the girl's eyes, Piper knew it was the cause of the *Republic*'s destruction. "You would know that my people have a fundamental belief in the basic freedom to determine one's own destiny." This time it was the Captain's turn to accuse. "You took that away from those on the *Republic* when you destroyed their ship."

The cruel grin that spread across the girl's face seemed totally out of place on one so young. "Semantics, Captain. They were already looking for a world to colonise. This place is as good as any."

Smiling at the irony, Piper shook her head. She looked around her, appraising the landscape, then turned her attention

back to the child before her and the creature within. "I know if I was looking for somewhere to go, it wouldn't be this dustbowl of a planet."

Seething, the child backed away from the insolent child-being. This place was its home, had been for millennia. How could it know what home was? All it ever did was wander the stars in search of other societies to disrupt.

The Captain looked down at the girl as she moved away and knew she had pushed her luck. She sensed the presence of her crewmates as they joined her from behind and was grateful for the support, although concern for their safety was paramount in her mind. But before she could tell them to get back to the shuttle, the landscape changed, and they found themselves in a place they found hard to describe.

The land was perfectly flat and seemed to go on forever. Its grey colour made Piper think of what Purgatory must be like. The sky was something different altogether. Its colours swirled as if it was the oily film on the top of some great space-borne lake, yet seemed close enough to touch. There was nothing else to see except each other. The temperature was comfortable, and Manny noticed the only smells came from her companions. She tested the ground below her and found it hard and unyielding.

Then Piper noticed their attire. Her outfit had returned to a Starfleet Captain's uniform. Manny was naked, her white fur rippling in consternation at their predicament. Rogen was dressed in an elegant purple silk robe his people seemed fond of, and Carman was dressed even more gaily than before. In a sense, they had all gone home in their clothing.

Piper absorbed this in a moment, but was more concerned when she realised, they were alone. The entity that had brought them here was gone. Manny started swearing in a language Piper could only guess at as a thought struck the Captain. She patted her pockets, then balled her fists in frustration. Their communicators and tricorders were missing.

“Well, now what?” Rogen asked.

A mocking voice seemed to sound from all around and within them, its sarcastic tone making Rogen wince. “Now what?” it echoed, and echoed, a choir of mocking voices. The volume slowly increased until they covered their ears to keep it out, but even that didn't help. Without warning, it suddenly stopped.

“Now what, indeed!” challenged Piper, her fists balled in anger. “What do you want with us?”

“Perhaps we want revenge.”

Piper rested her fists on her hips as she considered the inconsistencies displayed by this being. It seemed to be confused about being an individual or a plurality, for one. The thing that worried her the most was she wasn't certain the being was entirely sane. “Not a pleasant thing to say for a being with aspirations of godhood.”

“I am not their god.” The voice was insulted.

Now it was Piper's turn to mock. Her patience with this being was running out. “Oh, really?” she said acidly. “You've brought these people here, shaped their world, taken over their minds.” She rammed home the insult. “You use them for your own enjoyment! They are nothing more than pets to you!”

“They are not my pets!” Their assailant was getting defensive. “We only want them to rebuild our world.”

“Your world, not theirs!” Piper shot back.

The ground suddenly shook with the anger of the creature. “It is their world and mine!” it shouted, deafening the group. “You will disrupt it no longer!”

In the twinkling of an eye, the four found themselves separated and alone.

Crash scowled at the image of the solar collectors on the planet's surface, and the shield that shimmered above them. A thought came to him. “Are the capacitors under the shield as well?”

Soren tapped in a command and reported: “Seventy percent of them are, but approximately thirty percent of them are not. However, they are located about a kilometre beneath the surface.”

Crash's whiskers arched as he considered. “That shouldn't be too hard for our megaphasers to bore through.” Like his Captain, Crash often made snap decisions. “Fire the megaphasers and bore through to the capacitors. Once you're broken through, fire a torpedo into them.”

At Weapons, Brankovian nodded his understanding. “Aye,” he said before unleashing the massive energy from their ship's newest technologies. At the end of each warp nacelle strut lay the ship's warp powered directed energy weapons. Each was capable of firing continuous beams powered directly from the warp reactor. Under Brankovian's direction, each fired a brilliant red beam into the soil near the

edge of the shield, quickly boring through the ground, deeper and deeper.

To accomplish the task, Crash had ordered the ship to hold where she was. This was going to take a few minutes to achieve.

The little girl stopped scowling suddenly and ran off to play with her friends. What worried Earhaht the most was the glassy looks in the eyes of her crewmates. Still, she had her orders.

The animated rock trundled toward the small group of Starfleet veterans who had assembled, startling them all. She spoke up through her voder and introduced herself, her gravelly voice giving some of them doubts about their sanity. “Quickly, we must leave! Captain Piper left me orders to get you all off-planet in case she became possessed. Now, please, get in the shuttle.”

Kirk shook his head, determination etched on his face. “I won’t leave her behind,” he said, obstinately.

Earhaht became adamant. The last thing she needed right now was a group of stubborn humans. “Whether you come voluntarily or not is irrelevant. I have my orders.” The Horta moved forward menacingly. “Now, move!”

Almost reluctantly, the cluster of elderly humans boarded the craft. With Earhaht at the helm, they took off, with George peering out the window, watching the four left behind get smaller as the distance became greater. Their sacrifice would not go forgotten.

Amantallash of the Llash clan gazed around her in wonder. It had been some years since she had been here, in her family's home, with her siblings and parents still living in the same residence. She found herself in her bedroom, lying on the tawny coloured sleeping cushion she knew so well. She got up quickly, remembering she should not be here at all and began testing the walls and furniture, finding that they felt quite real. Indeed, they were just as she remembered them.

When she came to her mirror, she stopped and stared in horror. Her worst nightmare had become reality. Up until this point her focus had been on her surroundings. Only now was she beginning to realise there was something drastically wrong with *her*.

Manny checked her paws, her tail, her legs and her chest. She was no longer her beautiful, pure white, but ugly, disdainful black, like her brother. She ran over to her private shower, turned the water on full, and dove under the stream, hoping and praying that the black was only dye, and would wash out. She stood in the shower for what seemed like ages, scrubbing, and only managing to pull out some hair. Despairing, she finally engaged the drying sequence that left her fur fluffy, and still darker than coal.

She stumbled to her dresser, wanting to break her mirror and deny what she saw. She beat her fists against the panel, only succeeding in kinking the solid metal.

She put all her fear and anxiety into a single, heartfelt question. “What is going on!?” she shouted, a peculiar mixture of angry, frightened and confused.

The mocking voice she knew well returned. “I've sent

you back in time, to take your brother's place. This is my revenge for you," and the voice left her, laughing maniacally.

She saw the truth of it when she noticed she was a little shorter than she should be. Then she broke down, sobbing uncontrollably.

The planet Rogen found himself on seemed totally alien. The plants were an exotic colour, the ground mushy and yielding, the air misty and dank. He stepped over to a plant to examine it, hoping something would give him a clue to his whereabouts, and tried to break off a leaf. His fingers passed right through it! Stunned, he tried again, with the same result. Frustrated, he tried another plant, and failed once more. His attempts to learn more about his prison were interrupted by the whine of a transporter beam.

Three forms appeared in the jungle before him. In columns of blue and red they solidified, and Rogen sucked in a quick breath when he saw who they were. Piper and a security guard stood with his wife, Merete. In a rush of hope he stepped over to embrace her, and found his arms passed right through her. To make matters worse, she could not see him, and carried on her tasks as if he was not even there.

Merete raised her tricorder and scanned the local terrain right through him. Spooked, Rogen stepped back and watched, wondering what in the universe was going on.

Silently, Merete pointed off to her left, and the trio began making their way through the undergrowth. Rogen moved to follow, muttering: "What in Palkeo's depths is going on?"

A voice whispered back in his ear: "Vengeance, Doctor. Vengeance."

Rogen shuddered at the coldness of that voice, and followed, wondering if he could help.

Carman finished taking his swig of ale, then put down his jug, wiping his face with the back of his hand. If this was Hell, he wasn't complaining. He sang along with the band, cheering the dancers. His voice wasn't exactly in tune, and had a definite slur, but who cared? Everybody was having fun, and that's all that counted.

He had found himself dressed as a guest at a wedding. He was home, all the ornaments, smells, sounds and colours were of his homeworld. A Centauran wedding. Party time!

His costume, typically Centauran with its overtones of Greece, was just right. He wasn't sure just whose wedding it was, he'd had too much ale to work it out, but it was apparent he knew them.

A young lady suddenly dropped herself in his lap, placed her arms around his neck, and planted a huge kiss on his lips. Carman had no idea who she was, and he was too drunk to care. Something in the back of his mind told him he should care, that he should give a damn, but his alcohol soaked brain told him to enjoy. After all, what evil could come of it?

A small figure at the back of the wedding hall watched him and chuckled, darkly.

The bridge of the *U.S.S. Millennium* was unusually quiet as Piper stood watch. She knew this was all wrong, that

the people around her were not real, but she had no idea how to stop what she knew must be fantasy. The bulkheads felt real, the Conn felt as comfortable as ever. Even her crew were acting normally.

She glanced down at the navigational display on her chair arm and saw the ship was still patrolling the Neutral Zone as if the Tholian attack had never occurred.

As a matter of fact, it hadn't happened yet. According to the ship's chronometer, it was only hours before the Tholian incursion. It was also time for her to prepare for Merete's wedding and she dutifully got up to perform the ceremony, just in case.

Sarda watched her go, with a peculiar leer on his lips.

Crash was sitting forward in the Conn, willing the phasers to cut faster. The ship was in the upper ionosphere, a dangerous manoeuvre at the best of times. "How long until we cut through?" he asked Brankovian.

"Fifty seconds," answered the Lieutenant.

Crash gripped the Conn tighter and failed to notice the dents his claws had made in the underside of the control pads.

Below, in sickbay, a certain Vulcan stirred.

Amantallah paced the floor, wondering if what she saw around her was real or not. She had tested everything, the walls painted with scenes of Cait's natural beauty were quite real, her nails had left a very real scratch in one of the panoramas. Her sleeping cushion smelt and felt as it always had, a small comfort in this living hell. Her study computer

still had her initials carved right where she had put them.

The date had confirmed it was fifteen years prior to her service on the *Millennium*. She was now four and a half years old, even though she did not feel it. She was supposedly still six months away from maturity and still attending basic education. At least there was an upside. Now she knew she could ace all her tests.

She glanced at the wall chronometer. It was nearly evening meal, and she knew she could not avoid meeting the rest of the family. She had no real idea of how she would be received, the family's pride and joy had turned into a jinx kitten. Perhaps, like the radical shift in her colouring, her people's attitudes towards black kittens had changed as well. She grimaced to herself. Not likely.

Experimentally, she licked the back of a paw, and was disappointed to see the black refused to come off. She sighed. It was worth a try.

The gong for evening meal rang out, and in reflex, she got up and padded over to the door, stopping just before she hit the door control panel. She feared what lay beyond, and paused for a few moments, trying to muster the courage to face the family.

“Amantallah!” her father called. His impatient tone was not unexpected, but there was something else in his voice. Something she only vaguely remembered. Fearing her father's wrath more than his ridicule, she opened the door and walked down the corridor and into the meal area.

The reception she got was totally unexpected.

“What took you so long?” her father asked, angrily.

Manny recoiled at his tone, which she had never heard directed at her before, but she was even more astonished to see her father did not even mention her colour! Of the two, his tone bothered her the most. He had never spoken to her before like that. She was his favourite kitten, the lucky one. Now he spoke to her as if she carried some awful disease he was afraid of catching.

When her father's claws started tapping the table irritably, she lied quickly. "I...I was in the shower, Father."

The master of the Llash clan narrowed his eyes at her in suspicion. Once more, Manny recoiled at his attitude. Her Father had always covered her with praise and had never used harsh words on her. His attitude towards her was totally mystifying, until she remembered her colour change. She looked at her paws and realised it was only the colour he saw. Her white fur had been the standard by which she had been treated for all these years. And now she was experiencing the other side of the coin.

Instead of saying anything further, her father hunkered down and continued his meal. He was not pleased with her at all, and Manny felt a pit open inside her, where her Father's love and approval that had meant so much to her had been.

