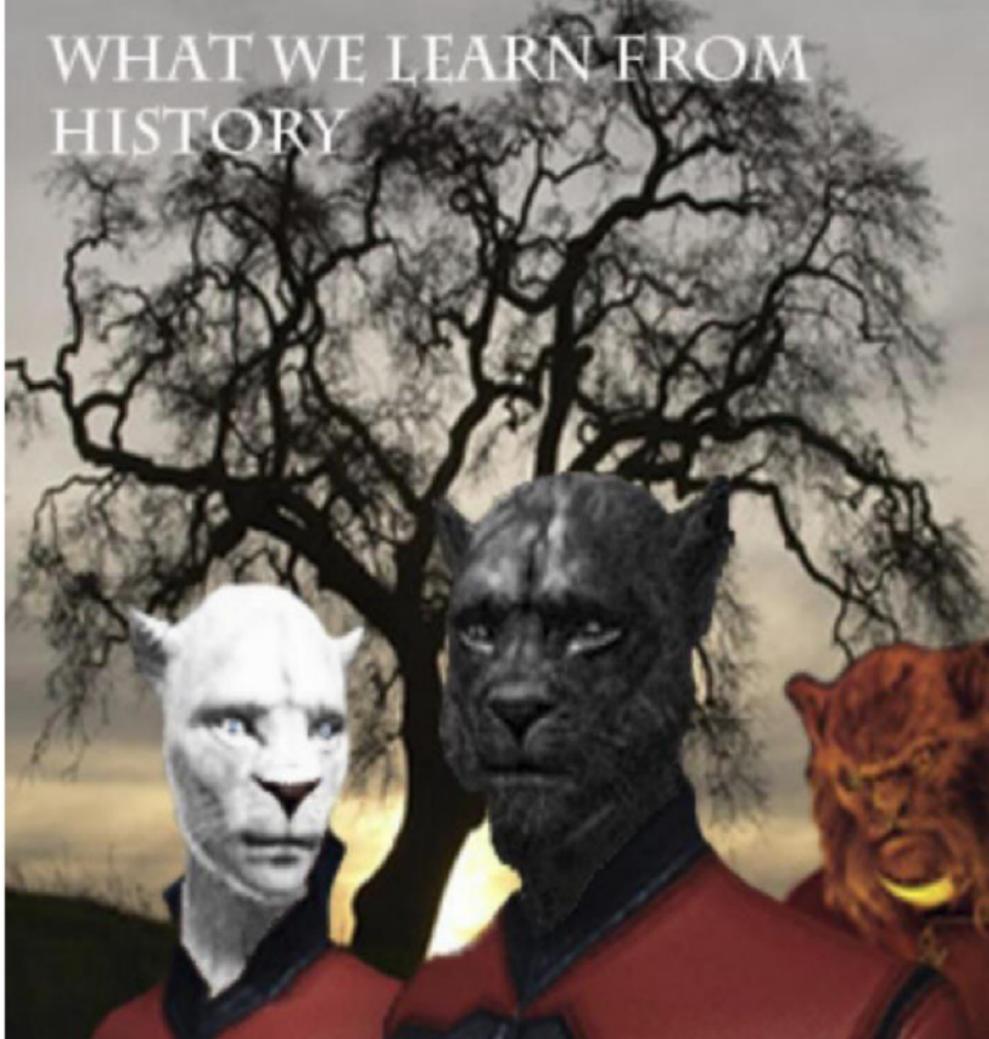


WHAT WE LEARN FROM
HISTORY



SEAN O'KEEFE
The 3rd book in the Star Trek:
Millennium Series

What We Learn From History...

by Sean O'Keefe © 2010

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for Edelweiss

Prologue

Mister President,

My name is Drallah, and I'm sending you this letter because nobody else is listening. Everybody hates me because I'm black. They all hate Blacks here on Cait.

I know they're coming for me. My friend, Lila, is gone and her mum won't tell me where she is. Some of my other black friends are missing, too.

Please help us. The police won't do anything. They won't even believe we're disappearing.

Please help soon before there are no Blacks left.

Drallah.

Chapter One

Captain's Log, U.S.S. Millennium. Stardate 8723.8. The ship is on schedule as we make our way to one of the Federation's oldest member worlds – Cait. We are providing transportation for a Federation diplomat, Susanna Carra, who will mediate the discussions. Such is the importance of the talks that the Federation Flagship, our ship, has been dispatched.

Captain's Personal Log:

I don't know what's going on on Cait. The Ambassador has yet to get a chance to brief me, but I'm expecting a word from her any time. At least this little trip will give us a chance to see one of the seven wonders of the universe – Cait. All I've ever heard from people who have visited it is that it's gorgeous. And it'll give a couple of our crew members a chance to visit home.

Homecoming is a word that fills most with delight. The notion that once more one will be surrounded with the sights and sounds of home that bring back to mind memories of once before. Times of joy, and sometimes sadness. Home is a place where friends and family helped forge the beings we now are and will continue to be. For

many of us, we are modelled on strong, positive influences and people of good standing. People who inspired us.

For others, they succeed in spite of those who sought to drag them down - often for no good or rational reason.

An example of one such being sat in the bar of the *Millennium* and stared out the window at the stars that streaked by the portal. He was one who had grown up in adversity with few friends and with only one real supporter – his mother. And even what she had managed to accomplish for him had had to be done covertly. Once he had graduated from his homeworld of Cait's version of a university, he had immediately enlisted in Starfleet and had hoped to turn his back on the world who had made his childhood a misery.

Krashtallah of the Llash clan brooded as he considered he was about to return to that place. Cait was a lush and beautiful world that had managed to mix a futuristic society with a love for nature. Seen from space, it was a mixture of green continents and deep, blue oceans. The major population centres were barely distinguishable from the forests. They were more easily seen on the night side as the lights shone brightly in the dark.

And for all its beauty, it harboured a history that was just as chequered as Earth's. It had its periods of war and expansion, of death and destruction, and it was only through spiritual development that they had any sense of harmony at all.

That harmony was now being threatened by a situation that touched Crash, as he was known to his shipmates, on a very personal level.

Gillian, the *Millennium*'s bartender, a lithe, pale, humanoid woman who had a smile that could light up a dead star, offered Crash another of his favourite drinks – a Catnip. She could see his soul was troubled, and being an empathic being, she tried to reach out to him. “Want another?” she asked. Her intention wasn't to get him intoxicated, Catnips were a non-alcoholic fruit drink.

Crash lifted his leonine head, replete with mane, and gave Gillian his version of a wan smile. “Why not?” he replied. He took the offered drink and sucked on the contents, his eyes drawn back to the window.

“Want to talk about it?” Gillian gently asked.

Crash tilted his head to the side and took in the bartender. She was very beautiful, from a human standpoint, with her braided hair and green eyes, yet he couldn't help wondering why she seemed always curious about what he was feeling. A human trait, he concluded. “No, thank you.” His attention was drawn to the door as they slid aside and his sister and her mate entered the room. Gillian followed his gaze and knew her work here was done. Crash was more likely to open up to family.

Amantallah's eyes took in the room, then alighted on the end of the bar adjacent to the window where her brother sat. Once she found her brother, she headed in his direction.

Manny, her nickname aboard the ship, and her brother were a study in contrasts – literally. Born from the same parents, and from the same litter, she had been a source of joy to her clan when she had entered the world first. On Cait, white kittens were received with joy, an omen of good things to come for a family, and so her snowy white fur was a badge of honour for her clan. Moments later, her brother, Crash was born. While white kittens are rare and welcomed, black kittens were more scarce and reviled as harbingers of evil and bad times ahead. Any advantage gained with Manny's birth was negated by Crash's arrival. Their father, Slashtallah, had almost killed him on the spot.

Their mother, Pashtallah, had saved him, cleaned him up, then delivered their last child, Gruntallah who, despite the miracles of his older siblings, turned out totally normal in every way. He bore the tawny fur that ninety-nine point nine percent of the population of Cait bore.

Manny took the seat next to her brother and wrapped an arm around his shoulders. “Good evening, Shrallal,” she said, using her native tongue equivalent of “brother” fondly.

Crash offered his sister a genuine smile. “Good evening, Shrallah,” he returned. “It’s good to see you.”

At that point, Manny’s mate slapped him on the shoulder in a very human fashion. Mind you, Scanner was a *very* human human. “Hi Crash,” he offered in his very peculiar southern drawl.

The Caitian nodded in response. His sister and her human mate had been a couple for four standard months and, even though he had accepted her choice some time before, there were still times when he simply didn't understand it. Scanner took a seat on Manny's right, with Crash on her left. Before either of them could order, Gillian placed their glasses before them and made herself scarce.

Scanner smiled. "You gotta love that lady. She seems to have a sixth sense when it comes to a drink." The forty-odd human settled down to enjoy his drink and let his beloved talk.

Manny cut to the chase. "You know, you don't have to see them."

They were their parents. Crash simply closed his eyes in resignation. "There isn't always a choice."

Manny understood. Their duty to their clan was clear. When in town, they were expected to visit. To not do so was the highest insult. Crash had managed to avoid this by simply staying away. It was always painful to visit when one simply wasn't wanted. "I'll go with you. Perhaps we can change their minds."

"Perhaps we can change the colour of the sun," he replied, with more than a hint of sarcasm.

His sister laughed. "All things are possible," she quoted. She decided to change tack. "You know, Ambassador Carra has been looking for you."

Krash rolled his eyes as only a Caitian could. “Anyone who has “Fluffy” for a nickname is someone I find hard to take seriously.”

A snort sounded as Scanner suppressed a laugh with his mouth half full. “Man, I mention she reminds me of a cat called Fluffy I once had, and everyone’s suddenly calling her that.” He straightened up in his seat and tried, once more, to fix his rumpled appearance. It seemed that no matter how much he tried to look dignified, Scanner always came off looking like he’d just come home from a party. He ran his fingers through his dark, curly hair in a vain attempt at neatening that too, and only made it messier.

Manny shook her head at him. “Don’t worry about it, my love. You look just right to me.” She wrapped her tail around his waist and joyfully accepted the scratching her gave her between her shoulder-blades.

While Crash was happy for his sister that she was happy with Scanner, he couldn’t help but feel uncomfortable with their love play. His prospects in that area were extremely limited as no Caitian female would consider mating with a black male. The chances of producing like children were just too great and even a black female wouldn’t consider it as their culture did not embrace their kind. Rather, the opposite.

He had found that, in the past, his career in Starfleet had been a sufficient calling to fill that gap. As he had been assigned to different starships and crews – but always

under Captain Piper, he had found that working to excel in every area had led to all kinds of promotions and citations, and now, in just fifteen years, he was now third in command of the fleet's flagship. A distinction he was proud of, and yet it still didn't quite fill the space a family would. No matter how hard he pounded on the square peg, it just wouldn't fit in the round hole.

As if sensing her brother's discomfort, which Crash did not discount as a possibility (it was well known she was a psi-sensitive), Manny turned back to her brother and gave him her full attention. "You know, I've had a chance to talk to Fluffy, and she's quite nice."

Crash's eyes widened, incredulous. His sister didn't refer to anyone as "nice". "What do you mean?"

Manny shrugged, trying hard not to let on what she was really thinking. She spoke carefully. "I mean she's *nice*."

Baffled, Crash just shook his head and just changed the subject. "What does she want?"

"I want to discuss the situation on Cait." The voice was softer than theirs, but carried an unmistakable hint of authority.

Startled, the three turned to face the ambassador. To Caitian eyes, she seemed something of a throwback as she stood only five feet tall. Her physique was also less bulky than theirs and her colouring was something to behold. Caitians fell into three different categories. Tawny, white and black. Susanna was a veritable rainbow

of colours which were visible even given the simple, oilslick-hued gown she wore. It had all the density of gossamer and flowed with her as she moved.

To Scanner's eyes, she looked like an enormous tortoise-shell coloured, Persian pussy cat.

Stumbling for something to say, Crash blurted out: "Ambassador Fluffy..."

Scanner nearly choked on his drink as the occupants of the room desperately tried not to laugh.

To Manny's surprise, the Ambassador merely arched her whiskers forward in amusement, her golden eyes sparkling. "Don't worry, Lieutenant," she said, addressing Amantallah. "I've been called worse."

"I couldn't imagine what that might be," Crash said.

Before his friend could utter yet another faux pas, Scanner offered Susanna his seat.

"No thank you," Susanna fairly purred. She glanced around her at the bar which wasn't all that big. "I was hoping to be able to discuss the situation on your homeworld with you. I requested this ship for this mission as, in the entire Starfleet only one ship has the two of you. I'm confident that, with your help, we can find a solution."

Crash grunted, his cynicism clear. "And if we can't?"

The Ambassador's eyes narrowed. "Then I'm afraid Cait will find itself out of the Federation."

The *U.S.S. Millennium*, registry *NCC-2001* was Starfleet's latest flagship, having just recently taken over the role from the retired *Enterprise* – *NCC-1701-A*. Overall, one could easily mistake the massive ship for being of the same class as the *Excelsior*, except for a few modifications. One, the dorsal linking the primary hull to the engineering section was truncated and strengthened. The warp nacelles were longer, but the most obvious difference was the mammoth hangar deck that ran the length of the engineering section's topside. It had clamshell doors at both ends to allow for the quick launching of the squadron of sleek, impulse only, fighters.

The *Millennium* was an experiment to judge the worthiness of such a vessel. There had been many times in Starfleet's history when they had been faced with smaller attack vessels they had found hard to deal with, so the *Ingram* class had been proposed. The first-of-class, to which a series of ships was named, was the *Ingram NX-2500*. Tragically, she was lost on her maiden voyage during trials, never to be seen again. Some wreckage had been found suggesting a cascade failure in a warp nacelle.

Despite the loss, Starfleet commissioned a second vessel, the *Millennium*, but as yet, no more of her class had been built. Whilst the *Millennium* had already proven herself in battle – as well as having the advantage of sporting her own fighters – the jury appeared to be still out with the Powers-that-Be.

There had been one notable difference between the *Millennium* and the *Ingram*. The design called for a highly secret cloaking device. Based on a recently created Romulan type, the plans had been stolen by Starfleet Intelligence, improved upon, then redesigned for the *Ingram*-class. The *Ingram* had never reached the stage where the cloak was to be installed, so she had missed out. The *Millennium*, however, had used it on rare occasions and always successfully. Due to the volatility of such knowledge becoming available to their political adversaries, as well as rival empires, Piper seldom used it.

The bridge of the *Millennium* was larger than most starships as, unlike most Federation Starships, it also had to house the control centre for the ship's fighters. Naturally, the ship also had a communications station, science console, helm, navigation and security posts. In the midst of the bustle of activity that ran the great ship was a lone chair. It was the nerve centre for the vast vessel and was usually occupied by the ship's captain, Piper.

Piper was nearly six feet tall, had long, sandy hair - only her closest friends knew it was really light brown - she kept tied back in a pony-tail and maintained her athletic build with regular exercise. Her emerald eyes captivated the attention of most, and helped her see into the souls of many an adversary who, foolishly, underestimated her. Her narrow nose and delicate lips accentuated a woman of natural beauty. Those who called her friend knew her to be easy going and compassionate. Those who

called her enemy knew never to get in her way. She didn't need a phaser to put you down. She could do it with her bare hands.

A product of a relatively young Earth colony, Proxima Beta, Piper had a great love for forested worlds and ecology. As their population was still fairly small, the inhabitants had simply resorted to single names for their people. Hence, Piper had only one moniker.

The Captain watched as her crew went about their tasks calmly and efficiently. Her faithful First Officer, Sarda, a Vulcan with oddly reddish hair, kept an eye out on his scanners at Science for anything untoward. He stood and checked the chronometer, confirming what he already knew. Beta shift was about to take over. He didn't need to check with the Captain to authorise the shift change. Through the telepathic link he shared with Piper she had already let him know.

“Begin shift change,” he announced.

Methodically and with practiced ease, Alpha shift turned over their posts to their replacements. Sarda surrendered Science to his second then stepped down to the chair Piper occupied – the Conn. As she stood to leave it she announced for the log, “Mister Sarda, you have the Conn.”

Sarda normally took command for only half of Beta shift before being relieved, but with the sequestering of their Chief of Security and their Third Officer/Communications Chief to the Ambassador, he was

left to carry the load. This did not phase the Vulcan in any way as he could literally work for days at a time without rest.

At the back of the bridge, the turbolift doors opened to admit Crash, Manny, Scanner and the Ambassador. Piper greeted them with a friendly grin and waved them over. “Can I help you?” she asked.

The affable Federation representative stepped forward and gave a friendly greeting. She spoke and her voice came out as a quiet, yet distinct, purr. “I was wondering if we could use your ready room for a chat.”

Piper indicated the appropriate door with a flourish. “After you,” she said, then followed as Susanna led the way.

Once inside, Piper offered her office chair then stretched out on the couch at the rear of the room. The Caitians and Scanner took the other seats. Susanna gave a smile and tried to open the meeting.

“Thank you all. As you’re aware, there are a number of Caitians in Starfleet, but I chose this vessel because, unlike all the other members, you’re the only two who are not tawny.”

Manny helpfully chimed in. “And you think we can give you some insight as to what’s happening at home.”

The Ambassador blinked. She had not expected them to see right through her. “You are correct.”

A bitter Crash added: "Neither of us have been to Cait for a number of years. You probably know more about the political situation than we do."

"Hmmmm." Susanna's pupils narrowed a little in frustration. "The situation is tense, to say the least."

Piper spoke up from the back. "Why don't you fill us in on what you know, Ambassador, and then maybe my crewmen will be able to offer their insights."

The Ambassador paused for a moment to consider the wisdom of this suggestion, then agreed. She purred her assent. "All right, then. It appears that there has been a growing movement on Cait to "purify" their genome. It would seem that some consider particular traits undesirable and that, even though the culture has tried to breed them out over the centuries, they still remain."

The Captain was startled to hear her third officer give a laugh that was full of old pain and cynicism. "That depends on what you consider undesirable," he said, sarcastically.

Susanna leaned back in the chair, her eyes wide and slightly defensive. Krashtallah's anger was fairly palpable.

"Commander." The word came from behind them and was full of subtle warning.

Crash got the message. He dropped his eyes, then his head. Quietly, sincerely, he said: "My apologies, Captain, Ambassador."

“Hmmm,” Susanna demurred. “If the feelings on Cait are anything like what I’m experiencing here, I have a lot of work to claw my way through.” She tapped her fingertips on the desk, mindful to keep her needle-sharp claws sheathed lest she scratch the Captain’s lovely furniture.. “I get the feeling you were going to make a point, Krashtallah.”