To try to fill the emptiness yawning within, Manny turned to her mother with a look of imploring in her eyes. She hoped she would still care, as all mothers do. Her Mother only returned the gaze coolly, as if she did not want to get involved, then turned back to her meal. Her affront only served to deepen the despair within.

On the other side of the table, her other brother,

Gruntallash the Ordinary, as she and Crash referred to him, sat chewing his meal and carrying on as if nothing had happened. He was the only one out of her litter who had turned out normal. His fur was tawny, as was their parents. When he noticed his sister's scrutiny, he only paused long enough to growl quietly at her before returning to his meal.

Manny jumped as the front door opened and Krashtallash came in, late and no doubt in trouble – as usual. Instead of the typical verbal attack and possible beating, she watched as her Father rose and cheerfully asked him how his day had been. Whatever he said did not penetrate as Manny's eyes widened in astonishment. His fur was white!

Crash regarded her gaze with contempt, sneered at her and turned back to his father, who continued to show absolute interest in his son. He showed him to the table, pulled out his chair, then offered him the plate heaped with the best pieces of meat. Crash tore at the food in delight and continued his oratory around half-chewed food.

Amantallash felt a wave of jealousy that threatened to overwhelm her. Her Father was treating her as if she was scum when she was usually the one on the receiving end of such praise. Not to mention that now she was being given the offcuts of the meal and ignored as if she was so much refuse! In a rage too great to know reason, she shoved her plate away from her and stormed out of the room. She did not care if her father beat her, grounded her or what. She only knew she wanted to get far away from the family that had rejected her, just because she was black.

Branches cracked and splintered as the group made their way through the jungle. Rogen had been listening, and Merete had reported that they were only minutes away from a village. He had fallen behind a little, not because the way was tough, he could walk right through the trees if he wanted to, but because his mind was racing with the same questions, over and over. What am I doing here? What is going on? No matter how many times he posed them, he still came up with nothing.

He was so intent on working out the puzzle, he almost didn't hear the twig snap behind him. He stopped and listened, and, sure enough, some leaves rustled. He turned and looked for the source. Almost invisible with mud and leaves covering him entirely was a native who was stalking the group. He certainly looked humanoid, in fact, he looked entirely human. It was not hard to tell, he wore no clothes at all. The spear he carried looked deadly enough, though.

Another native stepped out from behind a tree, once again camouflaged with only the whites of her eyes showing. His expert eye also confirmed her being human in every detail, and she, too, carried a spear fashioned from some aboriginal form of bamboo.

Two others appeared and stalked the Starfleet trio and Rogen had a sudden need to inform the Captain. He rushed through trees and hanging vines and began shouting at them to look out.

Frustration boiled as they failed to hear him once more and he frantically looked around for something, anything to attract their attention with.

Then, with a suddenness designed to stun, the jungle erupted and Piper, Merete and the security guard found themselves surrounded by twenty angry looking natives wielding their vicious spears and stone knives that were deceptively sharp.

The trio raised their hands in a sign they hoped would be taken as friendship.

Piper spoke for the group. "We come in peace. We are looking for the descendants of the crew of a Federation ship that disappeared in this area two hundred years ago. Can you help us?"

No one moved or spoke. They only seemed a little more threatening.

"Do any of you understand me?" she prodded once more.

Seemingly in answer, one of the largest males stepped forward and struck her across the face with the back of his hand, hard.

The security guard moved instantly to her aid. He raised his phaser, but moved no further. Three spears in his belly were in the way. He looked down, eyes wide in amazement, then fell grotesquely forward and came to rest with the spears stuck in the mud and his body propped up by them.

Shocked, Piper and Merete remained with their hands raised as the natives relieved them of their communicators and phasers then marched them off in the direction they had been heading, with Rogen following and wondering if there was some way he could help his wife out of this nightmare.

Chapter Nine

Carman woke up with the sun shining on his face. He felt good. There was something warm and soft lying on his belly and dropped his gaze fondly onto the crown of the young woman who had sat in his lap the night before. She was snoring softly, but stopped suddenly, awake and taking in her surroundings. She turned and looked up into his eyes, smiling. She moved upward, her breasts brushing his chest and stirring him. They kissed for a time, the heat of their passion rising.

Suddenly, they were interrupted by the sound of the front door closing. Carman thought that odd when realisation struck a blow. He was back in his home on Alpha Centauri Prime. He hadn't been here since the death of his wife in a flitter accident four years before. And now it was if he had never left, and that meant....

The bedroom door opened, and Carmel stood in the doorway. She was just as beautiful as the last time he had seen her on that fateful day: her black hair fell, shining and bobbing on her shoulders; the old-fashioned black metal framed glasses she wore framed her dark brown eyes that sparkled in the light; her full lips that could drown him in their loving fire, pursed; her nose, aristocratic, but friendly that had nuzzled his own so many times; and her portly belly, that spoke volumes of their baby she still carried.

Her look of loving welcome turning into astonishment then burning anger. Her hands balled into fists, and she ran out of the room, screaming. Carman tossed the

young woman off him, grabbed a sheet to wrap himself with and ran after her crying apologies, even though he knew there was no excuse for what he had done.

Carmel ran out the door, slamming it in his face and jumped into their little flitter. She fumbled with the controls she could barely see through her tears then managed to start the motor. Before Carman could stop her, the flitter jumped into the air and Carmel took off in a mad dash in the direction Carman knew was her mother's.

He stood, staring after her then hung his head and turned back to the front door. In one brief moment, he had managed to destroy his marriage and drive away the woman he loved, just after he got her back. He looked up as the door opened and the woman who had helped in the damage ran out the door, dressed, and putting on her shoes as she walked to her car. She stopped only long enough to slap his face and call him a string of expletives. "Bastard!" she shouted. "You didn't tell me you were married!" He watched as she ran towards her flitter parked in the street and took off in a direction all her own.

Carman did not care where she went or if he ever saw her again. He just watched his wife's flitter shrink in the distance, and muttered: "I didn't know myself until a couple of minutes ago."

There was no way to follow Carmel. They owned only one flitter. Feeling torn, a tear forming in the corner of his eye, he turned back to the house. His attention was caught by a flicker of light in the corner of his eye, and he looked off into the distance at some cumulonimbus clouds in the path of

his wife's flitter.

A flash and lightning forked to the ground. Normally the sight would have enthralled him, but a not-too-distant memory jogged him into desperate action. He raced into the house to the comm unit and frantically stabbed the combination of their flitter. If he moved fast enough, maybe it wouldn't happen this time.

Carmel's tear-streaked face appeared before him, and he sighed. She was all right. "Carmel," he pleaded. "I'm sorry. Please come home so we can talk about this." By now, tears were streaming from his own eyes, and it was all he could do to choke back the shame.

All his wife did was stare forward and sniffle. "How could you!" she said over and over. In the background rain began to splash the windows, leaving tiny rivers as the drops raced each other off the car.

"Darling," Carman said, trying to remain calm. "Please turn the flitter around and come home."

The human saying "that hell hath no fury" sprang to Carman's mind at the expression on his wife's face. She looked at him, and her eyes made her husband's heart wither. "Never!" she screamed. "How could you do this to me?" She tried to wipe the tears from her eyes, failed, then gripped the controls tighter, determined to get as far away from him as possible.

Carman became frantic. "Carmel, love of my life. *Please* trust me when I say you're in danger! Please come home before it's too late!"

She glanced down at the viewpanel and sneered.

“The only thing I’m in danger of is being around you.” She angrily wiped her eyes again then looked up. For a split second a look of astonishment and fear froze on her face illuminated by the pure light of a lightning bolt. Then contact was broken. But that look burned itself into Carmen’s mind and would never be erased.

He had failed. His second chance to save his wife from dying in that damned flitter had been wasted by his affair with that woman. He fell to the floor, the wall barely propping him up, a chasm opening within as he blamed himself for her death. Self-loathing threatened to consume him. If he hadn’t been with that woman, he could have saved her. He had known that their old flitter was dangerous, and yet he had let her go, knowing it would fail. It was all his fault! His wife and unborn son were dead, he knew, even before the local guard called, informing him of the accident. They were dead, and it was all his fault.

Piper knew it was fantasy, but she went along with it, just in case. What she really needed was some evidence that this was all unreal, a figment of her imagination. But right now, she could find none. Her crew mates were all acting normally, and nothing appeared out of the ordinary. She had given the wedding ceremony to her friends as she had done before and watched them run out. She listened, detached as Manny, Scanner and Sarda bantered about Palkeo Est wedding traditions. She even added her private little joke, just to watch the other’s reactions. But nothing seemed changed.

When the red alert klaxon sounded, she reacted as her training had taught her to, instantly.

Crash continued to put puncture marks in the Conn. He relaxed a little as the ship bucked in the high-level winds. He almost cheered when Brankovian said: "We're through!"

He thumped his chair arm victoriously. "Discontinue phasers! Fire photon torpedoes!"

Below decks, Merete got a pleasant surprise as she saw Sarda struggle to sit up. She dashed over to help as he regained his bearings, shaking his head, trying to clear the fog in his mind.

Merete reached out for a hypospray and quickly administered the stimulant directly into his carotid artery.

As if someone had turned on a light switch, everything snapped into focus. Sarda took stock of his mental situation and knew what had happened to him. Next, he reached out in his mind for Piper, and was surprised she was no longer on the ship. So, he reached out further, and was genuinely surprised at what he found.

The former crew of the *U.S.S. Republic* watched through the forward window of the *Banana Republic* as the shuttle neared the *Millennium*, the clamshell doors at the rear of the ship opening, allowing them access to Shuttle Bay Two, located just below the stern at the extreme aft of the Engineering Hull. Docking would be extremely tricky within the atmosphere and, once the tractor beam had locked on, the ship only seemed to crawl closer. If a Horta could sweat,

Earhaht's passengers would have drowned.

The morning brought Manny no new surprises. She had stirred, hoping all that had happened the previous evening had been a bad dream.

As she had feared, her father had been displeased with her abrupt departure from the dinner table and had followed her to her room. Her father had never raised his paw to his daughter, but this time would become engraved upon her memory, and her flesh. What had shocked her the most was the almost vicarious way he had done it, as if his actions had somehow given him a release.

And the beating had left her feeling broken of spirit. All she had kept sacred within her came crashing down under her father's sadistic temper. Her family was gone. The people who had smothered her with love felt no more for her, only disdain. The friends she had at school would now no doubt treat her the same way they had treated Crash, who had been ostracised by his fellows, even though he had displayed superior talents.

In fact, the only reason Crash had been given an education by the state was that their mother had insisted on litigation, something that was almost unheard of in their society. As members of the United Federation of Planets, she quoted the equal opportunity act at them and left the board with little choice. In fact, the extra time Crash had, with few friends to distract him, had undoubtedly helped his grades.

Now Manny was in his fur, and nothing was as daunting as facing her friends now. She knew they would

reject her, as they had her brother, but she was still going to try. She had to have something left to fight for.

Dejected, the young Caitian preened herself for morning meal and pushed herself out the door.

Rogen stood next to the tribal chief and tried to shout some sense into him. Not that it was doing any good. The grubby human merely grunted in what sounded a vestige of Standard at his followers. They seemed to be in some form of conference, the chief grunting and gesturing with his spear at the captives behind him.

Merete and Piper had been tied up and forced to kneel on what looked like this planet's only hard soil. The security officer had not been left behind, his corpse was tied to a carrying pole and he was being prepared to be the evening meal. The two women kept their eyes averted from the grisly scene and focussed on the discussion that ensued before them.

If Rogen had been able to affect anything, he would have cut the ropes and saved the women from this appalling situation. His frustration was on the brink of boiling over when the savage council seemed to come to a decision. Two of the female savages advanced on Piper and Merete, stone knives bared. Rogen tried to interpose himself between them, but they passed right through him. He turned his face from what he knew would be their fates, his beloved wife and friend captain would be no more.

The sound of tearing fabric, and Piper's howls of anger sparked Rogen's curiosity and hope. He turned and watched as the women methodically cut away their Starfleet

uniforms.

Piper struggled for a moment, but Merete's voice stopped her. "Stop it, you'll only get yourself hurt."

The captain seemed to realise the truth of this and stopped, even assisting a little to keep herself intact. Shortly, both Starfleet women knelt, unable to hide anything from the gazes of the astounded savages. They came up and poked and prodded Merete, amazed at her dissimilar physiology.

Dressed, a Palkeo Est could almost pass for human, but their reproductive organs were very different, and it hadn't taken the natives long to notice it.

The discovery brought the savages into another debate, and only caused Rogen to worry more.

Funerals on Alpha Centauri are swift and don't leave the family grieving for days over a loved one's corpse. Instead, a medical practitioner simply does a quick scan to determine cause of death, verify that an individual is indeed dead then packs the deceased off to the crematorium for immediate cremation. Alpha Centauri Prime already had an overpopulation problem and could waste little space by wastefully burying the remains of a dead individual intact, taking up precious land that could be used for something far more useful to society. Ashes to ashes, their ancient Scriptures stated, and that's the way the populace believed it should be.

So, the very next day, Carman was forced to endure the accusing stares of his and his wife's family as they presided over the disposal of Carmel's ashes. He had always

known that she wanted to be spread over the flower garden out the back, and so he gave his beloved her last wish, and gently sprinkled her over the roses she had imported from Earth. Roses that seemed to come out in full bloom in the sunshine, as if beckoning their benefactor home.

He decided against using the same words he had used the last time he had performed this very exercise. Instead, he let out everything he felt about her, moving some of his guests to tears. Some of the feelings he had kept locked in his heart for years poured out as he said a last goodbye.

Once finished, he turned back to the others and gazed into their eyes. Some seemed sorry for him, but the overwhelming majority stared at him in open hatred. This was very definitely not the way it had happened the first time. But then, Carmel had only gone over to her mother's for a visit, not to escape her lecherous husband as she had yesterday.

The sorrow they had once displayed towards him was now replaced by hostility. Carman was reminded of a human custom he had learnt from Jason, that of the "lynching" of wrong doers. Fortunately, it was not a custom at home.

Instead of comforting Carman, his mother stepped forward and slapped him, hard, across the face. He stared at her in shock as she muttered some local epithets, including "and I carried you for nine months!", then turned and stormed off.

In turn, his mother-in-law slapped his other cheek, screeching at the top of her voice: "If there is any justice in this universe, you will die as she did!" His fathers simply spat

at his feet and followed their women. The look in his father-in-law's eyes spoke of vengeance.

Carman had never felt so numb as one after another, his family turned and walked away, their every look, step and gesture accusing. It was his fault Carmel was dead, and every step was like another stake in his heart, stabbing until nothing was left but grief for his lost love and longing for a family who would now no longer recognise him as one of their own.

He would never see his wife again, never get the chance to know the son who had never had the chance to be born. He would never again have the company of his parents and kin, who had clearly disowned him. His entire world was coming crashing down on him as he sank to his knees, tears flooding his eyes at the loss of everything he had once held dear.

Carman was momentarily distracted from his grief by a tap on his shoulder. Startled, and all at once hopeful that someone still cared, he looked up, into the face of the local guard Lieutenant.

“Excuse me, sir. But I must have a word with you.” His tone was polite, but firm. This man meant business.

“Go to impulse power and activate attack plan sigma.” It was still all a little unreal, Piper knew there was something decidedly different about things this time around, she just couldn't work out what. It wasn't something tangible, her crew was behaving just as they normally would. Frustrated, she continued with the charade.

On the viewscreen, the badly damaged *U.S.S.*

Hathaway sat in space, a wreck. Two of its four warp nacelles were totally destroyed with sections of the ship on fire, and she was listing badly to port. Things had changed decisively. The Tholian's tactics were completely different. They had no intention of taking their ships as prizes, they were out for blood.

“Warn them off,” Piper ordered.

“They aren't listening,” Crash answered.

This isn't real, she thought to herself once more. What the hell. If it's not real, it can't hurt me. So, without preamble, Piper ordered: “Fire at will. Launch the fighters.”

Like some vicious case of *deja vu*, the fighters were launched, but this time they were over-matched. Soon, space was filled with the debris from destroyed fighters. Manny was firing the ship's phasers effectively, but the Tholian ships seemed untouched by the ship's firepower. The balance of power had shifted drastically.

As the *Millennium* bucked in the atmosphere, Sarda hung onto his bed. His mind had seen something astounding, yet tinged with the darkest danger for his friend, Piper. As Merete held his arm, he closed his eyes and reached out to the mind of the woman he had linked with. He saw within it a battle very similar to the one they had fought only days before, but this time the odds were stacked against Piper. He knew if she did not survive here, she would die in reality. So, he formulated a plan.

In four different times, in four different places, four

Starfleet Officers were fighting the battles of their lives. Not with weapons of destruction, but in their very hearts and minds. And they were losing.

Rogen waited – and sweated. The discussion seemed to have gotten quite heated. Abruptly, one of them stood and stepped over to Merete. Without thought or indecision, he did something that made a part of Rogen die then and there.

In one quick movement, the savage took a knife and slit open his wife's neck, cutting the Palkeo Est's version of the jugular. Her precious fluid spurted out and stained the ground and plants around her pink. Both he and Piper cried out in anguish when the three of them suddenly vanished and reappeared in the *Millennium* transporter room. They must have had transponders implanted! Even so, Merete would quickly die if she did not get to sickbay soon enough.

Sarda, waiting for the away team by the transporter console, reacted instantly, lifting Merete into his arms and running out the door. Rogen followed without thought, hoping in some way to be able to help, trying desperately to keep up with the Vulcan. They stepped into a turbolift and mere seconds later were deposited outside sickbay.

Doctor Harper was ready, having been informed by the transporter room. As Sarda gently placed Merete's limp form on the table Harper went to work. He shook his head at Merete's life signs, low and still dropping. Her blood pressure was almost non-existent, and she was in cardiac as well as respiratory arrest. Still, before he could get her body working again, he had to repair it. As quickly as he could function,

Harper repaired the damage, but it was taking time.

Rogen hardly noticed what was happening around him, all he could see was his wife's broken body. Harper was doing his best on her, and he told himself not to lose hope. Merete's face was ashen, her eyes had rolled back and to all intents, she was already gone. Rogen wanted badly to hold her hand, to somehow give her life back to her. He would do anything to bring her back.

Somehow, Piper had made it to sickbay, dressed in a Starfleet blanket. Others from the crew had also assembled inside the door. They were all watching the Doctor work furiously to save his patient.

Rogen checked the life signs readout again and saw only flat lines and the computer's impassionate diagnosis: Terminal.

“NNNNNOOOOO!” he cried, as Harper stepped back, giving in, and letting his wife die. “Make her live!” he screamed. He walked right through the diagnostic bed and took the Doctor by his shirt front, slamming him into the wall. He was so frantic to save his wife, he did not even realise he had actually touched something. “Make her live!” he cried again. “I'll do anything! Just make her live!”

As one, all eyes in the room focussed on him. Harper looked straight into Rogen's eyes. “Would you give your life for her?” he asked, deadly serious.

“Yes, yes,” he answered without thinking. “Anything.”

Suddenly, Rogen found himself on the diagnostic bed, his neck in searing pain, and feeling his life ebb away. And

as he looked up, he was happy to see his beloved wife alive and well, smiling down at him as everything went dark...

A lone, black cat sat high on a branch in the only tree in the school grounds with only one person in it. As she had expected, Manny was alone, rejected by her friends and teachers alike. Unlike her brother, she could not forget her loneliness by immersing herself in her studies. She simply sat on one of the highest branches that would support her, and moped.

For her, there was nothing left to be happy about. Her family had rejected her, giving Crash all the attention she had once taken for granted, that she had assumed was rightfully hers and always had been. Now, her father took delight in beating her. All her old friends wanted nothing to do with her, calling her “jinx”, as if there was such a thing! And yet, she was coming to believe she was.

Only an hour before she had bumped into her oldest, dearest friend who had always been there with anything she had needed. Fintapring was the one person from school she knew she could count on. Yet, when they met, Fin would not even meet her gaze!

“Fin!” she had cried, crushed to think even she would abandon her. “It’s me!”

In reply, the usually complacent Fintapring snarled at her, making Manny recoil. “Stay away from me, freak!” she growled before marching off. Out of the corner of her eye, Manny noticed Fin change direction after a moment and suddenly break into a lope. Curious, Manny watched as Fin

ran up to Crash and started fawning on him.

Stunned, she remembered that this was how Fin had always treated her, and even though she knew that her “friend” was simply ingratiating herself to the favoured white kit, the rejection was one she found hardest to take.

Now, lounging in the tree, she found her desperation at her joyless life made her sit up and begin edging out on the branch. It was all too much for her to bear, and without any real thought she began sliding, slowly dragging herself along with her claws. Soon, it began to sag and creak dangerously under her weight. She closed her eyes, knowing the limb would soon snap. She made a conscious decision not to stop her fall as she waited. There was nothing left now to lose.

Nothing except her love for her human companion, Judd. In the moment before it snapped, Scanner's face came into her mind and for a second, she reached out for the love he had brought to her, rolled all her feelings for him up into a ball and, in her heart and mind, sent it to him.

As Scanner worked to rivet the last plates to the pylon – in some of the most treacherous circumstances he had ever had to endure – his eyes widened as he sensed Manny's presence in his mind. He felt as if she had opened up the floodgates of her heart and poured it into him. The feeling was almost overwhelming, and it naturally delighted him.

He smiled to himself and thought of her as if he could do the same. “Right back at you, sweetheart,” he said.

As the branch cracked under her weight, she suddenly

felt Judd's love for her returned, as if she was once more in the airlock, holding him and feeling his love for her as well as her own for him.

The sensation stunned her so much that she opened her eyes, just as the limb broke. Claws extended, she scrambled frantically for a purchase as she dropped like a stone. Halfway down, her claws sank into a branch and held, the branch bending severely under her weight, but holding. She reached up with the other paw and dragged herself up to safety.

Below her, faces were upturned, their expressions delightful that she may have fallen, and sorry that she had caught herself.

Manny saw their faces, but their feelings were no longer relevant, as Amantallash of Llash clan reached out once more to touch her beloved's heart and once again felt his love returned. She revelled in the feeling, and it brought with it the realisation that all about her was fiction. She had not been sent back in time, her fur was not really black, and her family still loved her, no matter where she was at this moment and what she looked like. It was all an illusion.

She continued the hypothesis. If none of this was real, she had to be somewhere her crew mates could reach her, and so it was only a matter of time before they rescued her.

Hope found a place in her heart.

Carman sat in the interrogation room at the local Guard House, wondering why in all the planets he was here. It's muted lighting was geared to make the interviewee feel

like their future was gloomy, and it was having the desired effect. The hard chair he sat on was plain aluminium, the walls windowless and grey and the floor simple concrete. A drain hole in the middle of the floor led one to wonder if blood was sometimes hosed down it after interrogations.

As Carman sat there, he came to the realisation that it was a room designed to make someone ponder their situation as there was simply nothing else to do; to make one think that you were powerless, with no hope but what might come through that door. It was not a hope he was holding out for himself, as he was now alone after a lengthy discussion with the Lieutenant that he feared might become violent.

The Guard had dragged him off and accused him of murder, of all things! As if he would murder his wife! The mere thought of it caused his throat the tighten up once more and it took an act of will to keep the tears at bay.

He slammed his closed fist on the metal desktop in frustration. Wasn't it enough he'd seen her die again? Wasn't it enough that his family had disowned him? Wasn't it enough his unborn son was dead? Wasn't it enough that it was all his fault?

And now the Local Guard was accusing him of killing his wife. How could life get any worse?

Light flooded the room as the door cracked open and the Lieutenant stepped back into the room. Carman was dazzled and had to strain to refocus as the light resumed its previous level. He seemed to be annoyed at something. "You can go, Valastro. Don't go too far away, though."

For a moment, Carman felt he was in an old movie

from the Earth's archives. Gratefully, he got up and left the room, glad to be less one more problem for the time being. At the desk, he retrieved his identification and credit cards and found a small note amongst his possessions, stamped with the Starfleet seal. Curious, he tore it open to check its contents and was stunned at what he found. As if the events of the past twenty-four hours weren't enough.