The Commander’s whiskers arched at the honour she gave him by using his full name. A very quiet rumble began deep in his chest as he spoke. “There is plenty of diversity in our genome, Ambassador...”

“Susanna,” the Ambassador interjected.

Crash nodded in appreciation for the inclusion. “...Susanna. We have tall cats and short ones. Some with long fur and others without. Ones who are clever, and those who are not. We even have some who think they’re the reincarnation of Elvis. But we’re mostly known for how we treat those who are different in colour.”

His sister picked up from there. “If you have the amazing good fortune to be born white, you get to become a thoroughly spoiled kitten like I was.” She glanced at Scanner, who laid a comforting hand on her paw. She had told him her life story – in great detail. He knew of her deep shame for her former attitudes. “It took a lot more than it should have for me to realise just how bigoted I was.” She sighed and paused for reflection. “You know, I can look a Gorn or a Klingon in the eye and consider him just as much a sentient being as I was. Yet I was taught

from a very young age that having black fur was the nearest thing to being evil you could be. Black kittens are considered freaks of nature and are thoroughly loathed.” She turned and tucked her head under her brother's chin, lovingly rubbing him with the fur on her brow. Her brother continued quietly.

“So, you can imagine that living in that society was nearly intolerable.” Crash's gaze turned inward, remembering his youth. “I wouldn't have gotten an education if my mother hadn't forced the issue with the government. Even then, I was never accepted by the other students and barely tolerated by the instructors. I think they only let me graduate to get rid of me.”

Manny gave a quiet hiss, tut-tutting her brother. “You sell yourself short, Shrallal. You were the first black cat in our school's history to have finished top of not only your class, but the entire school!”

The Captain gave a quiet snort. “I suppose there *can* be an upside to being ostracized. It gave you plenty of time to study.”

Her Comms officer gave a smile rich with irony. “Every storm provides rain,” he stated with a sigh. He thought for a moment. “I don't know what I did with that award.”

“I'm sure you deserved it,” Susanna said, kindly.

Crash shrugged. “Not that it matters. As soon as I had graduated, I used all my savings and jumped on the

next liner for Earth. I was going to join Starfleet, whether they wanted me or not.”

The Captain wasn't the only person who laughed at that. She said: “I'm glad for our sakes they did. I noticed you in your last year when I was paying a call at the Academy. You seemed determined to do your best at everything, to win at everything. You even took the Kobayashi Maru test twice. It wasn't enough that your character was being tested, you still wanted to win the unwinnable engagement. Only one man has ever beaten it, and then only because he cheated.” Piper remembered hearing the story from Saavik once whilst working together. A little stiff from her long hours in the Conn, she stood up to stretch her legs. “Anyone for fruit juice?” she offered with a friendly smile.

In Starfleet, it was a universal rule that captains either drank tea or coffee. Once again, Piper broke the rules. She hated caffeine, and either drank water or fruit juice.

She also didn't mind getting those drinks for her fellow officers, even if they were a couple of grades lower in rank. She just wasn't the type to make someone else do something if she was in a position to do it herself.

Grateful for the offer, yet still surprised, Susanna joined everybody else with an upraised hand. The Ambassador looked about her, then, at the people she was with and realised that they weren't just serving together on a Starfleet vessel. They were family.

Whilst Piper ordered on her personal food dispenser, she continued. "I knew I wanted this brash, young fellow on my crew. I saw the Detailer the next day and had him posted to the *Exeter* under me as soon as he graduated."

The Commander gave a playful laugh, which from a Caitian seemed halfway between a purr and a growl. "Then you sent me back."

Piper grinned. "Yes. I could see your potential for Command so I sent you back for Command Candidacy School. You left me an Ensign and returned a Lieutenant J.G. By the time we took on the *Millennium*, you were my Third Officer." At this point, she passed around the drinks, then messed up Crash's head hair.

The Ambassador was moved by Crash's rags-to-riches story. She added, curiously: "I'm sure there's more to your story, Krashtallah."

Manny saw how her brother suddenly tensed and wondered why. The Ambassador had to be oblivious to the cultural faux pas she had just made, and she knew Crash would be conscious of this as well. Her question was innocently put, but to the Cait, it was a prelude to a relationship. It was tantamount to asking one out for a date. Before her brother could reply, she spoke for him. "Perhaps he could tell it to you sometime."

Out of sight of the Ambassador, Crash gave his sister a sound thump on the back with his tail which she pretended to ignore.

Unaware of what her enquiry had started, Susanna went on. “I’d love to hear it, but I’m afraid time is short. We don’t have much time before planetfall and I still have much to learn about the Cait and why they seem bent on committing genocide.”

“WHAT?” Such was the *Millennium* crewmember’s shock that it came out in unison.

Susanna dropped her gaze. “Perhaps I spoke too strongly, but the overall intention is the same.”

Shaking his head in confusion, Scanner stuttered in his southern drawl: “What are y’all on about?”

Visibly disturbed, Susanna stood and started pacing round the room. Her feelings were high and it showed as her hair stood on end. “The Federation received word that the Cait have started rounding up black kittens – and adults – and are moving them into relocation camps. Rumour has it that they’re offworld.” She stopped in her tracks for a moment. “This behaviour goes against everything IDIC stands for. Sentients exist in many varieties. Life in all forms is precious. It shouldn’t matter what we look like or what form life takes, it should be honoured and respected.”

A low growl was heard and Piper found it hard to place the origin of it until she realised it was coming from *both* Caitian siblings. She was surprised at the apparent intensity of feeling as she noticed both great cat’s eyes were slitted and their tail fur stood erect. The rage they felt was almost palpable.

As one, they stood and stepped towards Susanna. Crash spoke for the two of them. "Whatever you need to stop this atrocity, you will have." Manny nodded her agreement. She added: "This has got to stop."

Their growling ceased as Susanna looked up into their eyes that were full of conviction. She smiled, her eyes wide with joy. She took first Manny's left paw in her right, then Crash's right paw with her left. Her purring filled the room with familial warmth. "I know with the two of you helping me," she said with conviction, "we can do anything."

They almost started as Piper and Scanner joined them. Scanner put his arm around Manny's waist as the Captain laid a determined hand on the Ambassador's shoulder. "Susanna, the resources of the *Millennium* are at your disposal. What do you have in mind?"

Susanna sat back on her haunches and put her chin in her paw. "That's the hard part. At this point, I was hoping that you might be able to help me devise a workable strategy."

Piper chuckled at the irony. It wasn't the first time the Federation had sent people into the field and expected them to wing it. She gave Susanna a smile of encouragement then indicated they return to their seats. "Okay, once again the Federation council has discovered a problem and hasn't got a clue on how it could be fixed." She gave her statement only a touch of sarcasm as she

rolled her eyes. "It's easy to throw resources at a problem, but harder to make it all work out the way you want it to."

Susanna shrugged. "I wonder sometimes if that is the way it has always been."

"As a student of history, I can assure you – it has!" Piper ushered them all back to their seats and she returned to the couch, though she sat this time. Placing her elbows on her knees, she steepled her fingers together as she considered the situation. "You know, I can't imagine King Kraltathat supporting such a movement."

The Ambassador's ears twitched at the comment. "Have you met Cait's sovereign before?" she asked hopefully.

The Captain nodded, dislodging a lock of her golden hair, tickling her nose. She batted it away in annoyance. "Once, when I was serving on the *Hood* as First Officer. We were paying a courtesy call, as you do. The King put on a state reception for us!" she smiled to herself as she recalled. "He certainly knows how to make you feel welcome." Her mind's eye returned to the spectacular event he had put on in their honour.

Manny chuckled. "You don't know this, Shrallal, but I was invited to his palace once, too. I had just been accepted into Starfleet, and he wanted to honour the first white Caitian to do so."

Her brother tried to squash the bitterness he felt over their heritage once again. The look in his eyes darkened momentarily, and Susanna didn't miss it.

“I gather they didn't do the same for you, Krashtallah,” she said, sympathetically. “I'm sorry.”

Crash sucked in a lungful of air then let it out slowly, letting go of his aggravation. “I determined a long time ago to not let the miseries of my childhood define who I am as an individual. With the passing years I've learned to pity my people for their bigotry.” He swept his arm around him. “I live in a world of equals that include Caitians, Humans, Palkeo Est, Klingons, and even living rocks! There is no “I'm better than you” garbage out here. We are what our Maker made us and we are no better or worse than others. That kind of exposure tends to change one's perceptions.” With a slightly embarrassed look he added: “But there are still times when old feelings catch me off guard.”

Leaning over the desk, Susanna placed a comforting paw over Crash's and looked him in the eyes. “I had no idea how much this situation might distress you. For that, I am sorry, but we have a job to do. I want to thank you in advance for your willingness to suffer personally for this mission, though.”

Not knowing how to respond, Crash simply gave a polite nod.

Susanna lounged back in the chair and changed the subject. “So, if the King and Queen aren't behind this movement, who is?”

Piper cleared her throat noisily. “I said I had met the King before, but I never actually laid eyes on the

Queen.” She cast her mind back. “I seem to remember she was unavailable. Some mission of state, if I recall.”

Amantallash spoke up. “I’m not sure it matters, anyway. Cait is a constitutional monarchy, and the sovereigns have very little real power. That lies in the Parliament and with the Prime Minister.”

Susanna stretched her arms, temporarily unsheathing her claws. Crash noted they were longer and much sharper than his own. The Ambassador seemed oblivious to his attention. “It has been my experience that the true power in governments does not lie with the elected officials, but with the bureaucrats that guide their decisions. Elected ministers come and go, but the bureaucrats, like cockroaches, are bomb-proof.”

The Captain reached over and tapped a comlink. “Yeoman Carver to the Captain’s Ready Room.”

The reply was immediate. “Aye, Captain.” A moment later, the doors whooshed open to reveal a young woman who looked like she had come from parade ground drills. Uniform personally pressed with shoes and insignia polished to a reflective shine, her youth was overpowered by her ultra-professionalism. She wore no make-up on her fair, human skin, and her hair was cut to regulation, styled to razor-sharp efficiency. When Carver had come to the *Millennium*, she had seemed to be nothing more than another Academy drop-out, yet Piper had drilled her to a very high standard to let the young woman know that she was more than she thought she had been, and could be.

She now believed in herself and her abilities and – more importantly – that she could contribute something valuable to the crew.

Carver stood at ease, waiting for the Captain's command. She didn't have long to wait.

“Yeoman, I want you to consult the library computer and link it with that of Cait's to determine who truly wields power on that world. Don't let titles confuse you, they're largely irrelevant anyhow. Give me a report documenting who runs what and list them in order of hierarchy. Links are often subtle, so don't be afraid to dig around. I want the facts, but I also want you to go with your gut.” Piper checked the wall chronometer. “I need it by this time tomorrow.”

If the workload seemed onerous, Carver didn't show it. “Aye, ma'am,” she replied smartly. “Will there be anything else?”

The Captain grinned. “Don't be a glutton for punishment, Yeoman,” she said with a chuckle. “That'll be all.”

With a quick about-face, Carver left the room and headed directly for the library computer.

Piper watched her go then took in her compatriots. “I suggest we wait for that report before we make any more plans. At this stage, we'd just be groping in the dark. Let's call it a night and reconvene tomorrow to strategize.” With that being said they all rose. Piper continued. “In the meantime, I think you furballs need to spend some time

with the Ambassador and acquaint her with Caitian customs. We don't want her accidentally giving every Caitian male the idea she wants to date them.”

Susanna started at that, and if she could have blushed, she would have. Instead, her eyes went wide, her pupils dilated and her fur flattened. She considered Piper's suggestion then agreed. “I don't want to be misunderstood, that's for sure. Not when there's so much at stake.”

“Good,” said Piper, then cheekily added: “Now, everyone out. I want to get some sleep.” She ushered them towards the door, then had a thought and grabbed Manny's elbow, stopping her.

The Security officer looked concerned. “Yes, Captain?”

The Captain tapped her teeth with a nail thoughtfully. “Lieutenant, I thought you might call home and talk to someone and see if they know anything about what's going on. We're within subspace range to be able to make a direct, realtime call. I'd ask Crash, but I know he's not crazy about the idea of talking to your family.”

Manny bared her teeth in her version of a wry grin. “That's putting it politely, Captain.” Her whiskers drooped in sorrow. “I'm afraid the only thing Crash is going to find at home is pain.”

Chapter Two

In a time where most Federation ships saw a little too much action, and were all too often called into service to defend either a world, a colony, a ship, or just plain themselves, it was a strange thing to find children on board. A Starship was largely considered far too dangerous a place for children, and yet it was completely hypocritical when compared with only a hundred years before when earth trading vessels, whose top cruising speeds were no more than Warp Two, could spend months on one run alone thus making it essential that their vessels often carry generations of one or more families.

It was a fact that didn't escape Piper when she made her submission to Starfleet that her Chief Medical Officer, who had recently fallen pregnant, be allowed to raise her children aboard the *Millennium*. Not to mention the plethora of sociological studies that showed morale aboard was higher when their married members did not have to spend long periods of time away from their families.

Considering the peculiarities regarding Merete AndrusTaurus' case, including the fact that her husband, a fellow Starfleet officer, had died shortly after they married, they relented and filed the whole incident under "case study".

It was now four months to the day after her wedding. It was one week less than that since she was

widowed. Yet her husband, Rogen, had not left her without a legacy. Shortly after he was lost, Merete found she was pregnant with twins – a boy and a girl. As her people, the Palkeo Est, only have a gestation period of fifteen weeks, it wasn't long before her babies came – literally kicking and screaming – into the world.

And now the slight woman, with her pearly skin, short, platinum coloured hair and slightly up-tilted eyes, was trying to juggle her duties as CMO and new mum. And she was finding it a struggle. Fortunately, she had a lot of help and had delegated some of her duties to her staff. To help her with the late night feeds – every species has to put up with them – a group of her closest friends had agreed to a roster. The children had quickly fallen into a four hourly feeding rotation, and so each fourth hour during Merete's sleeping schedule a pair of her ship's companions would let themselves into her quarters and quietly change and feed them milk that she had expressed earlier then stored in a small refrigeration unit next to the babies' cribs.

It had only taken a couple of days for everyone to get it right. During training, Amantallash had observed that when she and Crash had been kittens, all their mother had had to do was lie down and let them suckle.

“More power to your mother,” Merete had said with a touch of envy. “If only we all had it so easy.”

There were anatomical differences between the Palkeo and humans, but they weren't so much that diapers

were any different. And the reactions regarding their contents were varied, yet strangely consistent.

On one occasion, Lieutenant Jason Nunn, the ship's chief helmsman, had run from the babies' room with a dirty diaper balled up in his hand screaming: "Incoming!"

Another comment had come from their navigator, the handsomely grecian Alpha Centauran, Carman Valastro. "If we saved this stuff, we could use it instead of antimatter in our photon torpedoes. I'm sure it'd send the enemy packing."

The image had left Jason clutching his stomach he laughed so much. The young Australian didn't mind toilet jokes.

Amantallah had countered that statement. "I'm sure there's a Federation Convention against using biological warfare somewhere," she had said wryly.

And so Merete had managed to continue in her duties. One of the first gifts she had received was a twin anti-grav pram from Piper, and Merete would often be seen walking down the ship's corridors followed by the pink and blue floating pram. The Captain had told her which side was which for the babies according to the appropriate colour, but this was one of those times when cultures clashed. For the Palkeo, colour assignments for gender was irrelevant and the Doctor was left wondering what all the fuss was about.

She would be eternally grateful to serve upon a ship with a real sense of family. The crewmembers had

collaborated on their gifts, and Merete found herself with more toys, clothes and general supplies than she could have possibly asked for. To top it off, Scanner and Amantallah had come up with an ingeniously designed chair that had dual adjustable cushioned cradles that would each hold a baby strategically positioned to allow Merete to feed her children simultaneously simply by leaning forward over them. Three of them had been made. One for her quarters, one for her office, and the other for the Mess Hall/Rec Deck. The Palkeo had no moral qualms about feeding in public, and nobody seemed to mind.

It was in the Mess that Merete found herself pouring over her paperwork whilst nibbling on her dinner whilst feeding her children. She paused for a moment, adjusted herself so her daughter could feed more easily, took a bite of her vegetable omelette, then requisitioned some more plasma. She looked up, curious, as a shadow darkened her table.

“I don't know how you do it,” Piper said in admiration as she took the seat opposite.

Her friend tilted her head to the side. “One does what one must,” she said with a voice mixed with conviction and resignation to fate. Her daughter moved again and Merete knew that she had finished feeding. She twisted to one side so her son could continue, then gently picked the tiny girl up and passed her to the Captain. “Here, Piper. Burp Piper.”

The Captain almost blushed as she was reminded of the great honour her friend had given her by naming her newborn girl after her. The Palkeo tradition was to name one's daughter after their grandmother, but Merete was never one to stand on tradition. As far as she was concerned, the Captain was closer to her than a sister, and there simply wasn't any other choice.

Piper grabbed a towelette and draped it over her shoulder, took her tiny namesake, who looked so much like her mother, placed her against her shoulder then gently began to rub her back in the Palkeo fashion. She marvelled once again at the amazing growth rate of Palkeo children. Piper Jr was only two weeks old, and yet she was already the size of a six week old human child. At this rate, Piper would be in school within two years.

The thought gave the Captain pause. School was something she had failed to consider. It would only be a matter of time before Merete's children would be ready to start their education, and they had no-one on board who was qualified.

“What are we going to do when they're old enough for school?” she asked in conversation.

The Doctor froze. Obviously, the thought hadn't occurred to her, either. She slowly sat back in her chair, picked up Rogen Jr and began burping her son. He must have sensed her disquiet because he began quietly crying, so she rubbed him a little more briskly to soothe him.

“I don't want to send them home to be raised by my mother, that's for sure,” she stated categorically.

Piper raised a curious brow.

The Doctor shook her head. “It's not that I have anything against my mother, it's just that these “kids”,” she was using a human term to get used to it, “are my responsibility. Nobody else's.”

Piper nodded her understanding. “So, where does that leave us?”

Her friend smiled. “We could pay for a tutor, you know. I've got plenty of savings.”

The Captain sighed. She wasn't sure about the regulations on that one. “I suppose we'll just have to cross that bridge when we come to it. I know that I don't want to have to let you resign your commission just so you can go home to school your kids.”

A slight smile settled on Merete's lips. She had every confidence that her friend would once again pull off a miracle. Piper had an amazing ability to make things happen. “I'm sure it'll all work out,” she said calmly.

Piper was honoured by her friend's faith in her, but this time she wondered if it was misplaced. What they were proposing was without precedent. It was a miracle in itself that she had managed to convince the Admiralty to keep Merete on board as an expectant mother, it was quite another thing to start a school on the Federation Flagship.