It read:

Due to the suspicions involving you in the unfortunate demise of your wife, your rights and privileges as an Ensign in Starfleet are suspended until the matter is resolved.

Signed, Sovak, Admiral, Starfleet.

The note pushed Carman past the limit of his endurance. There was only so much he could take, and now his last refuge was gone. Starfleet had thrown him to the wolves, left him with a Local Guard intent on seeing him rot in a rehab for the rest of his life. Carman, at heart, was an explorer, and to be caged would send him over the edge. It would be worse than death, and now he could only see one way out.

Carman stepped out the door, determined. He hailed a flitter cab and instructed the driver to take him to the ocean, and the high cliffs that separated the land from the sea.

The *Millennium* Bridge was a shambles, smoke billowed out of broken consoles all around Piper as she hung on for dear life. She knew her ship was dying. The seemingly invincible Tholians were carving her ship up, piece by piece.

Much of her crew was dead or dying and Piper was only keeping what was left of her ship together by sheer wit. Still, there were worse ways for a Starship Captain to go, and to die with her ship seemed the more noble way.

Behind her, the turbolift doors unexpectedly opened, and Piper stole a glance, curious. She had not ordered anyone to the Bridge. She got a surprise as Sarda stepped out. Wasn't he already on the Bridge? A stolen glance starboard confirmed she had *two* Sardas. But the one who had just arrived was the one who felt familiar, real in an unreal world.

The newly arrived Vulcan wasted no time. He stepped up to Piper and initiated a mind meld. Cool fingers touched fair skin and sandy hair as suddenly the whole situation became clear to her, and she found strength in the restored bond between her and Sarda.

Across the room, another Vulcan looked up and saw. Furious, it launched itself through the air at Sarda, then somehow stopped in mid-air. Piper turned on the floating Vulcan as all around her things came to a very sudden stop. And the look in her eyes could have burned diamonds.

“No more!” Piper said, feeling stronger by the second. She gestured around her. “This place isn't real. You've been using my own mind against me, creating this fantasy from my greatest fears. We haven't gone anywhere, this *is* my mind.” In abject rage she said: “And *I* make the rules here.”

The scene shifted suddenly back to the featureless plain Piper had arrived in. Sarda had disappeared, but Piper felt him in the back of her thoughts once more, her greatest comfort. She was dressed in her Scheel-tah ghee, her staff in

her hand. She wore no mask; she was the master here.

Before her, a vaguely human alien stood, looking completely out of his depth. Its skin was golden, yet had a peculiar sheen to it, as if it could be seen from a different angle, it would be blue. Its large, intelligent eyes were dark. It had no body hair, and its skin was mottled and creased, as if from age. It was no taller than Piper, and seemed no more muscular. The being had no nose, its face flat, its mouth lipless. But there was no mistaking the fury in its eyes. It raised the staff it carried with its webbed hand over its head and attempted to pound Piper into the ground with it.

Piper knew the best way to avoid being hit was simply not to be in the way. She neatly side-stepped the blow and quickly pummelled its side with blows impossible to follow. This battle would be at the speed of thought.

The alien stepped out of range and the Captain let it go, letting the lesson sink in.

“Why must you destroy my work?” the alien charged as it rested.

The Captain looked at her aggressor with pity. The being had no idea. “We never came to destroy anything.” She pointed her staff at the alien, his fear making him back up another step. “You are the one that held the *Republic*’s crew against their will, they have every right to want to go home.”

“I need them to continue our work. I want to rebuild my planet.” Once again, the creature’s voice seemed peculiar, like a choir singing slightly out of sync. Yet, the alien was adamant. For this comment, Piper launched another attack, leaving the alien bruised and holding its ribs.

“These people are not animals for you to drive!” Piper charged, pointing her staff at it accusingly. “They are people with hopes and dreams all their own, destinies that do not involve you!” Another lunge left the creature holding its stomach where Piper had struck. “You have no right to hold them against their will! Besides, only a few wish to leave. The majority want to stay and build a new world, and our laws prohibit us from interfering in their decisions.”

The alien lunged suddenly, forcing Piper to back-pedal and parry. Off balance, the alien received some more punishment from the Captain's staff.

“They are ours and you cannot have them!” The golden alien refused to listen, and was getting angrier by the second. It launched another attack, this one a little more calculated. Still, Piper deflected the blows and landed some of her own.

“Men and women are not chattel!” Piper cried. “They are not tools to create another fantasy for you!” She pointed her staff at the creature once more, and its newfound respect for her talents led it to step back. “Who are you? Why are they so important to you?”

The question seemed to throw the being into complete confusion. To Piper's eye, it seemed as if many faces spoke from the same being simultaneously, each one quoting a number she did not quite get – there were just too many of them. At the same time, the being's colour shimmered between gold and blue.

Suddenly, it snapped into focus. “We are the Gestalt!” it said powerfully. “We are all that remain of the original

inhabitants of this world. We suspended the minds of our greatest scientists in a machine that is beyond your understanding," it sneered. "We continue, and will continue as long as the suns shine in the sky! We *will* restore our world!"

Piper shook her head, almost pityingly. "You're dead and you can't share the world the colonists are building any more than a ghost can reproduce! The last two thousand years must have driven you all mad to believe you can behave this way and somehow be better than the people who turned your world to ashes."

The comment brought an unexpected response. The creature recoiled as if struck, shock clear on its face. "How dare you! We didn't tell the soldiers to *use* the weapons we created!"

At that, Piper laughed. She let the tension she felt go as she laughed at this piteous being. For all its power, it had yet to learn any sense of responsibility. "You're the kind of being who creates a bomb, gives it to a child to play with, then blames the child when it destroys them both!" Angry once more, she stepped forward menacingly. "You have learned nothing of compassion if all you choose to do is employ more violence with us and the colonists! And to borrow their bodies for your own purposes is tantamount to rape! How dare you assume you are better than they! The colonists are the ones who have done all the work in creating this place! They are the ones who will grow! They are the ones who can have children!"

With a vicious roar, the being struck at Piper

repeatedly, its staff flying. And at the speed of thought, Piper parried each blow then lashed out at the creature's head and sent it sprawling.

Piper stood over the creature, victorious. "Your race is dead. You are only a bad reminder of what they once were. If you truly want to leave a legacy, help the colonists restore this world. Open a dialogue and tell them about what you once were, so they can tell their children when you are gone."

The alien lay on the ground for a moment more, trying to rest before continuing its onslaught, but when it looked up, it found it was alone, its strength gone.

Carman was standing on the cliff edge, ready to rid himself of his life that had fallen to pieces when, within the blink of an eye, he found he was standing still on the surface of a desert world, next to Piper and Manny. The sunlight burned his eyes and he found he had to blink to restore his vision.

As he stood there, he tried to understand what had happened, gave up and simply rejoiced that it hadn't been real.

Beside him, Amantallash refocussed on the planet and quickly took in the situation. She had been expecting something like this to happen, and when it had, she reacted swiftly. A quick check of the Captain and Lieutenant Valastro found they were fine, just a little shaken by their ordeal. She looked about her frantically for the Doctor, and her worst fears were confirmed when she saw his prone form lying next to them.

Before she could render assistance, the terrain around

them dissolved and the *Millennium* transporter room replaced it. Merete was waiting for them, but on seeing Rogen's prone form, rushed over and roughly pushed the great cat out of the way. A quick check of his vitals confirmed her greatest fears; however, her training would not let her give in.

“Beam us directly to sickbay,” she ordered the transporter chief. Piper, Carman and Amantallash scrambled to get clear before the Doctor disappeared with her husband.

The Bridge officers wasted no time, either. They were out the door and on their way to the Bridge before the chief looked up.

Chapter Ten

Standing at the rear of the Bridge, Kirk watched as the photon torpedoes blew the capacitors to Kingdom Come. The subterranean explosion started a chain reaction that cracked the ground above them before it leaped upwards, then dropped into the space they once contained, creating a new crater on the surface.

The detonations continued as the destruction spread, following a line under the shield which was already visibly weakening.

“Fire everything at that shield,” George heard Crash order from the Conn. It had been a long time since he had met a Caitian, and he had forgotten how determined they could be.

On the screen, photons rained down on the shield whilst it took blow after blow from some of the most powerful phaser bolts he had ever seen. It took only a moment before the continued subterranean explosions and the damage to the screen brought it down and their weapons did their job, reducing the solar power installation to molten slag.

Crash looked over at Soren. “Scan it!”

It took seconds for the Vulcan to nod, formally. “The array has been destroyed.”

Yeoman Carver, who Crash had kept monitoring a single screen to his left which was focussed on the away team, reported: “They’re moving, Commander!” Up until that moment, the Captain and her team had remained stationary.

Crash spoke up for the intra-ship comms.

“Transporter room one! Beam up the away team!”

Commander Kirk had to jump out of the way as they stormed onto the Bridge moments later. Piper swiftly took her seat as Crash updated her. “The solar installation has been destroyed. We’re at one quarter impulse until we’ve cleared the atmosphere. The *Banana Republic* is aboard, and the passengers are berthed.” Crash paused and Piper got the distinct impression bad news was coming.

“Well?” she asked.

“Shield three is at fifty percent due to disruption from the ionosphere. One and two are down. We can’t bring them back up until we’re out of the atmosphere.” Crash looked like he had just eaten a brussels sprout. Which, for the carnivorous Cait, was anything but savoury.

Not good. The *Millennium* had been able to hold off the invader with full shields but may not be up to the task with less than half. And worse... “Any weaknesses?”

A particularly sour brussels sprout. “There is a small break between shields four and five.”

“Near the port warp pylon.” Piper’s statement made the air go cold. “Let’s hope it was finished off when we pulled the plug on it. Otherwise, we’ll just hope it doesn’t find it until we clear the atmosphere.” She tried to sound confident, but she certainly did not feel it.

A definite chill blasted through the Bridge as a familiar thud sounded through the ship.

None of the nurses in sickbay wanted to hinder the Doctor’s attempts to save her husband. Merete worked

frantically, first getting Rogen on complete life support to get his heart pumping, then working to stimulate his cerebral cortex.

The monitors on the wall did their worst. Flatline. All neural synapses had failed, the brain was totally non-functional.

Shaking, Merete battled to remain clear headed and detached so she could do her job efficiently. “Don’t you dare die on me, Rogen,” she said under her breath, angry and afraid. “You owe me a life together.”

It wasn’t fair that she be the one to try and save him, she thought. Normally, the *Millennium* had three doctors on board, Harper, Rogen and herself. With Harper away and her husband on the table, she had no choice. Save Rogen or die with him.

“Cortical stimulators,” she ordered, keeping her tone professional. A nurse frowned; it was highly unusual to order such drastic measures so soon after cardiac arrest. Rogen had only been dead for six minutes, two of which had been whilst on life support. Confused, he hesitated with the requested equipment in his hand.

Furious, Merete ripped them from his grasp. “You’re relieved!” she snapped.

Ashen, the nurse stepped back and was instantly replaced by another. The Doctor had never made a bad call before, she would not make one now, his replacement, Nurse Stone, thought.

Merete was not so sure. It was contradictory to all she knew about her own species’ reactions for Rogen to be as

unresponsive as he was. Permanent brain damage did not occur for seven minutes of oxygen deprivation. Some of his neural synapses should still be functioning on reflex. Yet, with another quick glance at the board, Merete confirmed that Rogen was effectively brain dead.

But Rogen could not die. She would not let him die. The Doctor snapped the stimulator onto the bed and adjusted it for Rogen, taking note that the nurse was administering the chemical stimulant as ordered. Deft fingers programmed the device, then she sent a tiny jolt of energy straight into her husband's brain whilst muttering: "Come on, come on."

Another glance at the board. The sensors registered a slight reaction, before dropping to zero once again. Time was running out.

Merete reprogrammed. She was worried, the cortical stimulator was really the last line of defence before having to let the patient go. She was momentarily startled as another nurse patted away the sweat beading her forehead. Her train of thought had been interrupted, but for only a second. Once more she sent another, more powerful, jolt into Rogen. "This has got to work," she said, praying that it would be so.

The sensors weren't helping. Again, Rogen's signs jumped back into pseudolife before flatlining.

"No, no, no, no, no!" Frantic, Merete pushed the charge all the way up to the limit, which was not much more than she had last time. Along with her, the nurses put all their hopes into some kind of response.

Closing her eyes, she sent the largest charge possible she could without frying synapses. Rogen's body actually

twitched in response. Almost afraid to look, she turned one more time to check his status.

Flatline.

Merete screamed a shrill cry, a cry of a soul lost, of a heart irretrievably shattered, before stumbling backward into a bulkhead and balling herself up. A male nurse caught her arm and gently lowered her into a seated position on the floor. He gave a meaningful look to Nurse Stone, who concurred and went off to prepare a sedative.

The Doctor howled, her grief pouring out in great sobs that seemed to go on forever. The agony in her soul was felt in her body as she ached for her lost husband with a pain only death itself could numb.

Stone returned to find her fellow trying to keep Merete from hyper-ventilating. She quickly knelt and gave the Doctor the injection, which made all the difference of a cup of water against a bush fire.

Concerned, Merete's helper turned a worried look at the hypospray Stone had used. "You could have given her something stronger, you know," he said, reproving.

For all her reputation of coldness, Stone looked gently at the broken doctor. "I couldn't," she answered, softly. The thud that sounded through the ship punctuated her statement. "If anyone gets hurt, she's the only doctor left."

They looked up as the door suddenly slid open to reveal Rani Singh, in her right mind, her eyes full of compassion after hearing the Doctor's cries. The older woman, still wearing her sickbay garb padded over to them and somehow Stone knew she should step aside and let Rani

soothe her. As Merete rocked, Rani slid her arm around her. Ever so gently, she helped Merete up and steered her toward her office. She sat her down on the couch within, and stayed with her, lending the Doctor a shoulder to cry on.

As Stone looked down on the two of them, Rani caught her gaze and quietly said: "She needs me more than I need to be afraid." Stone nodded her understanding and left the two of them alone to grieve.

In OR, Nurse Stone turned off the life support machines, called the time of death, then the nurses observed a minute's silence for their lost comrade before gently closing his eyes and covering his face with a sheet.

Piper sat in the Conn and sweated. It was taking so long for them to reach the safety of open space. As long as the entity was heard thudding against the shields, they were safe. She had no idea how it was still drawing energy after the solar collector's destruction, and right now there was no time to find out where. "Time to interface?" she asked, doing her best to remain calm.

Sarda, back at his post, offered: "Ten seconds."

Thud.

"Nine," the Vulcan counted.

Thud.

"Eight."

Thud.

"Seven."

Thud.

"Six.....five."

“Sound intruder alert,” Piper ordered, impassively. “General quarters.”

Lights dimmed on the bridge and the crew tensed up, ever so slightly. The battle was not over yet.

The Gestalt found the shield gap. Overjoyed and murderous, it jumped through the shields, but so great was its rage at one single individual, it did not bother to damage the ship. That would come later. It quickly searched the metal behemoth, and in an infinity lasting five seconds, it found the enemy and was tempted to a frontal assault. It stopped, unseen, only a metre away from the Starship Captain, and considered.

Although the Gestalt was largely controlled by the mind that once was 42, the others still found a way to make their voices be heard. At times, it was like the worst kind of multiple personality disorder where all the combined personalities often warred for dominance. At the moment, 54 was making a case for a cessation of hostilities.

“The human Captain is right,” her voice shrieked. “We have no right to interfere!”

42 was tired of hearing her pitiful complaints. The majority supported him, and that was all that mattered. “Be silent, 54! Their intentions became clear when they destroyed our solar collectors. As it is, all we've got left is about one hour to live!”

54's anger turned on him. Her loathing of him came through clearly. “Two and a half millennia has been too long to be a part of you already! An eternity with you would have

driven me insane!"

42 wasn't certain she was sane even now. Truth be told, he didn't even know about himself. What he did know was that the last remaining shred of their people, the Gestalt he had created, was about to end, taking with it thousands of years of culture and knowledge. And it was all Piper's fault.

Taking every last vestige of strength of personality that 42 still retained, he told 54 to "Shut up!"

Cowed, 42 was able to regain his usual semblance of control.

The argument had robbed him of precious time as he formulated a plan. From his vantage point before her he noticed that, from her actions, she was aware it/they was/were on board. But she could not know what form its attack would take.

Quickly, it searched for the easiest mind to control.

"Everyone, maintain your position." Piper stood and walked around the bridge, impatiently. "We are going to try to reason with this entity before taking any punitive action."

Krashtallah looked up from his board appearing distinctly annoyed. He shook his head at the universe's bad sense of humour, then reported. "Captain Piper. Captain Kirk is calling."

"On screen," Piper barked.

A deep electronic chime announced connection confirmed. Captain James T Kirk's face was not smiling. "Captain Piper, I demand to know why the *Enterprise* is being stalled out here." Kirk's eyes were on the Captain, and had

not yet registered his father, standing in the background.

George stared at the face on the view screen, which so mirrored his own only thirty years ago. A strong face that had seen a lot of action, and a lot of pain, he saw. A lifetime he had lived wondering what had become of his family, and now Jimmy was only a moment away.

“Jim, we have an intruder aboard.” Piper tried to sound congenial, and only wound up sounding harassed. “Now is not the time.”

Jim Kirk paused for a moment, and scanned the *Millennium* bridge as he thought. All thought froze as his eyes settled on the old man standing next to Communications. “Dad?” he asked, sounding immensely hopeful.

George felt like his heart was about to burst. An unashamed tear welled in his eye as he smiled. “Jimmy, I see you've done well for yourself. Captain Piper's told me a lot about you. I'm proud.”

No two words could have affected the great James Tiberias Kirk as those two words had. All the work, his achievements, his pain, all of them culminated in this moment of parental pride. For perhaps the first time in his life, he found himself unable to say anything. He only managed to get out a broken: “Thanks.”

The distraction was all the entity now inhabiting the body of a security guard needed. It turned its phaser on his fellow and felled him, fortunately unaware that the phaser was on stun. It then turned on Piper.

“Damn!” she yelled, whirling on her possessed guard. “You just don't give up, do you?” she snapped.

The entity was in no mood for discussion. It merely gave a ghastly grin as it levelled the phaser on the Captain. "Die!" it cried.

"You first," Piper shot back. "Warp nine!"

The bridge lurched as Lieutenant Nunn forced the Starship's huge engines to their limit. Piper tumbled back into her chair as the great ship vanished from the space around Tau Beta Four. In a second, it had passed the outer of the system's planets and was in deep space.

Suddenly separated from the energy source which gave the Gestalt its sustenance, it found its power over the physical world slipping away. In a last-ditch effort to wreak its revenge, it forced the guard back onto his feet, took aim and fired at Piper before it was no more.

The blast never found its mark. Commander George Samuel Kirk, seeing his Captain in danger, did what only came naturally. He stepped into the line of fire. At full stun, the energy knocked him to the floor, senseless.

Its long life slipping away, the Security Officer/Gestalt dropped to his knees, the phaser slipping from his grasp. It looked up at Piper with a mixture of hatred and fear. He whispered: "It was all for nothing," before leaving the guard's mind and the living.

Through it all, James Kirk had been watching. He surprised himself by yelping when his father fell. And inside, a little piece of him that he did not even know still lived found itself dying along with his father. He had never given up hope that one day he would be found.

Piper wasted no time. "Sickbay, medical emergency

on the Bridge.” She stepped down from the Conn and moved George into a comfortable position. His wheezing worried her more than anything. “And hurry!” The Captain looked over at Sarda and called to him in her mind. He acknowledged with a nod and stepped down from Science to take over the Conn.

The Captain listened in a corner of her mind to the Vulcan as he ordered the shields lowered and a rendezvous with the *Enterprise*. The rest of her mind occupied itself with making the Commander comfortable. She lay his wizened head in her lap, smoothing back his hair while they waited for the Doctors to bring a gurney.

A minute later, Nurse Stone stepped out from the turbolift and took note of the two unconscious guards. She indicated for one of her nurses to tend to them, then handled George herself.

Piper frowned up at her, wondering where the Doctor was. She asked Stone where her friend was, the look she gave the Captain told the whole story. Her heart cried for Merete, who she counted as more a sister than a friend. Losing Rogen would crush her, and she swore then and there to support Merete through whatever trials would come.

The Captain only moved when Stone was finished medicating the Commander, making him ready to travel. Together, they lifted the Commander onto the gurney and stepped into the turbolift.

As the lift doors closed, Sarda, who had been watching, sat back heavily in the Conn. Another crew member had been lost—the spouse of someone he considered

a friend. Merete was one of those few people he would admit he had feelings for. Her pain was his. He considered for a moment, then softly touched the intra-ship communications control.

“Attention, crew of the *U.S.S. Millennium*. It is my sad duty to inform you of the passing of a valuable member of the crew.” Sarda stopped for an almost imperceptible interval to control the emotions he, at this moment, wished he did not have. “Doctor TandroVerandi performed his duty in a manner that only brought honour to this ship, its crew, Starfleet and the Palkeo Est. In respect for his memory, and the one he left behind, we will now observe one minute's silence.”

All over the ship, from Engineering to the Bar to the Rec deck, heads were bowed and quiet reigned. Duties were still carried out, but everyone aboard remembered their psychologist, the grief of their CMO, and considered their own mortality.

All except Sickbay, which could afford no such luxury. Merete was as ready as she could be for the arrival of her newest patients. She had her doubts about whether she could cope. Even whether she still had the ability to save lives. The face of her beloved threatened to surface in her mind, and she had to forcibly push his smiling visage away, lest she break down again and be useless to anyone.

She took comfort from Rani, who had yet to leave her side. She didn't know her that well, but she would be eternally grateful to the enigmatic Ensign who had been there for her.

Her train of thought was broken as the doors swiftly

parted and Nurse Stone pushed into the examination room, Commander Kirk trailing behind her on an anti-grav gurney. Piper brought up the rear and helped move George onto the table, then stood back to watch as Merete went to work like a woman possessed.

An hour passed as two ships of space hurtled towards each other in a mercy dash. They each used circuitous routes to avoid the Tau Beta system, just in case. Soon, they both dropped to impulse power, the *Enterprise* swinging around to match course with the *Millennium* and come into formation.

From the outside, the *Millennium* dwarfed the *Enterprise* as they moved into transporter range. When the forty-thousand-kilometre range had been crossed Kirk and Spock beamed aboard.

Crash and Manny waited in Transporter Room One to greet them.

“Permission to come aboard?” Jim asked, always the one for protocol.

Krashtallah nodded solemnly. “Granted, sirs.” He wasted no time and gestured towards the door Kirk was already heading for. “If you’ll follow us,” he said, then both Caits leapt into the open doorway and began running down the hallway before their esteemed guests.

Spock took note of their attire and raised a curious brow. “Are uniforms optional?” he asked.

Crash paused to wait for a turbolift. “I apologise if our lack of uniform offends you, Captain Spock. In our last battle our uniform recyclers were damaged beyond repair.

The Captain graciously authorised casual attire for the crew until we reach spacedock.” Muscles rippled under shiny black fur, a movement his sister mimicked before Crash stepped into the newly arrived lift with a heartfelt sigh. “And weren’t we grateful! Nature gave the Cait all the coverings we need. Anything else is surplus and uncomfortable.” Crash fondled his decorative collar with its shiny insignia. “This is plenty.”

Kirk listened to the conversation with only polite curiosity. Always the one to learn whenever a new fact became available, he found this insight into the Cait fascinating. The universe was littered with varying kinds of feline cultures, and he had always found their species fascinating after getting to know M’Ress.

Also, listening to them momentarily helped him to take his mind off his father’s plight. He kept telling himself that people survived stun blasts all the time.

He did notice the similarity between the two. “Are you related?”

Crash’s slight whisker twitch was all the permission Manny needed to speak first. “Commander Krashtallah is my younger brother, my “Shrallal” in our own tongue. I’m older by a whole two minutes.” She gave Kirk her version of a smile. “We are both equal members of the Llash clan, Captain.”

It was this last comment that caught Crash by surprise. His eyes widened slightly, but his training kept it at that. Amantallah had never referred to him as her clan equal before. He filed this away for consideration for a later, more

appropriate, time.