Their reflections were interrupted as the tiny siblings burped in two part harmony. Both women laughed

and the tension was broken as each took a baby and began cradling it in the crook of their arm. Each was blissfully unaware they were being watched by the ship's new psychologist, Megan McCoy, out of the corner of her eye as she ate her meal.

After their evening meal, Amantallash and Scanner went their separate ways for the night. When Manny arrived at her room, she stretched her muscles to begin relaxing.

In her small lounge area she kept only a small desk with a computer terminal, a chair and a small sofa. She liked space, and being able to exercise in private when she needed to. The room was decorated with two narrow shelves that lined the walls. They contained several books from home, as well as Shakespeare, Milton, and a few other noted human authors. She also had a number of twentieth century detective novels she was fond of. Next to these sat a small box containing the growing collection of medals and other citations she had received in her service to Starfleet. The centre piece was a framed, eight by ten photograph of her and Scanner standing on the surface of Earth. The backdrop was an open wheat field, giving one the impression of endless farmland. It was taken by Piper months ago when they had all attended a funeral on the Kirk farm in Iowa.

There were other photographs on the shelves. There were shots of Amantallash graduating from the

Academy, one of the first starship she served on, her classmates, and one of her family back on Cait.

It was this photo that she picked up and stared at, casting her mind back to the day it was taken. It had been a rainy day, she remembered. The weather didn't matter, however. This was her coming-of-age day. The day when she became legally an adult. Able to vote, take a mate, all the stuff kittens dream of doing without ever realising they come with a pricetag – responsibility.

The background of the photo showed their home, barely distinguishable from the surrounding foliage. The Cait took great pride in making the smallest impact on their environment possible.

The foreground contained images of her parents proudly standing behind their children, paws on their shoulders, as if ready to push them out into the world. Two parents, two children. Krashtallah wasn't in the photo. He was studying that day, she recalled. Not that her father would have wanted him in the picture anyway.

The thought gave rise to anger, and Manny found she had to put down the photograph before she smashed it. The injustices her brother had been forced to endure were manifold. Some of them had even been by her hand. She wasn't sure she was ready to forgive her father yet, but she knew she wasn't ready to forgive herself.

Thinking of her father reminded her of Piper's request that she call home. She wondered what time it was in her home town and asked the computer to inform her.

Its reply told her it was late afternoon – a good time to catch her mother before her father got home from his job working for the transport ministry.

“Computer, open a private comm channel to the home of Slashtallah of Challa City.”

On the computer monitor appeared a single word: Connecting. Within seconds, the picture changed to reveal the family room she knew so well from her youth, with her mother peering at the screen at her end wondering who was calling. When she saw who it was, she gave a cheerful smile.

“Well, if it isn't our roving Starfleet warrior,” her mother quipped. “What can I do for you, my lovely snow kit?”

Manny smiled. Her mother had called her that when she was little. “Mother, we're on our way to Cait, so we'll be able to visit while we're there.”

Her mother's purr could be heard through the comlink. “Wonderful! It would be so good to catch up with you!”

Amantallah frowned to herself. She wasn't hearing her, that was clear. Respectfully, she said: “Mother, there will be three of us.”

Confusion reigned in her mother's mind. A worried look crossed her face. All she could utter was: “What?”

Manny gave a sigh that begged for patience. “Mother, Krashtallah serves on this ship as well. He's the third in command.”

Pashtallash tried to suppress her pride, but only managed partially. Her daughter had the impression that she was afraid to let her feelings show. "Hmm," she said slowly. "I'm not sure he would be that welcome. It might even be dangerous."

Amantallash found herself growling. "Mother, he's never been welcome, but he's willing to put his feelings aside and visit while in town. It is our custom and he wants to honour them and you. He doesn't want to offend anybody." She scowled to herself, giving vent to her feelings. "Any more than he does by just being black!" she spat.

Her mother recoiled. "You're defending him!" she said, surprised. "That's not how you were raised."

Angry and not afraid to show it, Manny gesticulated upward and snapped: "And praise the Maker that I opened my eyes to just what a good male my brother is! He's earned the respect of the Federation, Starfleet and this entire crew. But that's still not good enough for backwards Cait!"

This time it was Manny's turn to be surprised. Her mother actually smiled. "I'm glad for you, my daughter. Our people's prejudices will be the end of us."

Amantallash took a moment to collect herself. It was not her place to go ticking off her parents. "I apologise Mother," she said with forced calm. "I shouldn't have yelled at you."

The visage on the screen radiated motherly love. "You are already forgiven, my kit. Don't worry about it. If there's any forgiving to do, it will be me apologising to Krashtallahash." She looked thoughtful for a second. "Wait a minute. You said three."

The snow coloured Caitian smiled. "Mother, I will be introducing to the clan the one I cherish."

Her mother's eyes went wide with surprise. "Your father will be pleased you are considering a mate," she said with reservation.

Manny wondered. It was well known that no matter what species were involved, it was a rare thing when parents approved of the males their daughters fell for. Perhaps that's what her mother was thinking. "I will introduce him to the family when we get there." She paused for a moment, unsure how to bring up the next subject without making her mother think it was really the only reason she called. "Don't take this the wrong way, Mother, but I was asked by my Captain to ask if you knew of anything regarding a rumour we've heard that black kittens are being taken from their families."

This time the fear in her mother's eyes was unmistakable. She looked both ways, as if looking for someone who might be listening. "Daughter, you don't want to ask such questions. You could get everyone into trouble."

“I'll take that as a “yes” then. We will be looking into the matter when we get there, Mother.” A thought came to her. “Please, don't mention this to Father.”

“That would be wise, my daughter. I look forward to seeing you all when you make planetfall.” With one more glance about her, she signed off and the screen went dark.

Amantallash sat down on the floor and tapped her cheek with a finger. They were sailing into a nightmare, of that, she was sure. She turned and gazed at the photo of herself and Scanner. Bringing Krashtallah home with her might be the least of her problems.

“Remind me again why we volunteered for this,” Scanner said, quietly joking with his lady.

“Because it's the right thing to do,” Manny said, rubbing the sleep from her eyes.

It was oh-four-hundred hours, four A.M., on a civilian clock, and way after their bed-time. Still, they had put forward their names to assist with the babies' feeding, and they were good to their word. Manny gently touched the silenced door control and let them in.

Scanner gave a quiet command. “Computer. Lights, twenty percent illumination.” Obediently, the lights came on, dimly enough to see, but not too much to disturb Merete in the next room. Not that Amantallash needed much light. Her feline eyes took in everything as if in broad daylight.

The Doctor's quarters were larger than most as she was a member of the senior staff. This was fortunate in her circumstances as she was able to rearrange her room to suit her new status. Her bedroom remained her own, off to the right. A good portion of the lounge area had been turned into the nursery, with one of Merete's Momma chairs in the corner. A small couch and chair still remained to the left, whilst on the right sat two cots placed end-to-end, each with a colourful mobile hanging above it. Next to them was a change table and small kitchenette where the stored breast milk could be reheated and prepared. This had to be done the old fashioned way, with a pot and water, as Merete would not stand for modern intervention in the reheating of her milk.

They had only performed this task twice before, yet the two worked in partnership to prepare the feeds. Whilst Manny started boiling the water and preparing the bottles, Scanner had the dubious honour of changing the babies' diapers.

Amantallah noticed with a quiet smile that Scanner had once again held his breath as he opened each child's nappy, just in case.

In deference to their slumbering CMO, the couple had agreed to perform this chore in silence. Merete had enough on her plate without putting up with a noisy four A.M. feed.

The babies looked up at the couple in wide-eyed amazement, as tots are want to do, and gurgled contentedly.

Within moments, the children were ready for their bottles, and Scanner took Rogen to the chair whilst Manny curled up on the couch with Piper. Each child quickly got comfortable and started to suckle.

Scanner looked down at the little fellow cradled in his arm and found himself wondering what it would be like to have children of his own. Living on a Starship rarely led one to even consider having a family as life was busy enough, and with no children around it was a case of “out of sight, out of mind”. Before he met Amantallash, he had only had short lived liaisons with a handful of women and none of them had led to anything he might consider serious.

Yet now he sat, cradling a friend's child, sitting opposite his furry soul-mate who was also blissfully feeding it's twin. He mused for a moment that Piper Jr seemed very comfortable nestled into Manny's chest, a place he loved being himself.

His moment of reflection continued as he remembered back on a career that had taken him to many exotic places on many grand adventures, and yet he couldn't remember a time when he was more content than now.

“What are you thinking?” his girlfriend asked in a whisper. She had seen the familiar look in his eyes. He had been lightyears away.

He grinned sheepishly. He couldn't keep anything from his very perceptive Manny. “I was wondering what it would be like to be a parent,” he responded in kind.

Manny's eyes went wide at the revelation. She had often wanted to broach the subject, but had never found a good time. She smiled to herself and patted Piper's head ever so gently. “They do have that effect on you, don't they?”

Scanner's gaze turned on tiny baby Rogen who seemed happy just to suck on a bottle and enjoy the comfort and warmth the elder human provided. “They do at that,” he said. He spoke slowly as he reflected. “I always wanted to leave some kind of legacy. I suppose all of us do in one way or another. It's just that kids never seemed to come into the picture before. It's not that I don't want them, it's just that my career choice put the stop on that one. Besides....” He stopped himself. He wasn't sure he wanted to go on in the direction his thoughts were taking yet.

Even though his girlfriend was opposite him, Manny could still reach him with her tail. She used its prehensile abilities to their full capacity and gently stroked his cheek. “Besides what?” she asked, not wanting to push him, but too curious not to ask.

The human male looked at his Caitian girlfriend and decided to take the plunge. He knew he could trust her implicitly, but talking about this was going to change everything. Judd "Scanner" Sandage of Tennessee, Earth, took a deep breath and dove in.

"I come from a very old fashioned family, and before I was to consider havin' kids with anybody I'd have to be married to the woman I plan on spending the rest of my life with." It came out in a quiet rush, but it was a truth that he had to share.

Amantallah was aquiver. She felt a wave of joy, followed by fear, followed by elation and wasn't sure which one she should be. She wasn't even sure what Judd was saying, and whether he was even saying something pointed. She just looked expectantly at him for a moment in silence, considering his words. After a moment, she sighed, resigned as a thought came to her. "But I can't give you children."

Scanner gently grabbed Manny's tail and rubbed it against his cheek. "Sweetheart, ah've always known that. But there are many ways of havin' children. I was thinkin' we could adopt."

Manny found herself dizzy with the implications his words brought. That he had considered such thoughts were amazing, exciting, yet somehow frightening. She was finding it hard to speak. "What are you saying, Carra?" she asked, using her native tongue word for beloved.

Somehow, Scanner just couldn't say what he was about to with any distance between them. He slowly, gently, got up with baby Rogen in his arms, still feeding, and then knelt next to Manny so he could look her in the eyes. "I'm saying, sweetheart, that of all the sentient beings in this galaxy, I can't think of anyone I'd rather have as my wife than you." He switched his use of language to Caitian formal. "Amantallah of the Llash clan, will you be my life's mate?"

As long as she could remember, Manny had never shed a tear, and yet at this moment she couldn't help but cry. She leaned forward and gently licked her man's cheek. In her culture, that was all she needed to do to accept, but for Scanner's sake, she knew he needed to hear it. "Yes, my Carra. With all my heart, yes!" At that moment, they remembered the children in their arms so they nuzzled once and sat back in their chairs, their fates sealed. Come hell or high water, they were going to be married.

The Rec Deck was the venue of choice for the education of Ambassador Susanna Carra. As it was adjacent to the Mess Hall and even opened partially on it, the newly engaged couple found themselves the first arrivals. Ever since their betrothal, they had found themselves too hyped up to return to their quarters, and so they made their way to the Rec Deck, had an early breakfast, then the two of them spent some time working

out. Due to their different physiologies, they had their unique ways of exercising. Judd took in a morning jog on a treadmill, which Manny mirrored by jumping on an extra-large one and running flat out on all fours for two minutes. Her physique allowed for bursts of speed up to forty kilometres per hour, but for general fitness she kept it down to a mere fifteen kph. This was no time for subtlety, and Manny had a lot of adrenaline to work off.

Soon, they took a break from their morning run and Manny helped Scanner bench press some weights. Even given all the modern technology involved in a Starship, there were many jobs that required a fair amount of physical strength. For hundreds of years nuts and bolts still remained nuts and bolts and spanners were still spanners.

By the time oh-seven-hundred had come around and Crash and Susanna made an appearance for breakfast, Scanner and Manny were well and truly tired. They waved at the new arrivals as they made their ways to the showers to cool off. Even with the distance across the vast room, Crash noticed something had changed, but couldn't put his finger on it.

Standing next to him and quietly observing her new acquaintance, Susanna followed his gaze.

“I wonder,” Crash said quietly to himself.

Not realising just how acute was his companion's hearing, Susanna spoke into his ear. “They just look like a couple who are totally in love.”

Crash gave a start. “They've been infatuated with each other for some months.”

The correction had meant to be subtle, and Susanna couldn't resist arguing this point. She looked up into his dark brown eyes and said with all possible dignity: “Krashtallah, they are in love. And if my guess is right, they're going to marry.”

At that comment, Crash stiffened. “It will never be accepted.”

“Sorry?” The bluntness of Crash's statement had caught her off guard.

With a sigh and a smirk, Krashtallah said: “Amantallah is a white Caitian and could *literally* have any Caitian male she wanted. In a culture such as ours, it would be unconscionable for her to take a mate from outsiders.”

A growl from Susanna's innards reminded them of their need for breakfast. Both selected a collection of meats from Earth and bowls of water and in quiet agreement, held off their conversation until they were seated.

Once they faced each other off to one side for a bit of privacy, Susanna said: “Is this another of Cait's prejudices?”

With a deep sigh, Crash once again opened up his culture to this intriguing female. “I don't think so. White Caits are so revered that they could announce to the universe that they've found a way to turn down the

intensity of the sun and people would give them the benefit of the doubt.” He paused to weigh his next words. “No, it’s just that the level of jealousy from among my fellow males would be almost lethal for Scanner. Someone may even challenge him, but that kind of thing hasn’t happened for many generations.”

“And what about you?”

The question caught Crash off guard. He was used to seeing his sister and Scanner together, but, on some level, he was still not at ease with it. He looked into Susanna’s friendly eyes and realised that, if they were going to make a difference on Cait, it had to start with them. He had to be not only true to himself, but speak the truth to Susanna. She wasn’t going to be able to do anything successfully if he was going to lie to her. “I haven’t been at ease about it,” he said.

Susanna purred. “I know that hurt.”

Her levity eased some of Crash’s tension and gave him a brief laugh. “You’re right about that,” he admitted. “I suppose that, even though Amantallash is technically older than me, I’ve always tried to look out for her. Her spoiled upbringing has left her naïve in some areas, and since she came to serve on this ship, she has remained my subordinate in rank as well.”

Susanna lapped at her water for a moment then asked him another trying question. “So, what is the problem? Are you worried that Scanner won’t be a good spouse for her?”

The Caitian chuckled. "You're not going to let me off the hook, are you?" He paused for a moment to drink from his bowl, then ran his huge tongue over his lips. "I've served with Scanner since this ship was commissioned. In all that time I've found him to be eccentric, and sometimes annoying, but I have to admit that I know I could rely on him in any situation. He knows this ship well, and takes good care of it."

The Ambassador placed her elbows on the table, interlaced her fingers, then rested her chin on them. "And what does that tell you about the man?" she asked.

A wry grin formed on his lips. "I know where you're going with this," he said.

"Where might that be?" Susanna said, all innocence.

Crash chuckled once again. "You want me to admit that Scanner takes good care of the things he loves."

"Really?" Susanna continued cheekily. "I had no idea. Do you think that would be a good qualification for your sister's spouse?"

"Hmm. So, just because Scanner's a good mechanic, he'd make a great mate for Amantallah?" He tossed his head back and laughed, "Hardly."

Susanna tried a different tack. "And what does Captain Piper think of him?"

The look Crash gave her told her she had hit the mark. "The Captain has told me many tales of their adventures serving on the old *Enterprise* and afterward.

When she took command of the *Millennium*, she was given the opportunity to put together a team of her choice.” He gave a wry smile. “Not that she needed to. Captain Kirk had already made the recommendation to the Admiralty that they reunite Captain Piper, Doctor AndrusTaurus, Sarda and Scanner and that they serve together on this ship.” He paused for a moment as a thought came to him. He looked his companion in the eye. “I suppose it comes down to this: the Captain has only a select few people she lets call her by her name alone. And Scanner's one of them.”

Once again, Susanna gently placed a paw on Crash's own. He didn't miss the gesture and wondered why the Ambassador kept touching him. “Krashtallah, surely that speaks to the man's character.”

In his mind's eye, Crash tipped his king over. Checkmate, and he knew it. “You have made your point well, Susanna.” He mentally made a decision and absently nodded his head in affirmation. “I will try harder to accept that my sister has made a good choice and simply be happy for her.”

Crash watched as Susanna's face split into the warmest smile he had ever seen on a felinoid. He found it charming, disarming, and surprisingly attractive.

“That is all anyone could ask, my friend,” Susanna said. She looked down and noticed she had yet to retrieve her paw. She surprised herself when she realised she was reluctant to do so. Still, with great propriety, she slowly

withdrew it, picked up her bowl, and quickly downed the last of her water, trying to use the action to somehow change the subject.

Confused, and not quite sure what was going on, Crash let her go and did the same. Then the pair sat in awkward silence for a minute until it was broken by the return of Scanner and Amantallah. The couple were fairly vibrating with excitement. Their behaviour made Crash forget his situation and focus on theirs.

“Shrallal,” Amantallah addressed him with so much joy that Crash wondered if she was taking drugs. “We thought you should be the first to know. Scanner and I are getting married!”

Now in a complete daze, Crash looked at each of them in turn, then at Susanna as if somehow she could anchor him to reality. Was he hearing them correctly?

Trying to cover for Crash's lack of reaction, Susanna stood up and embraced them both. “Congratulations!” she said with glee. “I'm sure you'll be very happy together!” Surreptitiously, she grabbed Crash with her tail, tugged him to his feet, then dragged him over to her. At that moment, she let the happy couple go in the hope that Crash had composed himself.

Stupefied, but not without some sense of decorum, Crash embraced them each in turn. “May the Maker bless your union and give you many happy years together.” The blessing was pretty standard, but at the moment it was the best he could do.

Scanner slapped his hand on Crash's shoulder. "Thanks, bro. I bet you didn't expect to wake up this morning and find you're going to have a human brother-in-law!"

The answer Crash gave was completely honest. "No, I didn't."