Kirk was grateful for the diversion. He had been tense ever since he had heard his father had been found. Fate had a nasty habit of keeping him from his family.

The turbolift stopped with a slight jerk, which Crash noted to tell Scanner about later. He led the way right up to the closed sickbay doors where Piper stood, waiting. Their duty done; the Cait siblings stepped back to wait if their Captain needed them again.

Captain Kirk knew before Piper said a word. They knew each other too well. Kirk had been her teacher, mentor and advocate for Captaincy. So, even though Piper kept her composure, he knew his father was gone.

For a moment, Piper and Kirk faced one another, sharing feelings without saying a word. Piper knew Jim could read her like a book, so she let her eyes tell it all. His father was a good man, it wasn't fair, and once again fate had dealt them a lousy hand.

After a moment's silence, she stepped aside and let Jim through.

It was like stepping into another world. The ship's hospital was a mess. It had seen too much use in the last four hours. Even though not a drop of blood had been spilled, the smell of death was in the air. A solitary nurse was cleaning up the last of the spent equipment and was either putting them away or recycling them.

On the exam table, a lone figure lay, peaceful and serene. His body was shrouded by a shimmering stasis field to prevent decay. It had the effect of giving him an ephemeral

quality. George Samuel Kirk had died as he always wanted: in the line of duty. His expression reflected his final feeling: joy at having served once more. Of having the chance to be a hero one more time.

Now, James Kirk, his son, stood at his side, mourning that once again a family member had been snatched away from him just when he had the chance to get close once more. Just as his brother and son had been taken by alien forces beyond his control, now his father, the man he had searched for so long was beyond his reach. Yet the Kirk constitution refused to let it beat him, so he just stood and stared at his Dad's face, etching it into his mind so it could never be lost.

The legendary Starship Captain remained in silence for an hour, his loyal, best friend, Spock keeping vigil at his side. Representing the *Millennium*, the Llash clan waited and watched.

Concern for Merete overcame Piper's need to remain, so she quietly slipped into the CMO's office to check on her.

The Doctor was as she expected, a shambles. She had never dealt with the loss of a patient well, but Rogen had been no ordinary patient.

Piper noted that Rani Singh was up and about, and was staying with Merete, holding her as she wept. Whilst delighted the ensign was better, she simply nodded her gratefulness to her, and Rani took this as her cue to take a break. On the way past Piper, she whispered: "I'll be outside if you need me."

The Captain nodded, gratefully as she left.

Her attention turned back to her friend. She noticed,

out of the corner of her eye, a glass of sapphire blue fire sitting on the desk. It remained untouched, but for a moment Piper worried that the Doctor had drunk herself into a stupor. However, as she sat down on the office settee, she found no smell of alcohol on her breath.

She was uncertain if Merete knew she was there. All the same, she sat with her, pulled her head to her shoulder, and let her continue to pour out her grief.

As time went on and Merete showed no sign of slowing, Piper found herself exploring her own feelings and felt tears form in her own eyes. Not only had she just endured what she believed was the loss of her closest friend, Sarda, now Rogen, a good man who she had only known less than two months had been lost to her as well.

She had missed out on any chance of getting to know the man very well as she could see the blossoming relationship developing between him and Merete and so she had backed off to give them some space. However, in the small time available, she had come to know him as a man of honour and integrity. A man she could count on in a crisis. Someone she couldn't fault as a suitable partner for one of her best friends.

The joy in his eyes as he made his commitment to Merete came back to Piper, and she found herself having to squeeze away her own grief so she could help her friend cope.

Somehow, Merete sensed she was not alone in her pain, and she held Piper tighter, and so they both gave vent to their feelings.

Chapter Eleven

Captain's Log, Stardate 8552.2

The Millennium and Enterprise are in formation and en route for our separate destinations. The deaths of Dr Rogen TandroVerandi and Commander George Samuel Kirk are hereby entered into the log for their valiant service and sacrifice. I am recommending a posthumous medal of honour be awarded to Kirk for his service to the people of Tau Beta Four and his personal sacrifice in defending me at the cost of his life. I am also recommending the Star Cluster be posthumously awarded to Mister TandroVerandi for his bravery on his first away mission. He did not ask for what happened, but I know from my experiences with the alien that whatever situation he found himself facing, he dealt with the challenge bravely and died doing what was right.

Also, Commander Sarda has made a full recovery from his coma. He has since informed me that the alien "Gestalt" had caused his illness, as he could identify the creature and had the best chance of combating it, which he proved when he helped me turn the tables on it.

A light year away from Tau Beta Four, two ships of the United Federation of Planets flew side-by-side, separated by only a hundred kilometres of void. For all their majestic beauty, their mission was one of sadness. Their

mission to explore space had been supplanted by the need to return their fallen comrades. When the time was right Piper and Kirk stared at each other through their respective view screens. The sadness they shared at their loss went beyond words.

“I'll see you back at Earth.” Piper nodded at Carman, who made the necessary course corrections, then fed them into Jason's panel. The young officer then tapped in a command and the *Millennium* swung away and made course for Altair IV. Space warped around the ship once more as the vessel jumped from cruising at warp six up to warp eight. The captain wanted to give the starship enough time to meet the *Enterprise* at Earth for Commander Kirk's funeral. Piper then slowly stood, feeling a great weight on her shoulders. “Mister Sarda, you have the Bridge. Beta shift will now take over.”

As one the Bridge Crew let out a great sigh, glad it was finally over. One by one, the department heads surrendered their posts to their relief, then went off duty. The whole crew needed to relax in their individual ways.

Piper stepped off the turbolift, amazed her tired legs were still carrying her. As she approached her quarters, she found a nasty surprise waiting for her. She stared in amazement, then whispered: “Why me, Lord?”

Lieutenant Goldberg, in full pilot attire in his ancient leather jacket and gloves, was waiting with his security detail. He had obviously used his smooth tongue to con the guard into letting him speak to the captain. His attitude was one of resignation and he seemed unsure whether he wanted

to face his superior. He kept his eyes averted and missed seeing Piper place her fists on her hips and scowl at the security officer. A reprimand would be coming.

Cheesed off, and happy to let it show, Piper stalked up to the Lieutenant, stepped past him as if he wasn't there, and entered her quarters. The door remained open, and after a minute of making him sweat, she called Goldberg in.

The Lieutenant stepped inside, and Piper waved the guard off. He nodded, stepped out and waited outside the door. The pilot shrugged off his usual confident persona and waited humbly for the captain to speak. Piper stepped behind her large, wooden desk, sat down determinedly, then gave the pilot a dirty look. For some reason Ish felt the already warmer air of her cabin had suddenly dropped a few degrees. She did not offer him a chair.

“Do you have something to say, Lieutenant?” The lack of emotion in the woman's voice was scarier than anger.

A quote popped into Ish's mind. “We who are about to die....” After much deliberation he said what he had decided would be best. “Captain, I request that the Number Five squadron be reassigned. I have taken the liberty and found that Altair Four's fighter defence squadron is qualified and willing to take over our duties aboard the *Millennium*.”

Piper's eyes pierced the Lieutenant. “You presume a lot. However, I agree that your squadron should be reassigned, the sooner, the better. I will not be giving you a glowing report. Unlike other ship's captains, I do not resort to lying to transfer unwanted crew members.” She punctuated her statement by tapping a light pencil on her

desk, as a judge would use a gavel. "Fortunately, as I am Captain of the Flagship, I get to pick and choose my crew. I will take your suggestion under advisement, but I make the decisions concerning this ship, not you.

"This will not go well for your future, Mister. I suggest a serious attitude adjustment if you want your career to advance. That is all." Piper dismissed him with a wave.

As a last act of defiance, Lieutenant Goldberg snapped to attention, turned on his heel and marched out of her quarters, his career aboard Starfleet's flagship over. This was one story he would not be telling in shady bars.

Proxima Beta's most famous face watched him go with a tinge of sadness. It was a crying shame that so much talent was locked up in such an arrogant individual.

Still, at least the day's duties were over, and Piper got up, bending each muscle to her will. She shed as she moved, ever so slowly, to her bunk, then fell, eyes closed, already asleep.

Two lithe figures padded silently down a corridor, talking in a language that sounded to the human ear to be a mixture of purrs, growls and Latin. The members of the Llash clan chatted and danced around playfully, their tails intertwined. They stopped at a turbolift and while they waited, Crash brought up something that had been on his mind. "I read your report of your experience on the planet. I'm sorry you had to go through that."

Manny actually looked surprised at his statement, then she smiled. "No, Shrallal, it is I who should apologise. I

got to experience life as you had to, and I found it too hard after two days!" She leaned forward and nuzzled her brother. "You're a better Cait than I, Crash."

The doors whooshed open, and they stepped in, grateful that it was empty. Manny licked behind her brother's ear. "I'm sorry for what I put you through. I learned my lesson the hard way."

She looked at him, revealing a small part of her heart. "You know, as a member of Starfleet, I never looked at another species as any better or worse than my own. Yet I still had a prejudice over black and white." She shook her head in shame. "Truly amazing."

Crash sighed, the air whistling between his teeth. "I wish I could teach Father that lesson."

A horror caught Manny as she remembered the beating she had received. She knew that it had not been real, but she now felt guilty for how her father had treated Crash. Her experience hadn't been all imagination, her selective memory had only let her focus on her favoured treatment, not the pain Crash had suffered. "I'm not sure I can forgive Father for his treatment of you," she said, anger tingeing her words.

Crash shook his head. "No, you can't think like that. Father is who he is, and we should love him for who he is. If you and I work at it perhaps his attitude will change. I've never given up hope of that, but now I think we could be successful." He reached out and stroked his sister's head. "I'm no longer alone."

The two of them played together for the first real time

in their lives. When the lift stopped, they kept it up as they moved down the hall. Crash would jump over his sister, then bolt down the corridor and wait for Manny to catch him. Then they'd stop, playfully wrestle, growling and pawing each other, then repeat the cycle over again.

Passersby would watch their Second Officer and Security Chief in the midst of their antics and, knowing their history of confrontation, would smile and let them go about their play.

In time they found themselves outside Engineering, where they had indeed been heading, stopped and sat back on their haunches, panting. Krashtallah glanced at the door, then came to a decision. He looked back at his sister, who was watching him, nodded, then turned and left.

Manny watched him go, then thanked her god for giving her a brother such as he. The Cait she had been taught to despise was fast becoming her hero. Two days in his fur was more than she could take and yet Crash had lived that life and somehow made good. He may still not be liked by their parents and family, but he had made his life into something for people to sit up and take notice. If the colour of his fur was tawny or white, he would be acknowledged by his peers, even adored as a pillar of society. Yet, because he was black, he still had a long way to go. He might never be accepted, even if his knowledge and wisdom somehow saved Cait itself. But now, in his sister's eyes, colour no longer mattered. She saw him for what he was, and she was not embarrassed to admit she was proud.

A few short moments of staring after Crash, she

suddenly realised she was sitting in a daze. She snapped her eyes back into focus, then turned and stepped into Engineering. After standing high on her hind feet, she still could not find Scanner. She did, however, find his assistant, Jennifer and she made her way past a vast array of Engineering tools laid out around the deck as the final repairs were made to the ship. “Where's Scanner?”

Jenny was an intuitive woman. She had watched Scanner since their interlude in the airlock, and the man seemed to have been walking on air ever since. It was possible that, even given their differences, that this could be the real thing for the Boss. She was happy for him. “Looking for Wonderman?” she asked with a knowing smirk.

Amantallah missed the implied slur and only nodded in response, twitching her ears this way and that for any sound from her beloved. The thought surprised her and stuck in her mind. She *did* think of him as more than just a passing fling. When she thought of Judd, she thought of herself as well, as if in some way they were a part of the same person; and the feelings that came with the revelation were powerful and wonderful at the same time. And scary. She would have to tread lightly.

Her train of thought was so intense that Jenny had to click her fingers in front of her wide eyes. Before the impetuous engineer could click again, the super-quick Caitian caught her hand in a neutronium grip. “You were saying?” she asked.

Jenny had to struggle to free her trapped hand. “I said,

he's in the port pylon Jeffries tube making the final adjustments to the intercoolers." She gave her nemesis a dirty look, then turned back to her console.

Fortunately for Manny, part of her job was to know all the passages within the *Millennium* – including the Jeffries tubes. Now with a destination in mind, she got down on all fours and pranced past panels and through a narrow doorway which she knew led straight to the port pylon. After a few minutes of joyful running she needed for exercise anyway, she found herself at a junction that led off in four different directions. Without stopping, she used her height to advantage and kept running in a tube no higher than she was on all fours. In an environment such as this, she had the advantage of speed and sight for the tube was dimly lit.

Her sensitive ears soon picked out the sound of tools clanging and muttered swearing as she slowed her pace. A moment later, she came upon the one human who seemed to make sense to her. He was kneeling next to the intercooler unit, trying to pound it into submission. He was not successful. As she watched, Scanner was showered in sparks, and in reflex she stepped forward to help, to find her friend had the situation well in hand.

For an hour, Scanner worked without noticing his furry love watching him. It was only when he finally got the cooler functioning properly that he sat back and let his mind relax. Then he heard the purring.

With a start, he jerked around with the impression that somehow, in the darkness a big, white fur rug had snuck up on him whilst had been working. His primal fear turned

into a smile as Manny's aquamarine eyes opened wide and her head popped up. Scanner chuckled to himself and relaxed once more.

"Hi!" he said.

"Hi!" she mimicked, settling down once more. "Finished?" she asked hopefully.

Scanner sighed and wiped his forehead. "Yeah, ah'm finished." Then he leaned over and drew Manny's face in close and nuzzled her as her brother had, but longer. When he drew back, he still had hold of her face. "Thanks for coming all this way to find me. I needed it." He let go of his girlfriend so he could bang a fist against an overhead panel. "This pain in the ass has been driving me nuts for hours. I guess I needed my good luck charm." Then he sat back, packed up his tools, pulled over his "skateboard" he used to move around the Jeffries tubes. He invented the small, motorised boards after skinning his knees once too often on the original *Enterprise*. "Time to go," he said. "Let's get out of here and go somewhere more friendly."

Manny stepped by him so she could follow him out. "Oh, there's something I should tell you about Crash...."

In the holorange, two humans and an Alpha Centauran were relaxing in a different manner. The stress of the previous days had left them with explosive emotions that needed venting before a phaser accidentally went off.

Crack! "Damn! Missed again!" Carmen reloaded Jason's antique rifle as his friend had shown him and waited for a rabbit to show its face. The anger and frustration in the

Centauran was boiling as, time after time, he had failed to hit the target. If he had been holding a phaser the results would be much different. But he had insisted on learning to handle the ancient weapon, and Jason had only been too eager to oblige.

“Don't yank on the trigger, mate,” Jason instructed. “You try so hard with a phaser and you'd just burn a hole through the ceiling. Just squeeze it gently.” The younger Lieutenant was a little worried. Instead of relaxing Carman, the exercise seemed to only make him madder with each unsuccessful attempt.

“And hurry up, Carman,” Ghost said, herself a little annoyed at having to wait. “I want at go.”

“Not until I hit one,” Carman said with more than a little heat.

Jason and Ghost were beginning to worry about their friend's state of mind. Ever since he had gotten back from the planet he had seemed to be on edge. Why, they didn't know. They thought he should have just been happy to be a survivor. Even so, there were limits to their patience.

True to its programming, another fictitious rabbit appeared, and Carman let off another round. With the usual result. A small branch on an overhanging eucalypt fell to the ground with a thud. Enraged, Carman raced forward, rifle raised as if to bludgeon the illusionary rabbit to death.

“Hey!” Jason yelped, worried sick about his prized possession. He quickly caught his friend and twisted the weapon out of his grasp then gently put it aside. “What the hell's the matter with you?” he yelled. Ghost stepped

forward and gently touched Jason's arm, a look in her eye that told him not to push too hard.

For a second, Carman seemed on the verge of madness before he collected himself and took a step back from the edge. He struggled for a moment, trying to make sense of his feelings then took a deep breath and sat down on the nearest convenient chair. "I'm sorry," he muttered. "I just can't stop thinking about it."

Curious, Jason took the seat next to him. Ghost pulled one up and sat on the other side of the Centauran. She laid a comforting hand on his shoulder. "About what?" she asked.

Carman looked at the wall between them with ancient eyes, his mind back on Alpha Centauri Prime. "About what that bastard alien did to me! I had to go through losing my wife all over again! I thought I'd lost my family, my friends and my commission." His eyes grew hard and cruel. "It left me with nothing!" he almost shrieked. His hatred for the Gestalt was fairly palpable. "I'm glad the Captain killed it. If I'd had the chance, I wouldn't have even bothered trying to reason with it. I'd have destroyed it then and there. No questions asked. No mercy." A lone tear escaped his micron thin veneer of control. He wiped it away, angrily then continued.

Having never experienced anything like the pain Carman had suffered, Caitlin and Jason could do nothing more than rub his shoulders and sit in silence, hoping their presence would at least bring him *some* comfort.

Carman turned and looked Ghost in the eye. "You

know, there was a time when I would have almost given anything for one more look at my wife. Even a word would have done. Just the chance to stroke her face once more would have been worth dying for.” Without thought, Carman found himself reaching for Caitlin’s face as he remembered Carmel. He caught himself then shook his fist in the air in a rage. “And now even that’s gone!” he said, the tears beginning to flow. “The last image I have of her is her anger at what I’d done.”

He turned and looked at Jason, imploring. “I didn’t know, you know? When that woman offered herself to me, I should have known it was too good to be true.” He gave his friend a plaintive smile, as if seeking absolution. “When a beautiful woman wants to go home with you, it’s hard to say no.” His eyes filled with pain once more. “Especially when you think you’re still single!” He gave a primal scream, letting the anger out in a single yell.

To his left, Caitlin worried that they were going to have to call the Doctor, but the thought of her left her wondering which of the two of them would be more messed up right now.

Carman dropped his hands between his knees, his head drooping. He quietly muttered: “She hated me, and even though I know it wasn’t real, I still feel that somehow I betrayed her memory.” He stood and slammed the holorange wall, his control slipping away. “Wherever she is, I hope she forgives me.” Another tear got away, then another, but Carman was too caught up in his memories of his wife to care.

Jason's heart ached for his friend. He had never been married and had never lost anyone really close to him. But the pain in the man next to him was all too easy to see. In a small gesture, he grasped Carman's shoulders and faced him, hoping in some small way to alleviate his friend's agony.

"You know," he said quietly. "I could use a belt."

Coming alongside the men, Ghost said, "Me, too."

The older officer chuckled slightly; the moment broken then nodded agreement. "I hear Gillian's got some really good Saurian Brandy. I haven't had any for quite a while."

Jason Nunn steered him towards the door. "Then I suggest it's about time you had some."

For once, luck was on their side as Altair IV was only an extra day's travel on the journey to Earth and with the *Millennium* cruising at warp eight, they reached the lush world in two days. Sarda sat in the Conn, watching the green world turn below them as Starbase 57, which was very similar to the one that orbited Earth, tractored his ship into the docking bay.

It was common for the Captain to be on the Bridge for such procedures, but Piper had left strict instructions that no-one and nothing was going to interrupt her while she got a good eight hours of sleep. That was six hours ago. As well, the rest of Alpha shift were still berthed as the ship was well into Gamma shift when they entered the system. Sarda thought it best to let them rest.

Soon, the enormous space doors blocked his view of the planet, and he turned his attention back to the docking procedures. All was going smoothly and shortly a distant sound of metal on metal was heard as the enormous docking magnets locked into place. "Secure all stations," he ordered then stood and announced: "Twenty-four-hour shore leave is granted for all ship's personnel except Engineering." He knew Scanner's team still had some work to do on the ship. After all, he could not get away with wearing a Vulcan robe forever.

Scanner had already risen for the day as he was keen to get a head start on the ship's repairs. He had taken time the previous day to requisition the required parts from Starbase 57 and, much to his dismay, the Starbase had no spare uniform recyclers. The Palkeo Est used a different, incompatible technology on their world so he couldn't even adapt some of the local tech. It would have to wait until they reached Earth Starbase for a complete refit of the damaged systems.

Still, he could work on those they did have parts for. His first task was to finish the repairs on the food replicators; Crash had made a selection of Earth meats the previous evening and wound up with a plate full of vegetables. After threats of damage to various parts of Judd's anatomy, he decided the replicator system would take priority.

He was also delighted as, once the ship was docked, Amantallah was off duty, and she had decided to help Judd for as long as she could. They both had an appointment later

that day, but as long as Scanner had to work, Manny was going to be with him. Her prehensile tail was enormously handy for passing him tools while he was entangled in the ship's components. And while she was there, they talked, about anything and everything.

"It looks like you're going to be going *au naturale* for a while yet, sweetheart," he said when he got the news.

Manny had simply smirked. "Works for me," she said.

Scanner nodded his agreement. For the sake of his ship and regs, he wanted the recyclers working. However, he has getting quite used to working in a pair of loose shorts and one of his beloved Hawaiian themed beach shirts. He pecked her on the cheek and said: "Me, too."

With more time than usual for them to spend together, they were enjoying the opportunity to get to know each other better. It seemed the more they talked, the more they found they had in common with one another. It was a little like meeting another part of yourself, and they revelled in the feeling.

Merete spent the day preparing for Rogen's funeral. She had spoken to Piper the previous day on Palkeo Est's funeral rites, and the captain had absorbed the information. She knew of Judd's inability to acquire a replacement uniform recycler, so they agreed on an alternative to dress uniform.

As was Palkeo custom, Merete arose and began the ancient rites in silence, as she would be for the rest of the

day. It took her hours, but she took her time and donned her long, brown mourning robes. They were adorned with the symbols of a widow. Her Mother had been kind enough to send it up to her from her homeworld below. Brown represented the ground they walked on, for the ancient scrolls stated: "From soil you came, and to soil you will return."

Then she painted her face with earthen tones in the symbol of mourning and as she did so, she *saw* herself in the mirror, adorned as she was and realised she had never expected to have to perform this rite. She was now a widow, and Palkeo custom forbade her from remarrying as the marriage bond is forever. Rogen had been given to her and taken away in the space of a breath and left her *alone*. So alone.

She was suddenly overwhelmed by a sensation of emptiness she had never thought possible. The completeness she had felt with Rogen by her side was gone, and now she felt even less than half a person. Incomplete, lost and directionless. She felt like a rudderless ship lost in a storm.

The Doctor began to cry once again; but before she found herself having to redo her facial make-up, the door chimed. Surprised at the intrusion, she stood, stepped over to the door and triggered the lock release. Another surprise awaited her as the door slid open and Carman stood waiting. He was dressed like her, but in the brown mourning robes of a family friend. He stood, with hand extended as was the Palkeo custom, to lead and assist her with the rites. But

Piper had agreed to be her family servant for the funeral!

Fortunately, Carman was not bound by ritual to remain silent. "I suggested to the captain that I take her place." He took her hand and gave her fingers a gentle squeeze. "You see, I've been there." At Merete's curious expression he elaborated. "I lost my wife four years ago in a flitter accident, and then that alien made me go through it all over again. I thought I could help because I share your pain."

And she saw he did. His wife might be long gone, but the wounds were fresh in his eyes once more. He knew how she felt. The loneliness, the despair. He *knew*. It was somehow easier to know that Carman knew how she felt, and she found comfort in his presence.

She might not have been allowed to speak, but she did answer him, with a smile of gratitude. She fondly squeezed his hand in return, trying to give him a little support. It would be a little easier now, because they shared the pain and grief and could be there for each other.

Carman gently tugged her arm, and she followed him to the transporter room where Rogen's body waited, prepared in a simple, pine box.

When the two of them materialised on the planet Merete got another pleasant shock. In two long rows leading to the banks of the Braal River stood her and Rogen's friends. Family and Palkeo on the left, her shipmates, all dressed in Palkeo robes on the right. They all stared straight ahead as Merete and Carman walked toward the water and the huge pile of wood that waited for the body

they trailed on an anti-grav sled.