His sister knew him well enough to guess his state of mind. "I know it's a bit of a shock, Shrallal. But I know the idea will grow on you." With that said, she led her man over to the food dispensers to get their breakfast.

As Susanna watched them go she rubbed Crash's arm for comfort. "Just keep telling yourself: Be happy for her. Be happy for her."

Crash just sighed and drooped. "Easy for you to say, Ambassador Fluffy."

By the time Alpha shift was over, and Piper was once again free to discuss their dilemma, Yeoman Janice Carver was ready to give her report.

This time, they assembled in the briefing room, with Piper at the head of the table, Susanna to her left and Manny and Crash to her right. Scanner wasn't present as he was needed in Engineering.

Piper stood to convene the meeting. "Before we begin, I'd like to say a big CONGRATULATIONS! to Amantallah on her engagement to Scanner." She stepped

over and embraced her junior officer. "I feel like I'm welcoming you to the family."

Manny laughed and returned the hug. It was an Earth custom she was beginning to get used to and she kind of liked it.

They broke their hold on each other and resumed their seats. Piper swivelled and looked up at Carver. "Tell us what's you've got."

The Yeoman dimmed the lights and drew everyone's attention to the wall screen. On it was a complex flowchart that looked like a city rail system gone mad. At the top was one box that stood out alone, connected by a solitary line to the one below it. "As per the Captain's instructions, I looked into Cait's government. To refer to it as a 'dog's breakfast' would be an understatement." Carver used a laser pointer to indicate the top of the chart. "The King sits out on his own and practically isolated from the chain of authority. His job is to rubber-stamp decisions made by Parliament. And judging by some of the laws passed recently, I'm not even sure he's doing that."

The Captain leaned back in her chair, lost in thought. "So, you're saying he's nothing more than moss on a tree?"

The Yeoman gave her a blank look. Piper explained. "It's a Proxima saying. All the moss does is make the tree look green and feed off it. Aside from that, it's pretty much worthless."

“Thank you, Captain,” Carver said, trying to get back on track. “I’ll have to remember that one.”

Piper wondered for a moment whether the Ensign was telling the truth or simply humouring her.

The laser lit up the box below the King. “This is the Prime Minister,” Carver indicated. “Whilst he does wield some real power, once again, I’m finding that the real power lies in the people who backed him. Like the King, he’s only there because someone supported him. The people think they have the King and their government because they voted for them, but they never seem to consider the question: who gave them the choices? Like so many other systems of government, Cait’s politics are split into two different political parties. Within each one is a small group of powerful individuals who decide among themselves who will become the candidates. And if they’re doing what I think they’ve been doing, they’ve been collaborating on the nominees so that, no matter who is voted for, they get a leader that the power brokers want, not what the public really needs.”

The cat’s ears perked up at this information. Crash leaned forward expectantly. “Are you saying the elections on Cait are rigged?” he said incredulously. “That’s unconscionable.”

“It’s nothing to be surprised about,” Piper said with more than a touch of irony. “Terra has had more than its share of this kind of thing.”

“So who's benefiting from this kind of situation?”

Amantallah muttered.

Piper rolled a light pen between her fingers as she considered the question. “It's usually those who will personally profit from their leader's decisions. The bureaucrats are either the ones who have the money and manipulate the laws to suit themselves, or they represent the interests of others. Either way, it's definitely not a government run for the people and by the people.” She looked up at her Yeoman. “Please continue.”

Carver sighed and turned once more to the screen. She was finding it hard to stay focussed with all the distractions. “I also found the bureaucracy has increased a level with two new branches that were created only two years ago. They are: the department of Homeland Security and the Department of Information.”

“It just gets better and better.” All eyes turned on the Captain. She elaborated. “In the Earth's history, only three countries had a department of “Homeland Security”. Nazi Germany, the Union of Socialist Soviet Republics and the United States of America. The first two were eventually defeated by the third, which then went on to make a lot of the mistakes of the previous two. Fortunately, they woke up before it was too late.”

Susanna asked: “And the Department of Information?”

Piper pursed her lips in frustration. “That just makes our lives that much more interesting. A better name

for it is the Department of Propaganda. There's an old saying: He who controls the information controls the world. People are more likely to believe a nice, big juicy lie than a small one." She took a deep breath. "We're seeing the beginnings of a fascist government forming here. If they don't turn things around, they'll find themselves not only chased out of the Federation, but it's enemy." Her scowl spoke volumes. "We've got to nip this in the bud, quick smart."

Her fir standing on end, the Ambassador asked: "How do we do that?" The fear was evident in her sultry voice.

The Captain stood, placed her hands on the table and looked at each person in turn. "We find out who's in control and go for the jugular." She scowled, then turned back to Carver. "OK, we've worked out who the enforcers are and those who influence the people. Now, who's pulling the strings?"

It was at this point that Carver began to sweat. "I'm not too sure about that one, Captain." She tried to ignore the emerald eyes burning through the back of her skull as she indicated the screen once more. "The best guess I have is the Secretary for the Department of Transportation, a Mister Iratafein. He has links to most of the other departments and," she glanced at the Captain who had relaxed a little, "there seems to be a lot of money flowing through it. I noticed that the new Minister for Transportation lives in a nice big house built into the

canopy of a huge Caitian Eucalypt. It would have cost a small fortune.”

Susanna stood and paced the floor, agitated. “We’re missing something. I know it.”

Crash got up and followed her, concerned. “What is it?” he asked, more gently than he realised.

The Ambassador stopped, turned and looked up at him fondly. She found his concern for her touching. She placed a paw on his cheek. “You of all people should see it, my friend. What profit is there in persecuting black kittens?”

Amantallash noted that her brother made no attempt to remove Susanna’s hand. When he said nothing, she spoke up. “There is no profit, unless you’re using them for a slave labour force.” It came out without much thought, but it sounded plausible, even to her.

So much so that Susanna and Krashtallash ran with the thought. “If that’s so,” Susanna said, “they would be either in a secret location on Cait, or perhaps on a moon.”

“But what are they doing?” Piper asked. “What would you need people to do when you can use robotic labour for half the cost?”

Crash turned and faced his Captain. “Robotic labour is outlawed on Cait. They would have too much of an impact on the ecology. Most work is still done by hand, or products like computers are either imported or replicated.”

Piper stood and stepped over to the Ambassador and Crash. Manny joined her a moment later. Yeoman Carver thought it best to stand aside and watch.

“This is all well and good,” Piper said. “It sounds plausible, but we don't have any evidence. Besides, we still haven't answered the question: What has changed to make the removal of black Caits from the general population acceptable enough for it to go unchallenged?”

Her inquiry was met with silence. Nobody had an answer for that one.

Her point made, Piper continued, ticking off her fingers as she made a point. “OK. We know that someone has an agenda. It involves a virtual takeover of the government by subterfuge and graft. They may be using the black Caitians as slave labour. They may not and are simply following a rather nasty course towards racial purity. We have a lot of questions and still far too few answers.” Piper glanced at the wall chronometer. “We will be in standard orbit over Cait in twenty-six hours. Let's try and have a few more answers before then.” With a nod to the Ambassador, she said: “Dismissed.”

Chapter Three

When off duty, Krashtallahash could usually be found in one of two places: in the bar sipping Catnips, or in the huge Rec. Deck either working out or lounging in the tree that occupied one whole corner of the room. It had been added by the Starfleet Corps of Engineers to give the room a more natural air rather than the stale metal and plastic walls found everywhere else. Whilst Crash really didn't care what kind of tree it was, the Oak tree was as much a place to rest as his sleeping cushion in his room.

Once he had scaled the trunk and passed the first and second branches, he climbed, claws fully extended, out onto his favourite branch and simply draped himself over it, his limbs hanging freely. As long as he maintained his balance, which came naturally, he could not only stay put, but sleep comfortably.

He liked this position as it gave him an excellent view of the entire deck, whilst going unobserved to the casual eye. He enjoyed watching the interaction between the many and varied members of the crew. Starfleet was still largely dominated by humans, but that was changing as more and more people from other species got caught up the in dream of the adventure. The *Millennium* was one of the most diverse crews in the fleet and it was reflected in those at play below. In the distance, he could see young Jason Nunn and his good friend, Carman Valastro, doing

target practice. Their friendly competition was frequently mentioned in the ship's pool.

A glance off to his right found the Captain and Sarda sparring on the mat. Whilst it was clear that Piper was the Master of Andorian Scheel-tah, Sarda was starting to show some real improvement. Once, the pool was simply whether or not he would score a point against the Captain. Now, it was how many. He watched the spectacle as the ghee-clad pair, wearing helmets like those employed by fencers, circled each other with their bone-handled staffs held high.

When once Sarda had simply tried to bludgeon, which the agile Piper had easily dodged, the Vulcan was now applying finesse and intelligence – which resulted in a stratagem that came very close to landing a blow to the Captain's head. At the very last moment, Piper deflected it, then delivered such a barrage that it was all Sarda could do to parry each blow.

Crash's attention was drawn by a mild commotion at one doorway, then he smiled to himself when he saw that it was Merete and the twins. He mused to himself that there was just some kind of magic that drew people to children – especially infants. So, it was no surprise that when Merete's family appeared, people gathered around them, doing the goo and gah sounds that humans seemed predisposed to make. It wasn't long before both children were being cradled by friends and Merete seemed grateful for the care.

The Comms officer was startled by a voice from above. "You know, Shrallal, that I could have stunned you senseless with a distraction like Merete." Crash glanced upward and saw his sister's cheeky face looking down at him.

"How long have you been up there?" he asked her.

She grinned. "Only seconds. I used Merete's arrival to slip behind the tree and climb up it."

Her brother was impressed and let it show. "Outstanding! Troublemakers on this ship have a lot to worry about if you can sneak up on them that easily."

Amantallah tipped her head to the side. "Thank you for the compliment."

"You're welcome and you deserve it. You are an excellent security chief and one day you'll make a wonderful mother. Your kittens would never know when you're looking over their shoulder." He gave her a sly grin. "I think being trained in Starfleet security protocols is the perfect prerequisite for becoming a parent - especially when they hit puberty." His mirth was displaced as something darkened his eyes for a moment. His sister didn't miss the change.

"What is it, brother?" She considered several options and went for what she thought the most likely one. Her tone softened as she remembered there was a time when she believed he couldn't have cared less. "Are you feeling sorry for me that if I marry Scanner we won't be able to have children?" She loved him right then for his

concern. "Don't worry, we're thinking when the time comes we'll adopt." Amantallash gave a contented smile as she felt her revelation would improve her brother's mood.

It did not. "It's not that. I..." he wasn't sure how to put what he was feeling into words.

Amantallash's eyes went wide with understanding. Her face softened in sympathy for her sibling. "You think you're going to miss out on having a family."

The emotional pain was so intense Crash stiffened momentarily. Through gritted teeth he said: "Something like that."

His sister sighed, feeling for him. As a white Cait, it would never have been a problem for her. "Just because Caitians have their prejudices regarding black fur, it doesn't mean those feelings must extend to everyone else."

Crash lifted his head from his crossed paws. "What do you mean?"

Amantallash shook her head slowly in amazement. "Shrallal, don't fall into the trap of having prejudices against those who are prejudiced against you. It tends to narrow your vision."

"Sorry?" Crash didn't know whether to be confused or angry.

His sister took a breath. This may not be pretty. "Often people who are the victims of prejudice can be blind to their own."

Without realising it, Crash gave a low growl. His sister was treading on dangerous ground. For her to suggest he was prejudiced was more than insulting. It put him in the same category as those who had made his youth a misery. Still, it was his sister speaking, and, for the sake of argument, he let her continue. "How do you mean?" he said in a low voice that carried warning.

Amantallah sat up and pointed off towards the far door. Crash followed her gesture and saw what she meant. Ambassador Carra had just entered the room. "Over there is a female who I genuinely believe would like to know you as more than a friend. Yet, since she arrived, you haven't responded to any advance she's made." She looked him in the eye, searching for the truth. "Why not?"

Embarrassed, Crash looked away. He couldn't answer her question.

More gently, she pressed on. "Is it because she's not of Cait?"

Crash shook his head. His throat tight, he still couldn't respond.

His sister dropped her head down so she was inches from his face. "Then what is it?" she said gently with all the love she could muster.

The great cat, who most feared would one day tear someone's throat out, finally spoke. "I don't know what to do," he said quietly, lest someone overhear.

Eyes wide with astonishment, for a moment Manny was speechless. She didn't know whether to laugh or cry.

At last, she simply gave her brother a heartfelt smile and ruffled his mane. “Brother, there's nothing to fear. It's not like flying a Starship. If she compliments you, return it. If she touches you, don't be afraid to touch her back. It's good to be proactive as well. But above all, just follow your heart.” She thought for a moment. “Don't be afraid to talk about yourself. There's plenty of good stuff to tell her about.” She gave him a wicked grin. “Aside from your personal prejudice.”

Crash's eyes became slits. “What?” he growled.

Krashtallah didn't scare her. “I'm saying, brother, that in our twenty-odd years, you've never partnered for some reason. You haven't even dated. Why not? When it was clear to you that no Caitian woman would have you, why didn't you look beyond our world?”

Flustered, Crash's fur stood on end. He had no good answer for her.

Manny gave a grand gesture that took in all. “In this universe, there's plenty of room for love, you just need to remember that people don't always have to wear the same fur.” She paused for a second and added: “and some not at all.”

She was referring to Scanner, he knew. Her words had opened up a line of thought he'd never considered. It *was* possible he was being prejudiced against other species. His view of mates had always been limited to Caitian females. It hadn't even occurred to him to look beyond his own kind. He glanced over at Susanna again and Manny

followed his gaze. She had paused in her walk and was sniffing the air as if searching for something. Her eyes settled on the Oak and she started moving in their direction. Crash only noticed now that she had divested herself of clothing and her fur was quite lovely with its many colours.

Manny guessed his line of thought and got up. "I'll leave you two to talk. If you need me you know where to find me." At his worried glance she added: "Just be yourself. You've got nothing to be ashamed of." With that said, she got up, turned, then quickly disappeared behind the tree. Within seconds, Crash saw her disappear through the side door.

His attention returned to the Ambassador. He watched her approach the tree slowly at first, then she picked up speed, ran, then jumped straight past the first branch, landed on the second, and, using her claws to anchor herself, used her momentum to carry her up past Crash where she vanished into the foliage.

Wondering if he had just been imagining things, he gave a start when she reappeared overhead and dropped onto the branch over his head. She landed without making a sound.

"Hello there," she said, as if she had met him unexpectedly. Crash found this unlikely since she had obviously been seeking out his scent.

“Hello, Susanna,” he said with just a touch of confidence. He glanced towards the ceiling. “You make that look so easy.”

The colourful fuzzball gave a playful smile. “It takes practice, I can assure you.” She stretched her legs, one at a time, then shook out her long tail. She relaxed and curled up on the wider branch. “It is sooo nice to be on a Starship with a tree in it. It's just like a touch of home. Whoever designed this ship was a genius.” She purred with satisfaction.

Crash looked thoughtful whilst trying to settle his nerves. Just having Susanna around set his fur standing on end with excitement. Yet he couldn't quite work out why. “My sister and I use this tree all the time. I often find her sitting where you are.”

Susanna's head popped up and she examined the bark of the tree. “I see some of her fur here.”

Crash had to slow his breathing. His throat was constricting in a way he found difficult and embarrassing. He wondered whether Susanna could hear him, he spoke so quietly. “Can I ask you a personal question?” he said tentatively.

The Ambassador stretched her neck over and down, effectively lowering her head closer to Crash's. Her friendly air put him at ease. “I would have thought we were beyond such formalities, my dear.”

Her words startled Crash and left him momentarily speechless. It took him a moment to remember what he

was going to ask. "Why are you called Susanna? I thought that was a human name."

"One thousand, two hundred and fifty-three."

"Pardon?"

Susanna laughed. "That's how many times I've been asked that question."

Crash put his head on his paws. "I bet the answer is still the same, though."

This time Susanna laughed out loud. After a moment, she collected herself enough to say: "Most of the time."

When Crash looked at her askance, she obliged. "I was named for the human ambassador who brought Persia into the Federation."

"I see." He frowned. "That's not the real name for your world, is it?"

Susanna bared her teeth in a genuine smile of delight. "Now, that's a question I'm rarely asked." In a surprise move, she flicked out her tongue and licked his cheek. "You get that one for being clever. Actually, it's.." At this point, she started issuing a bunch of untranslatable meows that increased in pitch for a few seconds, then died out.

Crash tilted his head to one side, remembering the sounds. "I have no idea what you just said, but it sounded beautiful."

Touched, Susanna pulled her head back a little in surprise. She gave him a heartfelt: "Thank you."

“You must have a wonderful singing voice. What did that mean?”

Once more the Ambassador chuckled, and Crash found himself liking the sound. She put her head back on her paws before answering. “The nearest I can get is “dirt”.” At Crash's quizzical look, she explained. “Most cultures have very generic words for their planets. The human's homeworld, Earth, is often referred to as “Terra” because Earth also means just that – dirt. If I remember rightly, “Terra” itself is simply Latin for “land”. What about Cait?”

“Hmmm.” He thought about the subject for a moment, then said: “I suppose our word for our planet is pretty generic as well. Translated, it would simply mean: what we live on.” He continued as Susanna chuckled. “Actually, Cait is the name we have for ourselves.”

The Ambassador found herself absently nodding in understanding. “I didn't tell you why our planet is called Persia in Standard.”

This time it was Crash's turn to laugh. “Actually, I can. When we first met you, Scanner said you reminded him of a Persian cat – a pet he owned years ago. I gather that's how you got the name.”

Susanna gave a slight shrug. “It's not the name, it's the character of the people. We're a pretty easy-going lot. I suppose if we had the chance, we'd change the name of our planet to Purr.” She crossed her paws and looked down at Crash. “But we're not as ecologically minded as

the Cait. Our world is a lot more industrialised and mechanised.” Surreptitiously, Susanna dropped down her tail behind Crash and brought it up slowly behind his head. Once there, she rubbed him behind his ears.

Crash started purring – loudly. “That's nice,” he said, loving every minute of it. “If you don't mind me asking,” he couldn't help but be polite, “why did you become an Ambassador?”

Susanna looked lost in thought. “Somewhere along the line I thought I'd do the honourable thing and follow in the footsteps of my namesake.”

There was something in her voice that caught Crash's attention. “But that wasn't your first love, was it?”

The Ambassador's head popped up in surprise. She hadn't meant to let that slip. Still, she felt at ease trusting Crash, so she confided in him. “No, it wasn't. Sure, I have a talent for it, but I find the best way to get people to start talking is to create an air of understanding and learning. Believe it or not, when I was a kitten I dreamed of being a schoolteacher.” She gave a deep sigh. “It wasn't meant to be, though. Although I trained for it, there were no jobs available, there's a glut of teachers on Persia. So I took a course in politics and entered the Diplomatic Corps.” She twirled her tail in the air with a cheeky air. “I've found my training with children has been just what I needed to handle politicians.”

Crash smiled at the little joke. “I'm glad you made the change, though.”

Slightly annoyed, Susanna looked down on Crash. "Why do you say that?"

Completely innocently, he said: "Because it brought you here."

Before he could react, Susanna leaned right over and nuzzled Crash passionately. He was so startled, he lost his grip – and his balance - and fell out of the tree. He caught the lowest branch on the way down to slow his fall, and came to an ignominious stop on all fours. Almost by magic, Susanna dropped out of the tree beside him, a look of concern on her face.

"Are you alright?" she asked, worried.

Crash shook himself out. "I'm fine." He closed his eyes, opened them then looked into Susanna's golden ones. "Would you have dinner with me? I'd like to tell you about my family."

A short time later, Captain Piper and Commander Sarda stood on the *Millennium*'s cavernous hangar deck. At each end of the bay could be see the enormous clamshell doors that accordioned into itself to allow the passage of shuttles, fighters, and any small starship that could come aboard rather than dock. The *Millennium* also had a third shuttle bay on a lower deck, forward of their position within the engineering hull. It was connected to storage bays for more fighters and shuttles, should the need arise, via a zero-grav conduit leading up several decks through the ship.

For all this ship's capacity, it was the main hangar deck alone that was capable of receiving their newest addition to the *Millennium's* squadrons. As the forward doors were larger than the rear, they began sliding, noisily, apart to allow entry to a small, sleek, vessel that was straight off Starfleet's drawing boards. It was small in comparison to the *Millennium*. Compared to a fighter, it was huge.

Almost twenty metres long, the twin-nacelled vessel gently slid past the *Millennium's* dorsal, nosing directly into the bay.

Piper's eyes widened slightly. "They weren't kidding when they said this thing was big," she said with mild awe.

Her First Officer merely tipped his head to the side. "I have shown you detailed specifications for this new vessel." His voice was even, yet Piper could feel the undercurrent of mirth.

"Seeing it on paper is one thing," she countered. "Having one up close, that's something else."

The Vulcan simply raised an eyebrow. "There is something to be said that perception is in the eye of the beholder." He tilted his head as he gazed at the two men he could see through its forward viewport. "The Starfleet Corps of Engineers call this class of vessel a "Runabout"."

Piper just nodded her agreement. They watched in momentary silence as it slowed noticeably on approach. The Captain smirked to herself. She knew the pilot. He

would take no unnecessary risks. She wasn't sure which ship he would be more paranoid about scratching.

Finally, after several moments of creeping slowly towards the bay, the nose of the tapered, yet still boxy, ship reached the forcefield holding in the bay's air and passed through it with a quiet buzz. The moisture touching the surface of the ship immediately condensed and froze, and small pieces of ice dropped off its nacelles and shattered on the floor. What water that didn't touch it condensed to create a fogging effect around the hull. The tapered brick also gave the usual creaks and groans of metal suddenly warming as it touched the atmosphere.

The vessel passed by the watchers barely metres away, and the two of them felt the cold fairly radiating off its skin. Piper noted that, unlike shuttle and fighters that all carried the registry of their support ship, this one was considered worthy of its own registry number, never mind that it did not yet sport a name.

The Captain noted the nacelles losing their glow as it was powered down followed by the subtle shift in the deck plating as the stars outside the bay doors twisted and the *Millennium* went back into warp.

A moment later, and the doors whirred open and the new vessel's occupants emerged, engaged in an argument.

"I don't care *what* you say, the Victorian High Country is the most beautiful mountain range in the universe." There was no heat in the voice, just confidence.

Jason Nunn, the *Millennium's* pilot, stepped onto the port nacelle and down onto the deck.

The response was immediate and just as certain. "Says the young Starfleet Lieutenant only a year out of the Academy." The voice carried a touch of Greece, and a whole lot of cheer. "You haven't even *seen* any other mountain ranges." Carman Valastro, the *Millennium's* navigator, followed, and, although he was older in years than his compatriot, they were still both fresh from the Academy.

"Hah!" Jason replied. "You forget I took the *advanced* survival training course. We scaled K2! That's only the second highest mountain on Earth! And it's biggest killer."

Carman merely smirked. "Easily done with energised thermal underwear and gravity boots."

"Gotcha there, mate! We did it with late twentieth-century equipment and clothing. It was so cold I'm surprised I still have the tip of my nose!" The smile remained on his face as the two came to attention before the Captain. "Permission to come aboard?" they asked. It was merely a formality, but the ancient tradition was still considered an imperative.

Piper nodded with a slight smile. "Granted, gentlemen. At ease." The Captain stepped past her crew members and stood close to the vessel without touching it. It was still too soon. She gazed up and down its sleek lines, taking note of its phaser pods and photon launcher.

It was not to be underestimated. She frowned at its lack of name. "Did you take her before they could paint on her name?" she said, mock serious.

Jason Nunn gave an embarrassed grin. "Er, no, Captain. If I may speak freely?"

Curious, Piper said: "Go ahead."

"When we reported to Utopia Planitia on Mars to take her, we were met by Captain Scott."

Suddenly, the Captain could see where he was going. "And..." she said, leading him, although she was sure she already knew where.

Carman gave his most charming smile. "Captain, he said, and I quote: "Why bother giving her a name when all Piper'll do is change it anyway?"

Although Sarda did not move, the Captain felt his internal laughter through their link. She gave him an almost annoyed look, then turned back to her junior officers. They seemed uncertain for a moment whether she would growl at them for relaying Scotty's words. She put them at ease when she simply tilted her head to the side, put her fists on her hips and said through a rueful grin: "I suppose I had that one coming."

Sarda thought back and noted that nearly every starship Piper had captained, she had renamed. Including her very first command.

The Captain whirled on her heel, gazed back at the new ship, and thought for a moment. "I suppose we should name it then."

The suggestions started rolling in. Carman said: "I was thinking of the *Cochrane*, after Zefram?"

Jason was not to be out-done. "I was thinking the *Lancelot*, because it's agile, and armed to the teeth."

Even Sarda had a thought. "Perhaps the *Century*? After all, her home ship *is* the *Millennium*."

Piper leaned forward, suddenly wishing she had a bottle of champagne handy. She simply rapped her knuckles on its still warming hull and said: "I dub you the *U.S.S. Cork*." She turned and headed towards the exit, only pausing long enough to tell Sarda: "Have her name painted on today, Commander," before she disappeared into a turbolift.

Jason and Carman shared a confused look. "Huh?" they said in unison.

Sarda decided to put them out of their misery. "I would think that the Captain named it the *Cork* because of its tight fit."

Chapter Four

Whilst many of the Federation's member worlds were home to Starfleet's starbases – veritable cities in space, Cait was one of the few exceptions to the rule. The planet did sport a number of communications and weather satellites, however, and Jason Nunn took this into account as he brought the vast bulk of the *U.S.S. Millennium* out of warp drive and into standard orbit high enough to beam down, but not so close that she could be seen with the naked eye. And given the particular sensitivity of the local inhabitants in that area, that was harder than usual.

The reasons Cait did not have a Starbase centred around their desire to keep their world as pristine as possible. Their homes were usually built either underground, in natural caves, or in the trees. One way or the other, they wanted to intrude on nature as little as possible. So it followed that having a huge orbital satellite that was even more visible to the naked eye than their natural moon, would offend their sensibilities.

There was another simple argument for not building one: Cait did not need one for defence. As the Federation was spread out towards the edge of our spiral arm of the Milky Way, there were a number of planets that had open space on one side all the way to the Pegasus Galaxy and no disputed territories on the other. They had the benefit of relative safety due to their address. Cait was one of them.

Their security was so assured that Starfleet did not often have to make house calls. Most of their incoming ships were either freight, or star liners come to visit their forests and beaches. So, when Starfleet's flagship came visiting, it drew a lot of interest. So much so, that a number of smaller pleasure vessels were orbiting Cait, waiting for them.

No sooner had the *Millennium* dropped out of warp than she found herself followed on all sides by locals who had come to see the spectacle. There were small solar wind sailors, simple impulse vessels, shuttles, and even a few warp capable ships.

On the bridge of the starship, Crash's second immediately opened a hailing channel and warned the private vessels to keep at least five kilometres away. Most respectfully did so. The rest did so quickly after finding themselves scrutinised by the ship's targeting scanners.

In the *Millennium's* main transporter room, four beings stood on the platform waiting to beam down. Only one of them was human, yet all were wearing their best dress for the occasion. Another paused briefly to kiss a loved one goodbye before all were transported to the planet below.

No sooner had the light from the beams faded, than the group found themselves in the presence of Cait's ruling monarchs. King Kraltathat stepped forward, arrayed in their world's finest jewels and satins. In general, most of the planet's inhabitants wore little, they didn't need to be

protected from the elements. The monarchs were the exception to the rule. The King wore ruby coloured robes from his shoulders to the floor and even wore a simplified crown.

The Queen, Feentathat, was more conservative, and whilst she wore royal red like her husband, she wore only one layer of clothing, and that was as light as gossamer. She was only slightly shorter than her average height husband, yet that was not her most outstanding feature. Like Amantallah, she was snow white in colour. Unlike Amantallah, she had golden eyes. The two put together made her absolutely stunning.

As per protocol, Ambassador Carra stepped forward and received the greeting with an outstretched paw. Piper watched the greeting and wondered at how standard some things are. No matter where she went in the universe, just about everyone said “hello, I mean you no harm” with a simple handshake.

In her turn, Piper stepped forward and shook the King's paw. He was still the thorough gentleman she remembered him to be, and his voice was bass-baritone, a full octave lower than Crash's.

“Welcome to Cait, Captain Piper,” he said with pomp, but also great sincerity. He was either a down-to-earth character, or a very slick politician, Piper mused.

“Thank you, Your Highness,” Piper said, giving him the respect due his position. She turned and shook the Queen's hand and repeated the greeting with her. Once she

had been introduced to both monarchs, she turned and introduced Krashtallah as her third officer. Piper kept a keen eye out for their reactions.

If the King was put off by Crash's fur, he didn't show it. He graciously took his paw and shook it generously.

It was the Queen who caught Piper's eye. She shook Crash's hand and gave the perfunctory smile, but she retracted her paw just a little too quickly, as if he was possibly carrying some kind of communicable disease.

The reception for Amantallah was markedly different. The King had to contain his enthusiasm for meeting another white Caitian like his wife, and the Queen delightedly took both her paws as she would a sister.

Piper glanced quickly over at Susanna who returned the look. Both of them had noted the monarch's reactions, but Piper also saw something else in her eyes as Susanna glanced at Crash. Was that sorrow? she wondered.

The King gestured off to one side. "Come, let us entertain you." He made a grand turn, his cloaks swirling around him as he led them into a huge hall that was obviously being prepared for a banquet. Kralltathat stopped and indicated the activity. "I must apologise. You arrived a little sooner than we expected and our preparations are yet to be complete." He stopped and made a decision. "You must come back this evening, Ambassador, Captain. We will give you a proper reception fitting for people of your station!" Almost as if in

afterthought he added: "Your officers would also be welcome."

When the King turned his back, Piper saw Crash give a look that reminded her of the face she put on after eating something particularly unsavoury.

Susanna spoke for them. "We would be honoured, Your Highness. We look forward to seeing you again this evening."

A thought came to the Captain. "Are any of your senior ministers going to be present?" she asked.

The King looked surprised. "Why, yes, I thought you would like to meet them."

Piper smiled amiably. "Good. We'll see you this evening, then." She flipped open her communicator. "Piper to *Millennium*, four to beam up."

As the transporter beam carried them away, Amantallah took particular note of the Queen's expression. She didn't care for any of this, she thought. Not at all.

In the meantime, shore leave had been granted to the *Millennium* crew who were not on duty. Cait was a beautiful world and restful to say the least, and the stresses of serving on the fleet's flagship could often be acute.

Doctor Merete AndrusTaurus beamed down to one of the planet's public transporter platforms with her two infants and with Ensign Jennifer Rapid from Engineering tagging along. Merete liked having Jenny around as the

short, vivacious redhead was a lot of fun and very capable. Her freckles virtually lit up when she smiled.

Looking up and down the street, they gazed about them in wonder. Most industrialised planets within the Federation were fairly built up with recognisable shops, restaurants, etc. They had shop windows selling their wares and street level doors for easy access.

On a world occupied by cats, the landscape reflected their particular style. Whilst there were some places that opened into underground stores, most were in the trees at least five meters off the ground. The trees were generally enormous and lush with foliage. Each one showed the marks of those who still liked to climb them with their claws rather than the stairs that had been added for the benefit of non-locals.

Rather than neon signs declaring their wares, each tree bound shop had their names beautifully carved into the tree's bark – in Caitian. Fortunately for the two women, they had brought their GPS navigators, replete with translators, with them.

“Where do we start?” Jenny said in wonder.

Merete gave a weary smile. “I know what I'm looking for first – a cafe. I hear the local blend is industrial strength.”

Her friend gave a knowing laugh. “I've got you covered on that one.” She tapped in the command on her navigator and it pointed north. “A hundred metres that

way and six metres up. I'm going to have had a good workout by the time I get back."

The Doctor patted down her civvies. It was nice to get out of uniform for a while and wear something comfortable. "At least we're dressed for it." She looked back over her shoulder at Rogen, sitting in a baby harness on her back, and gave him a smile. He gurgled back happily. "Let's go, Sunshine," she said and started up the street.

Jennifer adjusted her own harness carrying Piper Jr and followed.

"What next?" Amantallah looked about her at her superiors as they sat in the Captain's Ready Room in confusion.

"That's a good question, Shrallah," her brother replied. "At this time, there's not much we can do other than wait and see." He turned to the Captain and added: "However, I would recommend uploading today's news media, *and* that of the past week, and see if there's any mention of the disappearances."

Susanna nodded her agreement. "I agree, and I suggest, rather than rely on our government inquiries, that we interview people who know someone who's gone missing." She pulled out her hardcopy of Drallah's letter from inside her colourful cloak. "Starting with our young friend's family."

Concerned, the Captain said: "I think it would be wise to send someone from Security with anyone who does so. I'm sure there are some who wouldn't appreciate our poking our noses into their business."

Their security specialist spoke up. "Captain, if we use humans, we should send them out in safety vests. One quick swipe," she unsheathed her sharpened claws for emphasis, "and they could be dinner."

Piper bared her clenched teeth, showing her distaste. "Not what I had in mind, that's for sure."

Krashtallah turned towards the Ambassador. "Captain, I think I would like to accompany Susanna on any excursions." Susanna's fur bristled a little and he explained. "It's not that I don't think she can protect herself. It's simply that I know the land better than she does, and having me there could produce a psychological advantage."

Placated, Susanna's fur flattened and she laid a friendly hand on Crash's. "I would be honoured for you to show me around, Krashtallah. But what do you mean by that?"

Up until now, Scanner had kept quiet, but he gave a knowing smile and explained. "It's his colour. Black Caits have been so demonised in their culture that you could easily do the "good cat, bad cat" routine without really trying."

All eyes turned on Amantallah as she gave out a huge sigh. Slightly embarrassed, she said with a little heat:

“There are times when I get really sick of my people's parochial views.”

Curious, Piper asked: “Where does it come from?”

The Llash siblings eyed each other for a moment.

Crash spoke up. “It is an unfortunate side-effect of our religion, Captain. You see, over two thousand years ago, our Maker sent a messenger to the Cait with a message of love and brotherhood. He was persecuted for his teachings and eventually killed. You can see pictures of him in just about every “House”.” Crash used the term as a proper noun in reference to his people's places of worship. He leaned forward, turned on the Captain's terminal and typed in a command. “Just a moment, I should be able to call up an image....there.” He turned the screen around so all could see it.

The image was striking – as artists impressions often are. It was of an obviously very caring Caitian teaching his followers. His eyes were a beautiful azure, but most importantly, his fur was white.

The Commander continued. “As I said, just about every temple, or “House” as we call them, has images of him. Most of them are quite beautiful, however, some of them depict his death at the hands of his detractors.” He called up another image and displayed it. “Now you understand.”

The picture was brutal in the cruelty of the Teacher's death at the hands of Caitians who were

predominantly black. Piper noted that not a single one of their number was white.

She steeped her hands once more in thought. "So....I gather the black Caitians are still being blamed for the death of...." she frowned to herself. "What is his name?"

Both Caitians sucked in a shocked breath. Manny spoke up. "It is forbidden to speak his name, Captain." She glanced at her brother. "We usually get by by referring to him as our Teacher."

"Hmmm." Piper considered their religion. "O.K., he taught love and brotherhood, and was killed for it. It's not like that scenario is without precedent," she added with a touch of irony. "How do you know this? Can I get a copy of his teachings so I can read for myself?"

Crash's eyes widened in disbelief. "Captain, this is a very sensitive issue for the Cait. So much so, that only the priests have the right to read the scriptures."

The Captain took a calming breath. She was getting irritated and knew it. The last place she expected to find resistance was from her own staff. She looked both Caitians in the eye for a moment, then addressed them together. "Commander, Lieutenant, I need you to remember that your first loyalty is to Starfleet and this crew. If we're truly going to get to the bottom of this situation, we need to consider all the angles, all the facts. Some of what needs to be considered might offend. If that

makes you feel uncomfortable, I'm sorry, but it has to be done. We need to keep the goal in focus. Okay?"

For a moment, both cats looked like they were sitting on pincushions. The situation was anything but comfortable. Crash pondered his position for a moment and remembered the Captain was absolutely right, and that if there was one person he could implicitly trust, it was her. She wouldn't go anywhere unpleasant without a very good reason.

As he pondered, he felt a hand touch his arm. He looked up into the eyes of a female he had grown quite close to in a very short period of time. They were eyes of faith and confidence, that knew he would make the right choice, and that would support him. He drew strength from this, then noticed that Scanner was doing exactly the same thing for his sister, giving him a glimpse into their relationship. Turning, Scanner took his Manny's paw in his hand and together they met the Captain's gaze. "We're with you," they said.

Piper beamed at them. "That's good to know," she said cheekily. "Now, could one of you please answer the question?"

Both Caitians were confused for a moment, then Crash remembered. "Captain, even if you could get a copy of the scriptures, they are in a dialect that has been lost over time. Only the priests know it, and it's a closely guarded secret."

The Captain tapped her chair arm. "So, you're telling me that, even if I could get a copy of the scriptures, I couldn't translate them anyway."

Amantallah shrugged. "That's right, Ma'am."