Following custom to the letter, Merete stood and watched as Carman moved her husband's remains into position on the pyre, then removed the sled. Surrounded by the tall, cedar-like trees of home and the river of her birth, with the sun setting in the east causing a blaze of red and orange across the sky as the day died, Merete stood and watched as Carman lit the torch and passed it to her.

She remained where she was for a moment and said a silent prayer then moved forward and lit the pile of dry wood in several places then stepped back and watched it burn. Strange, it was as if her future was going up in smoke as well, yet now she knew she was not alone in her mourning. Carman stood by her side and watched as if, somehow, he too was letting his wife go as well. They looked at one another for a second, then by unspoken agreement, they moved together and supported each other with an arm around the other.

Up and down the line of the *Millennium*'s crew there were few dry eyes. Piper felt her friend's grief and shed more than her fair share of tears. Standing next to her, Sarda could not help but feel her sorrow through their link. He found the emotions raw and almost overwhelming. However, instead of trying to put some distance between them, he comforted her in his mind, letting her feel his own sorrow for Merete, yet also his confidence that, in the end, all would be well.

Without moving a muscle, Piper let her friend know his gesture was appreciated and how much their friendship

meant to her by mentally affectionately embracing him.

In the dim light of the fire, the corners of Sarda's mouth twitched upwards ever so slightly.

The sky quickly darkened and soon the only light was that of the flames and they took all night to burn themselves out. Regardless, the people remained and respectfully waited as Rogen's body was quietly returned to the elements.

The *Millennium* was to remain in port for another day while the crew rested and completed what repairs they could. Those who wanted to, mixed and mingled and shared their experiences of the last week. Others spent some time exploring the beautiful world of Altair IV that was so far out of the usual patrol patterns that it was rarely visited by Starfleet. Most took the chance to see the almost mythical beauty of a planet taken care of by a people of extraordinary environmental conscience.

But a few remained on board. One of them, a large, brooding cat, sat and stared out the image window which displayed a view of the planet revolving below, rather than the boring interior of a space station. Krashtallah was not sure why he was brooding, but he kept it up anyway. He fondled his Catnip and stared at the serene world below and remembered what little he knew of the Doctor before he had been taken by the Great Lion. It bothered him that what he remembered of Rogen was not much. He would have to spend more time getting to know the crew. As third in command, that knowledge could be vital. But still, he sat

and brooded.

Gillian knew that Crash was miserable. The beautiful bartender watched him with her sapphire blue eyes, pondering his problem. Perhaps in some way he was jealous of his sister and Scanner, who were seated in their usual seats at the bar. They were talking like two teenagers with a crush on each other. They only had eyes for one another. It was clear that Crash wasn't going to interfere with their relationship anymore, but she was sure he would get over whatever was bothering him. There were some times when you just had to be left alone.

Crash knew why he was miserable. It was simple. He just hated losing someone under his command. And what was worse, his friend Merete had lost her husband.

He looked over at his sister and Scanner and pondered the strangeness of the universe. His sister could have any male on Cait she wanted. Yet somehow, she was attracted to this human who was twenty years her senior. Not that age really had anything to do with it. Caitians were considered mature adults at five years, so in mature years, Manny was only five years behind him.

A part of him was glad for his sister. She had found someone to share her experiences and their voyage amongst the stars. Another part knew his single status was likely to remain permanent as no Caitian female would associate with a black male, for fear of black kittens of her own, the ultimate Caitian shame.

His career ambitions would fill the void, but eventually he knew he would want companionship of his

own. He kept up his spirits as he considered the strangeness of the relationship beside him. It was a big universe, anything was possible.

In sickbay, Merete put down the medscanner in shock. No, it couldn't be possible. In a daze, she walked straight out of her office and into the hall. As if on autopilot, she wandered the corridors until she found herself outside Piper's quarters. Reluctantly, she reached out and tapped the door chime.

“Come in,” came Piper's cheerful response.

The small Palkeo Est woman stepped through the doorway and dropped into a chair. Concerned, the Captain turned from her vanity where she had been setting her hair style for the morning shift and sat next to her friend. She suspected Merete had simply sought her out as someone to talk to, so she reached out and took one of her hands to comfort her.

When Merete failed to look up, Piper asked: “What's the matter?”

The Doctor pushed the medscanner into her hand which still displayed its last finding. Piper looked at it, trying to comprehend what was going on, then stared at its reading in open shock. So soon? she thought. She manipulated the readout for more information and got her answer. One week.

Unable to contain herself, Piper exclaimed: “Congratulations! It's twins!”

Merete snatched the scanner out of Piper's hand,

scowling. "I believe you have a duty to perform, Captain." The Proxima Betan woman stared at her friend, not comprehending. Then the reality of the situation came crashing down. "Oh."

"I don't want to leave, Piper." There was determination in her words, tinged with need.

Piper stared into her friend's soul. "Starfleet regulations are clear. Pregnant crewmembers are not to serve on ships of the line."

Merete returned her stare. "A regulation penned by a man, no doubt."

"Admiral Robert April, to be precise. Still, there are your children to consider. Space is very dangerous."

"So is riding a bus."

"Late in your pregnancy your efficiency could be affected."

"There *are* two doctors on this ship, Piper."

"But *you* are the CMO, not Doctor Harper."

"My people's gestation period is three of your months. I wouldn't be 'inefficient' for long."

"A Starship is no place for children."

"My children would not get under anybody's feet."

Piper sighed. "If this ship was destroyed, your children would die with you."

"The statistics show that three in four Starships make it to retirement."

"So, your children have a one in four chance of dying on this ship."

"The odds aren't all that different at home."

This was fast getting nowhere. Besides, Piper was inclined to agree with her. "If I let you stay on board, I could be setting a dangerous precedent. Regardless of my feelings, Starfleet has the final say."

Merete finally smiled at her friend. She knew Piper was really on her side. "I know you can be very persuasive." She got up, confident that the captain of the fleet's flagship could do it. Yes, she would be setting a dangerous precedent, but she believed that families needed to stay together. And Starship designs were making them safer all the time. She was certain that one day their families would go with them into space, so who better to start the ball rolling than themselves?

"Thank you, Piper." She bent over and kissed her friend's cheek. "This crew is my family, and this ship is my home. This is where I want to raise my children."

Piper stood and placed her hand on Merete's shoulder. "I'll do what I can. No promises."

Merete gave her a small smile. "I know," she said then left.

The captain sighed once more and leaned back in her chair. She began tapping the arm, deep in thought. This would have to be handled very delicately. Opening a channel, Piper called Sarda and Yeoman Carver to her quarters.

The captain's assistant arrived a few moments later, calm and confident, padd in hand. "Yes, Captain?" Sarda showed moments later.

"Commander, Yeoman, I need you to do some

research for me.”

The flight to Earth was uneventful, and, thanks to the higher cruising speed of the *Ingram*-class ship, she made port only hours after the *Enterprise*. During the three-day flight, Sarda and Carver worked together to find the information Piper required and gave the Captain suggestions on how to deal with her problem.

Piper then made some calls to certain individuals and got her answer sooner than she expected.

The weather was kind to the Kirk clan, their friends and family as the funeral entourage stood in the ancient cemetery. The hundreds year old plot seemed to be populated by Kirk's ancestors, which the many Starfleet officers who had come together observed. The fields around the family farm still waved with wheat and the entire setting was serene and very isolated.

The remoteness of the scene did not stop Starfleet from pulling out all the stops in honouring their lost hero. Every buckle shone, every shoe highly polished, all uniforms starched to the consistency of cardboard. A number of notable Admirals who had known George were in attendance, as well as Captains Kirk, Piper, Spock, Scott and Sulu. The crews of the *Millennium*, *Enterprise* and *Excelsior* formed an honour guard and Lieutenant Nunn found himself, and his father's rifle, among those firing a twenty-one-gun salute.

Following the family tradition, a priest gave the

eulogy. As well, a very old and retired Admiral Nogura shared his memories. Piper then spoke of the person of impeccable integrity they had known. She talked of the amazing old man she had discovered on Tau Beta IV, the man who before she had known only in legend, and how he bravely met his fate.

Then James T. Kirk got up to speak. For a few minutes he stood in silence, just staring at his father's casket in thought. Then he spoke up for all to hear. "I hardly knew Dad when I was young. When he disappeared, we thought him dead, although I never gave up hope that we might at least find out what happened to him. Then a week ago I get a report that someone was enquiring about him for a DNA match. I may never have got a chance to talk to him, but my Dad made sure he told me his heart. He said he was proud of me. I wish I had the chance to tell him as well." After a moment of reflection, he continued. "Dad, wherever you are, I'm very, very proud of you." The man who the entire planet held in the highest regard could not continue, and with tears streaming down his face he stepped down and nodded for the undertaker to lower the coffin.

At last, George had come home to his wife, he being buried in the plot next to Winona. The headstone read: George Samuel Kirk, One Day You Will Return, Love Winona. Her faith that her husband would one day come home transcended death.

George's stone was decorated with the honours he had won, including the Medal of Honour Piper had recommended. The Starfleet symbol sat over the

Commander's bars he so well deserved. It stated George Samuel Kirk had lived a full life. Born in 2203, died in 2274.

The salute was fired as the casket descended under the stone.

Commander Chekov stepped forward. "Company, attention!" As one, every officer snapped to attention, then saluted. "Company, dismissed!"

The crowd broke up and groups of friends moved into their own cliques and talked or beamed back to their ships.

Under the only tree as far as the eye could see, a group of very old friends assembled and greeted one another. Much of the crew of the original *Enterprise* cracked open cans of beer and toasted the memory of George Kirk.

Piper shook hands with her one-time comrades and shared a can with them. Sarda, Merete and Scanner, with Amantallah on his arm, joined them under the shade of the ancient oak.

The news of Rogen's passing was not left buried. In turn, they each gave Merete a handshake or hug, even Captain Kirk.

After a while of chewing the fat, Piper took Merete's arm and led her off into a nearby field where they could be alone. Merete was worried at Piper's seeming urgency and felt her heart sink.

As they walked, Piper started talking. "It took some persuasion, but I managed to con the Admiralty into letting

you stay aboard.”

Merete stopped, stunned. This news was not at all expected. She had tried to build up her confidence, that her friend would pull off a miracle once again and help her stay aboard; but her faith had waned, and she had beamed down, fully expecting a rejection. “How did you do it?”

“I quoted the Articles of Federation, citing the equal opportunities acts and that I believed you were being treated unfairly by forcing you to put your career on hold while you had a baby, a concept that has been around since the twentieth century.

“I also yelled at a few Admirals and quoted the findings of a number of studies stating that crew morale among the Trading Fleet was distinctly higher on ships that carried their families. I suggested you be used as a case study of our own to discover whether or not you can have a child on board and function as an officer.” Piper stared up at the sky for a moment and shook her head in amazement. “Would you believe they still refused? Even after I called a few of them sexists?” She sighed, then steered Merete towards the Kirk homestead. “I had to threaten to resign my commission before they listened.”

Today was a day of surprises for Merete. For Piper to make the threat was a great honour. Her friend was not one for idle threats, and perhaps the Admiralty knew that when they reconsidered. Still, Merete found herself marvelling at her friend’s loyalty, and she felt herself unworthy. “Thanks, Piper,” she said, before giving her a hug. “I know how you feel about your commission.”

Piper hugged her back then continued walking. "They did decide to let you stay on board during your pregnancy, subject to review after they're born. Don't worry, if they force the issue, I'll simply involve the press, and Admiral Smillie knows I'd do it." As they stepped through the front gate, Piper changed tack. "Besides," she said, her cheeky look back in her eyes, "I wanted to be their God Mother."

The Doctor had trouble remembering the human reference then pinned it. "I wouldn't have anyone else."

The old wire door creaked as Piper opened it and ushered her friend in. As she took a last look outside at the fields that seemed to go on forever, she found she had missed the times she had camped out here with the Kirk family, years before. It was unlikely that Jim would retire here, but there was no question of the farm passing out of the Kirk family's hands. Jim would no doubt will the place to his nephew.

Those times of fun and laughter were gone, but Piper chose to make sure that the times ahead would be the best of all.

With a quick grin to herself, she closed the door behind her and joined in the wake.

Starfleet officers old and young alike talked, drank and remembered old friends lost and found.