"Then how is it that I hear you quoting from your religion from time to time?"

Crash gave a wry grin. "All kittens spend time, once a week, being taught in the local House. We all had to learn some of the most common teachings and sayings by rote."

"Ah." Annoyed, she tapped the chair even faster with the tips of her fingernails. "This is getting nowhere fast." She cast her mind back to her study of history. The situation reminded her of something she had once encountered in Mankind's past. "The whole situation reminds me of the old witch trials in the Middle Ages." Whilst Scanner nodded his understanding, Piper found herself facing three confused felines.

"It was a time in man's history when those who had the authority to work in God's name abused it. They kept the truth of the scriptures to themselves, spoon fed the populace and kept a vice grip on power. Anyone who opposed them was declared a heretic and, all too often, burnt at the stake. It took some very courageous people to stand up to them and make the changes needed. Still, it took time." Piper's eyes had narrowed at the injustices that had been delivered to so many undeserving people. "I don't want that happening again here." She looked them

square in the eyes. “One thing they didn’t want the people to know was one of their own verses: the truth shall set them free.” She sat forward, determination etching her face. “I think we’re going to have to find out what the truth really is, then let the people judge for themselves.”

Susanna smiled mirthlessly. “It’s one thing to decide to do a thing, it’s another to actually pull it off. What do you plan on doing?”

The Captain looked at Crash. “Commander, I want you to check the Federation databanks for anyone who is *not* Caitian who has studied their history. Try to find someone who might have gotten a look at their holy book. I know just how much curiosity can overcome good sense when it comes to archaeologists.” She wrung her hands together. “Failing that, we’re going to have to “borrow” one. You can almost guarantee that when a group hordes the information to themselves they’re hiding something.”

Scanner cradled his coffee cup, which was now going cold, and leaned back in his chair. “That’s all well and good, Piper, but what then? We’ve got no-one who can *read it*.”

Piper gave a sinister chuckle. “There’s always someone who can read something. You just have to find someone who *will*.” She turned to Amantallah. “I want you to find a priest who has been kicked out of the order, excommunicated, whatever. Someone with an axe to grind that will be willing to help us out. Someone who can translate for us.”

Crash gave out a long whistle. “Respectfully, Captain, I've seen a copy of the scriptures before, and it's a pretty thick book.”

The Captain grinned gamely. “Then Manny will have to find someone who also knows what's in it and what to look for.”

Amantallah failed at repressing the urge to roll her eyes. “That's a tall order, Captain,” she admitted, her lack of confidence plain.

“I don't think so. I've known the two of you long enough that you don't always follow the rules. There's a little bit of rebel in everyone, and being a priest is always one of the toughest jobs in the universe. Not everyone who becomes one is cut out for it.” She looked Manny in the eye to emphasise her point. “And that is the person we're looking for.”

Piper checked her wall chronometer and sighed. “There's never enough time in a day,” she complained. “We've got four hours before the banquet. I suggest we make hay while the sun shines and get to it. Make sure you're all back at the ship in time to prepare for the fun.”

The Ambassador tilted her head to the side, suddenly seeming older and tired. “Captain, I've been to many of these soirees before, and they've never been “fun”.”

Piper shrugged. “That's what we get paid the good money for.”

Scanner snorted, put his cup away in the dispenser, and headed out with the others. As they exited, Piper spoke up. "Commander Krashtallah, a word please."

Surprised, he turned back and stood before the Captain's desk at ease. "Yes, Captain?" he asked, a little concerned.

Piper relaxed into her chair and offered Crash the one opposite. "Crash, you know I don't like to pry into the personal affairs of others, but it seems clear that you and the Ambassador have got a thing going."

An awkward silence ensued for a moment as Crash waited. He wanted to hear what the Captain had to say without making assumptions. He simply arched his whiskers forward, curiously.

Piper sighed. "On the one hand I'm glad for you that you've found someone, Crash, I really am." She paused for a moment, letting her statement stand. "On the other, we're entering a potentially hostile situation and I want to make sure you're thinking clearly. Don't let your feelings for the Ambassador cloud your judgement." She tried hard to make it sound like a friendly request, not an order.

The Commander's gaze dropped to the desktop as he considered her words. Much as he hated to admit it, she did have a point, and while one part of his mind told him to tell the Captain to mind her own business, the other, louder voice of reason told him to be careful. There was plenty of time for romance, and now wasn't necessarily the best

time. He took a deep breath and let go of his tension. "I understand, Captain. I will try not to let my feelings get the better of me."

Piper leaned forward and put her elbows on her desk and gave him a soulful look. "Krashtallah, I'm not speaking as Captain to Third Officer, it's as one friend to another. Be careful, okay?"

The great cat nodded and smiled at Piper, this time not using her title when he addressed her. "I will."

If there was one thing Caitians knew how to be, it was comfortable. Merete admired the "cafe" they sat in, keenly aware that this was obviously the one made for offworlders and other tourists. For one thing, the place had tables and chairs designed for humanoids, with the usual accoutrements. They served their beverages in cups and mugs – definitely not Caitian style as they drank their liquids from bowls.

Still, there was an area set aside for the locals that contained a number of mats, bean bags and small tables to eat off.

The place was very colourfully decorated. It seemed that while the streets looked more like organised nature, the interiors more accurately reflected the native's character. Stripes were in vogue, and the colours often clashed according to human tastes. Yet, the overall effect was pleasing to the eye.

Music filtered down from a hidden speaker system that sounded like a late night backyard cat fight put to a rhythm. It was a little hard on the ears at first, but the visitors learned to tune it out after a while.

As Merete and Jennifer got settled, placing the babies on their knees, a lovely, young Caitian female sauntered over. Like the majority of her people, she was tawny in colour, but had decorated herself with all kinds of studded belts, and she even sported an earring! "What can I get you?" Her voice startled the visitors as she sounded like she belonged in a mid-western diner.

Merete ordered. "Two Cappuccinos, please."

Their waitress blinked and took in the babies. "Oh, aren't they darling! What'll they have?"

Jennifer covered her mouth with her hand so her smile wouldn't show. Her friend answered candidly: "Breast milk."

The young lady's eyes widened. "I don't think we have that."

Now Jenny was biting her lip to keep silent. Merete, deadpan, said: "Don't worry, I'll be supplying that." And to make her point, she swung Rogen around in her lap, lifted up the bottom of her shirt and began feeding him then and there.

The waitress' eyes became saucers. "Wow." She continued staring for a moment until she collected herself and went to fill their orders.

Once she had turned her back, Jenny laughed silently into her hand so violently she was shaking. Piper looked up at her in mild alarm, then found something else to ogle. As she flailed about, looking for something to touch and explore, her hand came into contact with the bottom of the table and found something sticky. She touched it again and found her hand was stuck to it. "Ah!" she said, worried and excited at the same time.

Jenny looked down to see what had caught the baby's attention and quickly extricated Piper from her mini predicament. "Yuk!" she said, once she had discovered the cause of the problem. "It seems after a couple hundred years of progress some still haven't kicked the habit of chewing gum and sticking it to the bottom of tables!" She moved herself and Piper along the table away from the offending matter.

"I thought black Caitians were a rarity," Merete said.

"Hmmm?" Jennifer, curious, looked up and off to the part of the cafe set aside for the locals. Sure enough, two black Caitians were sitting there. Each held a small bag. "That's something you don't see every day."

As they watched, one of them opened their bag and took out a small hand-held device that Jennifer found vaguely familiar. It looked a little like a black mushroom with a couple of activation buttons. The local tapped one of the buttons, then surreptitiously set it off to one side.

“Now, where have I seen one of those before?” she asked herself quietly. Alarm bells were going off in her head, but she didn't know why.

As she was rattling her brain, they were joined by *yet another* black Caitian carrying a bag. Before she could raise the alarm, he reached into it, pulled out a phaser and started shooting.

Chapter Five

In the quiet computer library room on the *Millennium*, Crash looked at the computer screen more than a little disturbed. Whilst it was clear from the news agencies that some black Caitians had disappeared, it was played down, explained away, and, worst case scenario, completely ignored. On the whole, the incidents seemed to be simply swept under the carpet.

He slumped back in his chair, amazed, and yet at the same time mortified, that a people, any people, *his* people, could be so blasé about people going missing. It just wasn't right. It was totally heartless.

A yawning chasm started to open within him as despair over the situation tried to overcome him. As if in answer, he felt a familiar presence at his side.

"I know it's hard," Susanna said. "Try not to let it get to you. Your own people may not see your value, but there are many others who do." She hunched down and placed her head on his shoulder so they were cheek to cheek. "We need to show your people that black Caits are just as special as tawny and white ones. It shouldn't matter what colour you are. It's what's on the inside that matters."

Crash sighed. "You and I know that, but the rest of my people will take some convincing."

Susanna turned slightly so he could see her eyes. "So, we'll convince them."

He looked back at her and wanted to believe her. “The only way to do that is to change the fundamental belief systems of my planet.”

Susanna's eyes narrowed. “No. From what I gather, your people don't believe your “Teacher” died because he was *white*. He died because they rejected his *message*. Somewhere along the line, the story got distorted.”

Crash's pupils went wide. The notion had never occurred to him. He had been told for so long that it was a colour thing that he had just come to accept it as fact without questioning it. “How do we prove it?” he asked, a germ of hope blossoming.

On his shoulder, Susanna smiled. “I hear your Captain is quite good at pulling off miracles. We should find out for sure when we can actually *read* the scriptures for ourselves.”

“Then we'll have to help her make it happen.” Crash stood, determination etched in his face. “We *will* make it happen.”

It was then that the red alert klaxon sounded.

Only moments before, Merete and Jennifer were looking forward to a caffeine fix. Now, they were thinking and acting fast to avoid getting killed. Both women immediately put the babies behind them as they ducked for cover. Thinking quickly, Jennifer ripped her communicator from her pocket, toggled the mute button,

flipped it open and hit the emergency send button. Then, so it wouldn't be discovered, she stuck it to the bottom of the table in the middle of the mass of chewing gum she had found earlier, leaving it broadcasting audio.

From underneath the table, they watched in fear as the black Caitians quickly and systematically shot out the security cameras in the shop, followed by any communication device they could find. Then the newest arrival stepped over to the door, shut and locked it then turned over the "Closed" sign. He then turned and pointed his phaser at the patrons, who all ducked in fear.

He finally spoke with all the solemnity of one giving a university lecture, and said in a no-nonsense tone: "I want everyone over on the mats now, thank you. Please don't try to resist. I don't want to shoot any of you, but I can assure you that I am quite willing to use this if necessary." He indicated the windows and one of his cohorts began shutting the blinds. The interior remained bright as the light controlled lamps came on and adjusted automatically.

Merete glanced around her from underneath the table. At a quick guess, there were about another six off-worlders in the cafe, along with three tawny Caitian customers, and the staff. There didn't appear to be anyone else from the *Millennium* present, so she took it upon herself to speak for the hostages, if for no other reason than to protect her children.

“What assurance do I have that you won’t shoot us anyway?” she asked, trying to keep her voice even.

Their unexpected host stepped over and pointed his phaser at her. “Somehow, I don’t think this table would put up much resistance if I shot you through it. You can take it as given that if I wanted you dead, you would be by now.” Narrowing his gaze, he saw her babies behind her. “Ah. There’s nothing so strong as the motherly instinct. You have nothing to fear from me. Now, please come out and join the others over on the mats.”

Merete had watched as her fellow hostages had obeyed. She noticed that the proprietor, a large, solidly built, tawny Caitian, was bristling with rage. His hair was standing on end, and he was barely restraining his anger. “Trust a black Cait to sink to this level,” he spat.

One of the other two black Caitians, a female, jabbed him in the back with her phaser, propelling him forward. Her behaviour resulted in a mild scolding from her fellow. “Now, now, Blue, that’s not what we’re about, is it? Let them continue in their lies, and they will continue to believe them.”

At this point, Merete had extricated herself from under table and was cradling Rogen on her hip. She scowled up at her captor and let her rage fuel her. “What gives you the right to hold us against our will?” she demanded.

It occurred to her that this male was the tallest Caitian she had ever encountered, and his bearing was

anything but common. If this had been another place and time, she would have thought him an aristocrat.

The profound sadness in his heart showed in his eyes and Merete found herself wondering what was really going on. "This temporary inconvenience is a necessary evil, I'm afraid. I can assure you, it won't be for long." He pointed off to his left once again. "Now, please join the others."

At Merete's side, Jennifer had taken stock of the situation and decided that, for all her training and preparedness, there was no way she was going to do anything that would put the babies in danger. The three black Caitians were heavily armed and decidedly larger and stronger than she was. Reluctantly, she followed Merete's lead and obeyed. Not that she had any choice anyway. Merete outranked her. In situations like these, any action was her call. She sauntered over to the mat and sat next to Merete. Both of them crossed their legs and sat a baby against their stomach, and held them close.

It was then that she remembered the mushroom shaped device. She stole another glance at it and realised what it was, and its implications. This was not going to end easily.

At his post on the bridge of the *Millennium*, the Communication's officer's eyes were drawn to the flashing red light on his console. The emergency call was routed immediately to his earpiece and he listened intently, trying

to understand what he was hearing. The sound of phaser fire was unmistakable, and he jabbed a control to locate the origin of the signal. He glanced over at the Conn. "Commander!"

Sarda quickly joined the junior officer. Ensign Simon Townsend had only been with the *Millennium* crew for a few weeks, but the young man had proven himself an adept addition to Krashtallah's Comms crew. His agitation was telegraphed in the tone of his voice. Sarda calmed him with an even: "Report, Lieutenant."

The young, blonde human looked up at the older Vulcan. He remembered his training and said more calmly: "Sounds of phaser fire, sir. Someone down on the planet has hit the emergency call button on their communicator, but it's on broadcast only. We can't call them."

The Commander considered the situation. "Can you identify whose communicator it is?"

Townsend called up the required information. "Ensign Rapid, sir."

Alarm bells went off in Sarda's head. The last he knew, the ensign had beamed down to the planet with Merete and the babies. He stepped over to the Conn and mashed a button, calling for Red Alert. "Captain Piper to the Bridge," he called into the microphone. He turned back to Townsend. "Put the audio on the speakers."

Immediately, they could hear Merete's voice, very close to the communicator, asking about their safety. It

was clear she was talking to their assailant, and they could just as clearly hear his reply. His assurances that his motives weren't homicidal did not impress Sarda, and he added a call for Amantallash and Krashtallash to join him on the Bridge as well. He glanced over at Science and called for the source of the signal to be scanned. Within seconds, an orbital image of an eating establishment appeared on the main screen. Several heat signatures could be seen within it.

Sarda glanced over at Townsend. "Call Transporter Room One and have the occupants of that room beamed aboard. Have a security team standing by."

Within seconds, he received an unwelcome reply. "Sorry, Commander. Someone down there is operating a Transporter Inhibitor. I can't beam anyone out without them being scrambled."

Just then, Piper emerged from the turbolift, looking as worried as Sarda had ever seen her. He knew she had already gleaned a lot of what he had learned from their link. "Are you sure it's Merete?" she asked.

He didn't need to reply as they could hear Merete speaking to her captor from the overhead speakers. Piper called to Ensign Townsend. "Send a message to the local authorities informing them of the situation." She turned back to Sarda. "We need to get our own security forces on the ground as soon as possible."

Sarda nodded his agreement and considered his Captain and friend at that moment. She was operating in a

mode he knew well. Act now, worry about your feelings later. Her capacity for putting aside her emotions in a situation was admirable.

He looked over at the turbolift doors as they opened and the ship's three felines stepped out, concern for the unknown situation apparent.

Piper waved Amantallash over. "Lieutenant, I'm going to need your expertise. As far as we can tell, Doctor AndrusTaurus and Ensign Rapid are being held hostage in a shop in the Capital."

Manny's eyes widened in fear. "And the babies?"

"With them." Piper's flat statement caused a momentary silence on the Bridge. Nobody wanted to imagine what could happen to the children.

"I'll get right on it, Captain." Without another word, Manny turned on her heel and disappeared into the turbolift.

Piper turned her attention to Krashtallash. "Commander, I want you to listen to the recording of the incident and give me any insights you can."

"Aye, Captain." He took his usual place at Comms and began replaying the broadcast with his personal earpiece. Piper noticed Crash's shadow, the Ambassador, stood against the wall nearby, trying to stay out of the way.

It was times like these that frustrated a Starship Captain. When all that could be done was being done and all she could do was stand by and watch as her orders were being carried out. She stole a glance at Sarda who simply

gave her his usual comfort by bolstering that feeling of confidence in her she felt in the back of her mind.

When Krashtallah tensioned, Piper caught the motion out of the corner of her eye. "What is it, Commander?" she asked.

It wasn't often that Crash seemed startled, but now was definitely one of them. "I can't be certain, Captain, but I think I know who's holding the Doctor."

The Captain was stunned. The odds were heavily against such a coincidence. "Are you sure?"

Crash put down his earpiece. "I believe I am, Captain." He stood and stepped forward to report. "I believe he was a fellow student from my days doing advanced study before I left for the Academy. He and I were study partners. His name is Martin Luther." He smiled at the irony. "He considers himself to be a reformist and changed his name to reflect this. He took the name from the two Terran historical reformers." His mind's eye went back to that day as he remembered Martin's pain. "His family cut him off when they found out. Clan affiliations are very important in Caitian society." He shrugged dismissively. "Not that they paid any attention to him anyway." Coming out of his reverie, he continued his report. "Captain, from what I have heard, there are three of them. The one who identifies himself as Red is Luther. As for Blue and Yellow, I have no idea. All I can say is that Blue is a female, Yellow a male."

Piper fixed him with a look that beheld the seriousness of her next order. She was about to ask a lot of him, but she had every confidence that he would rise to the occasion. "I want you down there, Commander. Go with Amantallash and work with her. Try to talk to Luther and end this peacefully. I don't have to remind you what's riding on this."

Crash nodded solemnly. "Yes, Captain." He turned and headed for the turbolift.

The Captain noticed that Susanna seemed torn, as if she wanted to go with him. She gave her an out. People like her simply needed to be contributing. "Ambassador, I need you to talk to the Caitian government for me. Inform them that some of my people are among the captives and that I want my people involved in their rescue."

The diplomat within Susanna kicked in then. She gave Crash one last fond look as the lift doors closed, then headed for the Captain's Ready Room. She paused long enough to ask: "If I may, Captain?"

Piper waved her on and let her go. "Let's get down to work."

When Crash arrived at the transporter room, Amantallash was already present with a five member security team. Each was armed with a standard phaser, a phaser rifle, and wore vests that would not only protect them, but also carried a number of useful tools. As soon as

Manny saw Crash, she tossed him a vest and phaser, which he quickly donned.

Manny looked at each party member in turn. “Ready?” she said loudly, militarily.

“Ready!” they cried in reply.

Amantallash was proud of her people. They trained hard, and she knew they could handle anything. “Let’s go, then!” she said, waving them onto the transporter platform, then simply added: “Energise.”

The mild euphoria that comes over one upon beaming down faded quickly as the landing party quickly fanned out in all directions. Manny had ordered they be beamed down two hundred metres from the cafe, and they wasted no time in racing into positions that effectively surrounded the establishment. She even had a couple of her people climb the trees into adjacent buildings to cover the overhead branches, in case their antagonists tried to escape upwards.

Once positioned behind a local flitter – a kind of flying car – Amantallash flipped open her communicator. “Ensign Townsend, patch me into the audio inside. I want to hear what’s going on. Two, I want know how many people we’re dealing with. Keep an eye on your scanner.”

Two was an blue-skinned Andorian male, Ensign Brankovian. He was positioned adjacent to the cafe with a clear view of the windows. He slipped his infra-red goggles over his eyes and adjusted them for the ambient temperature. What he saw didn’t delight him. His voice

came out in his people's typical hiss. "One, we have three standing, each holding phasers. On the floor we have six Caitians and ten humanoids – including the infants. At least we know where our people are."

Amantallash, One, considered for a moment. "That's good intel, Two, but I don't think we can take anything for granted. Whoever has the babies could be using them as shields."

The notion repelled the family-oriented Andorian. "If they are, they will regret it, One."

Manny nodded absently in agreement. Children were not to be used as shields in any culture. "Stand by, Two. Three to Six, are you all in position?"

"Three, aye."

"Four, aye."

"Five, aye."

"Six, aye."

It was at that point that the local police showed up. Amantallash rolled her eyes as the larger, armoured flitter announced its arrival with its typical ear-piercing klaxon. The unit parked itself behind the vehicle the Llash siblings were using as cover, then the hatch popped open and about ten local cops bounded out and took up positions around the site. Manny's practiced eye caught their high-powered phasers and body armour as they moved out.

A relatively tall male, obviously the leader, swaggered out of the vessel and made his way towards the duo. He made no attempt at taking cover, and his bearing

told Manny everything she needed to know about his intentions.

The male looked them both up and down, first noting their Starfleet uniform flak vests, then went on to give Manny an appreciative look, then Crash a dour one. “And you are?” he asked Amantallash imperiously.

As befitting rank, Crash introduced them. “Commander Krashtallah, Lieutenant Amantallash, starship *Millennium*. And you?”

The interloper drew himself up to his full height of one hundred and seventy centimetres and said with every shred of authority he could muster: “I am Captain Graptasan. I will be taking over from here. Your people will take orders from me.”

Manny's eyes became slits and she gave out a low growl. She used a human line she was fond of: “Like hell you will.”

Astonished, the new arrival spluttered: “Pardon?”

Amantallash drew herself up to her full one hundred and eighty centimetres and towered over the Captain. “Your people are poorly trained and are not ready for combat. Neither are they equipped for hostage situations. Besides, we have four of our people inside and we won't be leaving them in your incompetent hands.”

Graptasan was still considering a clever comeback when Amantallash backhanded him so hard he landed flat on his back. She jumped on top of him, pinning him to the

ground, growling with teeth glittering in the daylight only an inch from his throat. "Your people will take their orders from me," she hissed. "I will not have this situation torn apart by little people like you with oversized egos and tiny brains. Do you understand me?"

The Captain could only nod in terror and supplication. The Caitian way was ancient, but effective. Amantallah had established her dominance clearly. None of the Captain's people would step forward to lend a hand. It was not their way. He had to fight this battle alone. And he had lost.

All the while, Krashtallah had looked on, knowing that his sister had done what she had to do. He kept the pride he felt for her in his heart to share with her some time.

Amantallah stood and waved the police officers over. They would come in useful. She assigned each one a number for identification from ten to twenty-one – Graptasan wasn't getting out of duty – and gave them the frequency they needed to listen in on their private communicators for orders. She then pointed out what positions they would take around the perimeter and let them go. She then turned on the Captain. "I want all the public transporters within one hundred kilometres shut down. There's no way our friends inside are going to use them to escape."

Seeing the logic of the order, the Captain did not argue it. He picked up his communicator and made the necessary calls.

That done, she turned to view the cafe once more. Her keen eyesight saw no movement from the blinds that might indicate someone watching.

“Two,” she called. “Is there anyone at the windows?”

Brankovian quickly took one last look, then replied. “Not at the moment, One. There was one a moment ago, but he's moved back to the rest of the group.”

Manny considered her options. She could use stun grenades, but that could badly injure or even kill the infants. She discounted gas as well. Doses that would knock out adults could easily be lethal to children. The one weapon she had were high pitched stunners. They could temporarily stun a Caitian with it's beyond human range sound, but it wouldn't knock them out. They would still have the capacity to do some damage before being subdued.

Her safest option was the one she was sure of the least. And, to top it off, would put her brother in the firing line.

She looked him in the eye. “I suppose you're on, Shrallal.”

Graptasan looked at Crash askance. “You're not going to send *him* in there to negotiate, are you?” He had missed the familial reference.

Manny shook her head, a wry grin on her face. She wondered at the irony. "Aside from the fact that my brother may know one of the hostage takers, he outranks me. I take my orders from him."

The Police Captain gave her an incredulous look, but after a quick glare from Manny, he kept his peace.

Crash pivoted on his right foot and looked his sister in the eye. "I'm off, then." With a glance at the Captain, he added: "Keep him in line."

His sister gave him a smile of encouragement. "No problem. Don't come back without the kids."

Determined, Crash started off towards the cafe. "Count on it."

On the inside, Jennifer found herself wondering what was going on. She thought back to all the detective novels she had read as a child where someone had been taken hostage, and the one thing these people were not doing was making demands. They had simply taken them captive, then sat down and waited. Her curiosity overcoming her need for self-preservation, she spoke up.

"What are you waiting for?"

Whilst Blue and Yellow simply scowled at Jennifer, Red at least engaged her. His manner was of one who was enjoying an afternoon tea with a friend. "My dear, your precious Federation has been ignoring the plight of the black Caitian since we joined. We have tried to bring our problem to their notice by going through channels and we

keep being brushed off. We have been told time and again that the Federation is “looking into it”, but those words have usually come through our own people, and we cannot even be sure anyone knows about our plight.”

Merete had been listening to the conversation, and said incredulously: “So you’re doing this just to get attention?”

Red tipped his head to the side. “From the right people.” He stood and stretched his muscles. “When word came that the Federation’s flagship was coming here, I took the opportunity to get the Captain’s attention.”

The Doctor saw red. “By using myself and my children as bargaining chips,” she snapped.

Red shrugged. “Your inconvenience is minor compared with the *millennia* of suffering my fellow Caitians have borne at the hands of our brothers. I want assurances that the Captain will take affirmative action so our problems will not only be addressed, but dealt with.”

Before Merete could utter another word, there was a knock at the door. Red dropped to all fours and made his way over to it and pressed himself against the wall for protection. “Who is it?” he asked as if this was something he did every day.

Merete started as she recognised the voice. “Someone who wants to see you all come out of this alive.”

Red frowned. The voice was familiar to him. “To whom do I have the honour of addressing?”

Curiously, the being outside laughed. "You always were a bit pompous, Martin."

Red's face lit up in recognition. "Krash of the Llash clan! Of all people they send to talk to me, it had to be you!" For a moment, he forgot himself. "How have you been?"

The laughter became a bit strained. "Aside from running off and joining Starfleet, becoming a Lieutenant Commander and making third in command of the Federation's flagship, I haven't done much. Today, I thought I'd look up the affairs of an old friend and try and keep him from getting his head blown off."

The comment brought Red back to earth. "Ah, yes." He glanced over at his captives. "Well, with you representing us, we should do well."

There was a slight pause. "Martin, I don't represent you. I'm here simply to find out what your demands are and to see if I can secure the safe release of your hostages. And one thing I can assure you of. If one hair of the heads of the babies, their mother or their friend is ruffled, you won't have to worry about the Federation coming after you. I'll take care of that one myself."

For the first time, Red looked worried. He had an idea of just how formidable Krashtallah was. "Noted," he said. "Our demands are simple. For the persecution of our black brothers and sisters to end. I want it signed *into law* that to persecute a black Caitian for any reason will be a jailable offence."

For the first time, Yellow spoke up. The passion in his voice was clear. He was nearly hysterical. “We've had enough of taking abuse day after day! It's got to stop! And if we have to start killing offworlders to get our point across, so be it!”

Before Red could get a word out, Crash spoke from outside. “You'd better get that one in line, Martin. I'm holding *you* personally responsible for his behaviour. I know that the other two are here because of you, that this whole hostage thing was *your* idea, so I'm putting you on notice. Now, I will pass along your requests to the Captain so she can take them up with the King, but I think she will be much more inclined to do so if you give her a show of faith. Release some of your captives, say, the offworlders and the children we've seen through our infra-red scopes.”

Behind Red, Merete and Jennifer shared a glance. For some reason, Crash was keeping their identities to himself, and they decided to keep that in mind. He was playing his cards close to his chest.

Red gave a dark chuckle. “You don't think I'm going to give up my only real bargaining chips, do you?” He turned and looked over his shoulder and considered his options. There was no way he was going to give up the offworlders, but releasing the Caitians could create good will with the government. He whispered: “Blue, Yellow, bring me our fellow Cait.”

Whilst his fellows complied, he spoke up to Crash. “I'm sending out our Cait brothers and sisters, but I'm not

giving up the offworlders until I see the new laws in writing. If I don't see real results in four hours, I'll execute one of the hostages, then one every hour until I have what I want."

Outside, Crash scowled. Not what he hoped for, but it was a start. He stepped away from the door, raised his communicator and called his sister. "They're sending out the Cait. We have four hours before he starts killing."

"So we have just short of that time to talk him out of it?"

"Yep. We have our work cut out for us." Krashtallah made a show of attaching his phaser to his utility belt. He had seen the blinds move and knew he was being observed. He watched as the door slowly opened, then the Caitian hostages came out, one at a time, looking scared but just glad to have gotten out alive.

A number of Caitian police, at Amantallah's directive, came out of hiding and escorted them to safety behind the police flyer. Crash quickly joined them and helped with the debriefing. They soon knew exactly how many people they were dealing with, the weapons they were carrying, and how many hostages remained. They also knew that Merete had taken charge of the hostages and was speaking for them.

That done, Crash sat down next to the flitter, his back to the cafe, flipped open his communicator and called Piper to give her a report.

It was at this point that Martin opened his bag and took out a small video unit. He quickly tapped into the planet's major news service, News Prime, to see if they had been mentioned. He waited a moment, then a minute more, then another minute. And nothing was being said. "What does it take to get someone's attention these days?" he asked in quiet frustration.

Not overly surprised, Martin took out his private communicator and tapped a programmed number. After a moment of silence, Blue looked at him askance. "I'm on hold," he said. Shortly after he said: "Hello. Let me introduce myself as Red and let you know that in..." he checked his wrist chronometer, "..one minute, the satellite dish on the north face of your building will explode most violently. As the leader of the Army for Equality for Black Caits, I take sole responsibility. And just to update you, I have taken ten offworlders hostage in the Starshine Cafe in the Capitol. Have a nice day." With that said, he took out a remote detonator and hit the big red button on the top. He didn't need to see the explosion to know that it had happened.

Within five minutes, the air above the cafe was swarming with news flitters trying to get a view of the scene. They were quickly frustrated by the thick canopy of trees, so they launched a large number of smaller, remotely operated cameras that floated above the team members, jostling one another as they tried to record the scene.

Amantallash was not impressed. She took out her communicator and opened a hailing frequency. "This is Lieutenant Amantallash, Starfleet, ordering you to pull your flitters and cameras back. I am calling for a two hundred and fifty metre exclusion zone around the site." She lowered her hand and communicator and watched to see if they would comply. They did not. She cast a glance at Captain Graptasan.

"By law, they don't have to," he said with an impish shrug. He was enjoying her discomfort.

Manny growled. "They are giving away my people's positions and giving the *terrorists* just what they want!" She pulled out her phaser, took quick aim and shot down one of the cameras. It exploded with a satisfying bang, its pieces littering the forest floor.

It took about five seconds for the news people to understand what had happened and back off as ordered.

Amantallash made a show of putting away her phaser. "Sometimes you have to use the universal language." She turned back to the cafe. "What next, Crash?"

The answer came in the form of a chirp from her communicator. She whipped it out and answered. "One here."

Ensign Townsend gave her the bad news. "We've had reports that your hostage takers just remotely destroyed a communications dish at News Prime's

headquarters. Nobody was hurt, but they sure got their attention.”

Manny scowled. It things weren't bad enough. “I got the impression something was up when the media arrived en masse.” She waved her phaser once more at a floating camera that was venturing close. Its operator got the message and backed off – fast.

Krashtallah, who had been listening, flipped open his communicator and called Susanna. “Ambassador,” now was not the time to get cosy, “has there been any word from the government regarding the terrorist's demands?”

Susanna was all business. “I've been speaking with their Interior Minister and they have a blanket policy of not negotiating with terrorists.”

“Not even when the demands won't hurt anybody?” Crash let a little of his frustration show.

The answer came back a little more gently. Susanna was sensitive to his voice. “Commander, they have simply told me that the statute already exists in the Federation Charter which Cait, as a signee, is legally obliged to observe.”

“Like hell they do,” Crash growled. He remembered who he was talking to and added: “Sorry, Susanna, I'm now growling at you.”

Even though Susanna was in orbit, he could hear the quiet smile on her lips. “Don't let it bother you. Although I don't know what else we can do to give these people what they want.”

Crash thought for a moment, speaking out his thoughts. "He said he wanted to see the change in the law for himself before he would let the hostages go." He gave a sly smile. "We'll just have to give him what he wants. Susanna, I need you to organise something for me and put it together as quickly as you can."

Inside the cafe, Merete was losing the war of keeping the babies quiet. For a time they had managed to rock the children to sleep, play with them, and Merete had suckled them, but eventually the children had picked up the vibe that something wasn't right. A Palkeo Est child was just as capable, if not more, of crying their eyes out. No matter how much they tried, the children would not settle down. It wasn't too long before the young male Cait, known only as Yellow, started losing his patience with them, and even though Blue and Red tried to placate him, his frustration with the situation that was now being compounded by infants crying incessantly. It was all getting far too much for him to handle.

Before Red would stop him, Yellow launched himself at Merete and stopped an inch from her nose. His eyes red, he snarled at her. "Shut those kits up!"

Red was surprised at how cool Merete was as she stared him down. "Back off, Yellow," Red said in her defence. "Now."

Yellow considered whether to challenge his leader for a moment, thought the better of it, then complied. "Can't I at least stun them?" he whined.

Merete scowled at Yellow as if daring him to try that again. Yellow met her stare for a moment, then looked away. Even then, he could feel her glare in the back of his head.

From his seat near the door, Red watched the humanoid mother and wondered about her. Her bearing suggested training, perhaps even Starfleet considering the ship had been in orbit for hours. But the mere presence of her children discounted that notion. It was widely known that parents did not raise their children on Starfleet ships.

After an hour of waiting, Martin opened the door slightly and waved for Krashtallah to come over. While Crash was wary, he knew that Martin could see Amantallah training a sniper's phaser at his head. If he even lifted his phaser in Crash's direction, he would never be allowed to get off the shot.

During the lull, Krashtallah had had time to consider Martin's ploy. Whilst he believed and actually sympathised with his cause, he did not agree with his methods. Peace at the end of a gun was no peace. It was simply the quiet before the storm. And to try to litigate for equality was a joke. One cannot make a law to change a people's heart. Don't legislate, educate.

It seemed that Martin was trying to be a martyr for his cause, but the notion did not sit well with the Cait Crash knew. He would make his statement today, and, indeed, had already done so. But he was not the type to want to spend the rest of his life in a rehabilitation centre, away from people he could influence. It just wasn't his style. There had to be a way of escape. It was then that Crash realised what it was.

After taking a leisurely stroll up to the cafe door, Crash looked up into his one time friend's eyes and asked: "What's up?"

Martin's eyes narrowed. Krash was planning something, of that he was sure. Still, he had to go forward. "Have you heard anything from the government yet?"

Krashtallah remained cool. "I'm sure you're monitoring the news channels. Keep it tuned to News Prime. I'm told they'll be making the announcement shortly." His tone turned icy. "Now, I have your assurance that you will release the hostages safely once the law has been ratified."

"On my honour," Martin affirmed.

That comment brought a scowl to the Starfleet Officer's face. "Honour?" he growled. "If you had a shred of it you would never had tried this stupid stunt."

The heat Martin felt about his people rose to the surface and directed itself at Crash. "The ends *truly* justify the means!" he snarled. "You have been with Starfleet too long! You've been blinded by their ways and have turned a

deaf ear to the pain and suffering of your fellow Blacks! It is you who has no honour!"

Krashtallah managed to contain his own anger – barely. "You lost your way a long time ago, Krelltaspan," he said, using Martin's birthname. "There is no battle between black, white and tawny. The fight is to make all of them see that we are *one*, that colour means *nothing*. And you cannot do that by actions that justify the hatred that is already dividing us. The way to win is to prove your detractors *wrong*. The only thing you've achieved today is more hate. The greatest peacemakers in history *never* achieved their aims through force, only through peace and understanding." He shook his head in pity. "You may survive today. You may even manage to elude capture. But until you see that you are still blinded by your *own* prejudices, you will remain captive by them."

Martin scowled down at his former associate. "A nice speech, Crash, but in the end, *I* will be the victor, and our brother and sister Blacks will be free.

"You won't be," Crash said firmly.

"We'll see. The fight isn't over 'til the loser squeals." That said, Martin closed the door.

A little deflated, Crash turned and strode back to his sister. He had tried reason and it had fallen on deaf ears. He hadn't really expected success, but he felt honour bound to try, given their history.

As he walked his communicator chirped. He flipped it open and held it to his ear. "Ready when you are, my dear," came a friendly voice.

Confident in his strategy, Crash didn't slow his pace. "You have a go."

In the News Prime studios, the fully briefed news director took the call and set Crash's plan in motion. He gave a knowing look to his news anchor and drew a line across this throat with his finger.

The prearranged signal sent the female news anchor off in a new direction. As if listening to a cue on an earpiece she announced: "We have a breaking news story. Following the demands of the terrorists calling themselves the "Army for Equality for Black Caits", the King has bowed to their wishes and is now going to make an announcement on the matter."

On the small monitor Martin had brought with him, he watched in elation as his dream came true before his eyes on News Prime. It was the news service that had the ear of the people.

The King appeared, in all his regal clothing, and stepped onto a small dais. "It has come to my attention that there is a minority within our number that are suffering at the hands of their fellow Cait. I am now using my executive authority to sign into law a decree declaring it

illegal for any Cait or organisation to discriminate against any other or organisation because of race, *colour* or creed.” He held up a very official looking document, signed by himself. “Under my leadership, I want no Cait to demonstrate childish bigotry by treating any other badly through ignorant bias, but to treat each other in a spirit of friendship and kindness. We must remember our Teacher's words to: “Love your fellow beings.”

At that point, he glared into the monitor. “I want it known for the record that this announcement is not in response to a threat made against this administration or our people. It has been made at the request of a member of Starfleet, and the Federation Ambassador, both of whom brought the fact of a deficiency in our legal system to my attention.

His scowl intensified. His tone darkened. “And I have a personal message for the hostage takers in the Starshine Cafe. You've won nothing but a long term in prison and I will personally see that the fur falls off your bones before you see freedom again.”

His heart thumping in his chest, Martin snapped the monitor shut, turning it off. *Victory.* Rejoicing, his fist punched the air. “Victory!” he cried. The King's threat had fallen on deaf ears.

Blue and Yellow joined in the celebration. “Victory!” they cried. “We're free at last.”

Martin looked down at his captives almost fondly. “I apologise for the inconvenience. Your assistance has

been invaluable, but I'm afraid it's time to go." He nodded at Yellow, who picked up the Transporter Inhibitor and switched it off with the touch of a button. As the expected transporter beam took them he said finally: "Farewell."

Once she was certain they were gone, Merete quickly stood up, a baby in each arm, and ushered everyone towards the door. The wave of relief that washed over her then was beyond her ability to verbalise. She would spend some time later thanking her god for their rescue. "Time to go everyone," she said as she waved them through the now open door. "Let's get out of here now in case they left behind something nasty."

Nobody needed any further stimulus as they quickly made a dash for the exit and out into daylight and freedom. Once outside, Merete took the children and Jennifer straight over to Crash and Manny, who each took a child from her to give her a break. Relief for their freedom now gave way to absolute fury. The heat in her eyes could have caused a bad case of sunburn. "Did you get the bastards?" she spat.

Crash's communicator chirped and he flipped it open put it to his ear, then he grinned. "We did."

High above the surface of Cait, three furry, black beings reformed inside a small shuttlecraft that had been waiting for their signal. Still basking in the glow of his triumph, a now complacent Martin didn't even feel the stun blast from the waiting Starfleet security forces, or notice

that the view out the front window wasn't that of stars, but of the inside of the *Millennium's* shuttle bay.

Half an hour later, those involved sat in the Captain's Ready Room for debriefing. The air was that of relief, but the tension from the day's activities was still felt. An air of normalcy was needed, so the *Millennium* family tried to relax in each other's company and focus on taking delight in Merete as she cuddled her children. As one, they were just grateful that she was among them once again.

Intensely curious, Merete couldn't help but ask the room: "How did you catch them?"

Sitting next to her boyfriend, Susanna spoke up cheerfully. "Once Crash realised that all it would take was a broadcast from the King to get this over with, I arranged just that. It was a simple thing to do, and the King was only too willing to oblige." With that said, she turned and looked at Crash, taking his paws in her own. "The document he signed was *real*, Crash, not a fake. He really did sign that order into law."

At that, Piper rolled her eyes and sighed in frustration. "It is one thing to make a law, it's another to have it enforced. Cait has been living under the Federation charter for years, and they should have enforced the equal opportunity section of it. They didn't. They won't necessarily obey this one, either."

Susanna, bewildered, turned and looked at Crash, who nodded in agreement. "I grew up under the Charter, and it did nothing to make my life better," he said.

Deflated, Susanna slumped back in her chair next to Crash. He put a comforting arm around her shoulders and let her rest her head against his.

Endeared, Merete turned back to Piper. "I get that, but how did you catch Red?"

The Captain grinned. "That was easy. Once Commander Krashtallah realised there had to be a ship waiting in orbit for them, it was a simply thing to find it. It was pretty clever of them, really. All they had to do was wait for the transporter inhibitor to be turned off, then beam them up instantly. They hid their ship among the flotilla that's still following us. All we had to do was scan them, find out which ones had transporter capability, hail them, and find the one piloted by a black Caitian with a lousy attitude." She entwined her fingers behind her head and sat back, content. "From there, we simply jammed their transmissions, then invited them on board with a tractor beam."

Merete gave a freeing laugh and let the final tension go. "I would have given good money to see the look on their faces," she said as Piper Jr crawled out of her lap and onto Susanna's. The tiny tot seemed to like her warm fur.

chronometer, then quickly sat up as she realised the time. "People, we have about half an hour before tonight's banquet. Let's get ready." With a quick glance at the Doctor she added: "Merete, the King has extended a special invitation to you and the children to try and make it up to you."

The Doctor sighed and bounced Rogen on her knee. "It seems this day will never end," she said, wistfully.

Chapter Six

Piper's description of her earlier visit to the King's palace seemed like nothing compared to the lavish event staged that night for the *Millennium's* crew. The King, naturally, sat at the highest place on a gently sloped dais at one end of the hall. Everyone was given their own cushion, each one embroidered with stunning images of Cait's wilderness. The foods were brought before them by largely female servants who wafted the latinum-plated trays by regularly.

Merete noted that the servants all seemed to move with the natural grace of an acrobat and she wondered if this was a trained or natural behaviour. She had often watched Crash and Manny do their workouts, yet she could not recall them moving with so much *artistry*. She also noted, that like so many of their kind, they wore little but their fur and some cleverly designed and colourful ribbons that flowed with them as they moved. They, like the guests, wore elaborate masks that were also exquisitely designed. Each held many gems of varying colours, and the masks also reflected a range of emotions from sadness to rage.

Next to her sat Susanna and Krashtallah who each kept one of her children curled up their tails as they slept. Their masks were simple and reflected their status as Federation operatives. Susanna was naturally one of the

guests of honour, being the Federation Ambassador, as was Captain Piper, but the King was making a special point of honouring Krashtallah for his efforts in saving the lives of all involved in that day's hostage drama.

The importance of this was not lost on either of them. The political ramifications of this day would be felt for some time, and could cost the King dearly. Many had called his actions a "capitulation" to the desires of a handful of terrorists. Having Krashtallah as the face of the heroes who saved the lives of a number of *tawny* Caitians, as well as a number of offworlders and their children, was political point scoring and they knew it. The fact that this new law would benefit him as well was being made known to all, not only with his being honoured, but the photo opportunity taken before the feast. Even the Queen seemed to have warmed to him.

Next along to Crash's right was the Captain and Commander Sarda, each formally attired in their dress uniforms, as was Scanner to Merete's left who was seated next to Amantallah. Again, like the others, they wore simple masks - except for Piper who, in her typically flamboyant style, painted hers on her face. She noticed when Piper blinked her eyes the Starfleet motif appeared on her lids. Gazing at Manny and Scanner, the Doctor noted they seemed to be having the time of their lives, and Merete noted with a wry grin that Scanner still looked a little rumpled, even though she couldn't spot a single crease in his uniform. Amantallah was wearing her dress

uniform, as was Crash, which appeared the same as Piper's red with white collar, save that it ended at their tails.

Merete noted all this with her keen eye that missed nothing, then turned her attention to those opposite her. They were a peculiar collection of Caits who each wore lavish attire that got louder the closer the individual got to the King. It would appear that the more detailed one's clothing, the higher their status, she thought. Even their masks reflected this. However, she knew politicians when she saw them. The smug look of self-importance in their bearing was hard to miss.

Susanna turned from looking at the dancers who seemed to leap impossibly high and land on each other's outstretched paws, thus forming living towers, and caught the Doctor's gaze. She leaned over and surreptitiously began pointing out their fellow guests. "You may have guessed that the Prime Minister, Cardtasharp, is closest to the Royal Family. Then you have his deputy, then the Minister for Homeworld Security, the Minister for Information, then the Minister for Transportation, then the Minister for the Environment, etcetera, etcetera, etcetera. I've spoken with a few of them already and I've found them to be quite aloof." All of this was whispered quietly in her ear, lest their keen hearing fellows overhear. "It seems that most of them don't have much time for offworlders."

The Doctor shifted to make herself more comfortable, then looked off into the gallery. Aside from her friends and the politicians, there appeared to be one

other person present who seemed to stand out. It was a lone, white Caitian who appeared to be wearing a simple, white robe that virtually blended in with his fur. Unlike the other guests, he wore no mask. Dangling around his neck appeared to be a golden pendant in the shape of a tree. The significance of this was lost on Merete, so she tapped Krashtallah on the closest part of him she could reach, his tail, to get his attention.

The Commander craned his neck past Susanna and gazed into the Doctor's eyes. His flexibility often amazed her. She pointed off in the direction of the white individual. "Who's that, and what's that around his neck?"

Krashtallah followed her finger and found himself staring at the male. The hackles on his neck stood on end as his eyes narrowed in disgust. The tension that rippled through his body was easily felt by Susanna, who turned from talking to Sarda to focus on him. "What is it?" she asked, worried and a little fearful. She looked off in the same direction as he, trying to find what was bothering him.

It was only through sheer force of will that Crash refrained from growling. He averted his gaze and did his best to control his feelings. He turned and regarded his new love. "Susanna, over there is a male who did his best to make me, and others like me, feel like we were nothing. That we were inherently evil because we were black." He drew a deep breath to calm his nerves. "He and his fellow "priests" made my childhood a misery." He took a

moment for himself, closed his eyes, then opened them again with a small smile on his lips. He put all the love and feeling he could into one look and gave it to Susanna. "But I'm not going to let him take any more of my joy from me. There's a lot more to life than sad little people like him and I'm not going to give him any more power over me."

"Well said, Shrallal," said Amantallah with a cheering smile. "Don't let him get to you."

Crash looked back at his sister fondly. "I won't." But try as he might, for the rest of the evening, he couldn't help but cast the occasional glance in the priest's direction.

While Merete had part of her answer, she still wanted more information. Because of the Commander's obvious sensitivity, she turned to Manny and asked her the priest's identity.

The security specialist managed to indicate the priest without actually doing so. "His name is Zif, and he's the high priest of the Teacher's Way."

The Doctor frowned. "Not much of a name, is it?"

Manny arched her whiskers forward in amusement. "I'd agree with you on that one, Doc." She slipped around Scanner, who was watching the live music and acrobatics with open amazement, and sidled up to Merete, going shoulder to shoulder so they could speak privately. She gave the priest a very quick glance to see if they were being observed, then extended that look around the room. No-one was looking at them or glanced away as if caught.

Very quietly, Manny said: “If you become a priest, you give up your clan affiliation, so that part of your name is dropped. Once you've done that and taken the oaths, you get to wear the white robe and wear the Tree of Destiny.”

For a moment, Merete missed the thought, then got it. “The pendant is the “Tree of Destiny”,” she said, confirming her suspicion.

Manny nodded slightly. “If we're going to save this world, we're going to have to get their help,” she said with all the hope of a man on his way to the guillotine.

Merete clenched her teeth in frustration. “How do we do that if *they're* the problem?”

Manny shrugged in resignation. “I have no idea. We're hoping that we can find out what the priest's holy book says. It might help us.”

The Doctor chuckled. Piper had told her this part. “I'll keep my eyes open for someone who might be able to help us,” she said with mock seriousness.

The entertainment went on for some time before the King gave a simple wave and the acrobatics ended. The musicians remained, much to the humans' disappointment. The female lead singer's voice was akin to listening to one running their fingers down a blackboard repeatedly. At least for the time being, they kept silent.

The King stood, and protocol demanded everyone else in the room do likewise. Susanna and Krashtallah

simply kept the babies behind them on the floor, entwined in their tails.

“Friends and honoured guests, I want to thank you all for coming this evening to welcome our new friends from Starfleet: Captain Piper and her First Officer, Commander Sarda.” He indicated them with a flourish. The audience gave them a polite applause. “We also welcome the Federation's Ambassador, Susanna Carra.” The King did likewise, and once more, there was polite applause, accompanied by the odd chuckle.

He stepped forward and put his hand on Crash's shoulder. “I especially welcome home our brother, Commander Krashtallah of the Llash clan, whose bravery in the face of the terrorists this day will be remembered and honoured.”

To Crash's amazement, the Queen stepped forward behind her husband and passed him a small case. The King received it from her with his usual grace, then opened it and extracted a large pendant.

The King continued. “Krashtallah, you acted bravely in the face of the terrorists who not only held captive some of your countrymen, but also some of your friends and their children. In honour of your bravery, we award you the Golden Claw.” He reached up and placed the pendant around Crash's neck. “Wear it with pride, my friend.”

Dumbstruck, Crash could only stare and mumble a faint “Thank you” before he felt the King's arm around his

shoulders grab him and steer him towards the waiting cameras. Beside him, his fellow crewmates applauded his good fortune, their broad smiles cheering him on.

Behind him, Susanna cast a glance at the Queen, who had returned to her cushion and was applauding politely, but that was all. She wondered what was really going on here, and out of the corner of her eye she noticed Piper had that look in her eye that said the same thing.

Once the presentation was over, the music restarted, much to the dismay of the humanoids, and the crowd broke up and mingled. Piper singled out the Minister for Transportation for a discussion. She did her best to say hello and shake the hands and paws of those who managed to catch her eye as she slowly made her way over to him.

Feigning ignorance, she introduced herself. "Good evening, I'm Captain Piper. And you are?"

The tawny Caitian in the flowing green robes with a mask to match, and whose clothes were adorned with symbols Piper could only guess at, drew himself up pompously, lowered his mask, and smiled. To Piper's eyes, he seemed to be looking at her as one would peruse their latest meal. His voice came out in a tenor, which surprised her. "Greetings, Captain Piper. Welcome to Cait. I am Minister Gruntallah. I'm sure you're finding everything to be as perfect as our reputation."

As a Starfleet Captain, one of the things you had to learn was to keep your thoughts and feelings to yourself

and not let them show. She was stunned and shocked on several levels. Her first reaction was surprise that she was talking with Crash's brother. The second reaction was dismay that he was going to play the game. His reference to Cait's reputation demonstrated clearly he was hiding something. So as not to appear a dunce, she put on a face of mild surprise. "You're Commander Krashtallah's brother!"

Gruntallah did his best to hide his reaction, but he was not as good a poker player as Piper. The knowledge put him on edge, as if he would rather it be kept quiet. Which was not something that was going to happen in this place, Piper mused.

The Minister did his best to remain smooth and gracious. "I am, indeed. My brother brought much honour to our clan today."

The inferred "for a change" was not missed by the Captain.

"As did your sister, Minister. Lieutenant Amantallah is my Security Chief. The two of them worked together to free the hostages." Piper watched him for his reaction. For a moment, she wasn't sure he was revolted, annoyed, surprised, or what. All of these impulses warred for dominance. Still, he quickly hid behind his politician's mask once more.

"I'm sure she did, Captain. My sister is a very capable female. She honours us with her life of service to

the Federation.” His tone was even, but the familial pride was there.

His embellishment also told Piper who he favoured. Still, she had what she needed on that subject. She went off on a tangent. “Your world is very beautifully maintained, Minister. Being as ecologically minded as you are, it must be tough to keep up with the energy requirements of a growing population.”

Being the Minister for Energy and Transport, Gruntallash was suddenly in his element. “We do quite well, Captain. We use orbital solar collectors to beam energy to the surface. At a few places, we harness geothermal energy cleanly from underwater hydro vents. We also collect energy from underwater current turbines in our oceans, as well as hydroelectricity from our rivers.”

Piper could quickly do the math in her head and just as quickly came up short. “I notice you don’t have a lot of arable land for farming, and, given your people’s preference for meat, you must replicate a lot for food. That would put an enormous drain on your energy reserves. Have you got any antimatter reactors online to make up the difference?”

The question seemed to unsettle the Caitian, that was sure. He was a smooth operator, that was certain. Yet the Captain had already learned his tells. She had noticed he had started shifting on his feet, ever so slightly. “We are building some at present, Captain,” he said in a good attempt at nonchalance. It was all he volunteered.

Piper was not about to let him off the hook. "I was under the impression that Cait was not big on dilithium reserves."

The Minister suddenly looked like he'd swallowed a carrot rather than a sirloin. He desperately cast his eyes and ears about and made as if someone had called to him. "I apologise, Captain, I must leave you now." He started moving away. "Perhaps we can talk again some other time," he said over his shoulder as he disappeared into the crowd.

Piper watched him go. "I wouldn't bet on it," she muttered.

Elsewhere, Amantallah had found herself alone, yet never far from the Captain. Scanner had bumped into a fellow engineer, and their jargon had quickly gone over her head. After a moment, he had given her a sympathetic look, and she took this as her leave to go and find someone more interesting to talk to.

As she mingled with the crowd, she found their sights and scents interesting. She recognised people from a number of different clans more from their smells than from their appearance. There was one in the air that seemed strangely familiar, but she couldn't nail it down. However, given that she seemed to be a male magnet for her species, she didn't engage anyone in conversation. She had no time or patience for politicians, so she avoided them. They made her skin crawl.

Her ever present need to protect her Captain and crew kept her close to the centre of their group so she could observe them. Even given the great lengths the King had gone to make this event safe and secure, she was one to realise just how much an illusion security was. One photon torpedo beamed into this room would give everyone a *very* bad night.

“I trust you’re having a good evening.” The voice was unexpected, and it took Amantallash a second to realise it had been addressing *her*. She turned her head to the right and found herself face to face with her world’s top cleric. It wasn’t often she found herself talking to another white Cait, and twice in one day was a bit of a record for her. The old feelings of camaraderie for a fellow white Cait surfaced for a fleeting second until she remembered what this being stood for. Given his reputation on their world as the number one black Cait persecutor, she had to resist the impulse to slap him. Above all, she was a Starfleet officer. She decided to simply hide behind her mask and mirror everybody else’s air of aloofness.

“I am, thank you.” Her words came out almost in monotone, leaving Zif wondering what she was thinking.

He smiled amiably. “I don’t know if you’re aware, but apart from you and the Queen, there are only a handful of other white Caits who haven’t entered the priesthood. I was thinking of enquiring why you had chosen not to. I have it on good authority your father expressed that

desire.” Zif gestured towards a door that led to a balcony overlooking the city.

As repelled by Zif as she was, Amantallah found herself curious as to his intentions. She gave a quick glance to check on her crewmembers and to make sure they would not be out of her line of sight then allowed herself to be escorted by him through the crowd. Once out in the cool of the night air, the priest leaned on the balcony railing and relaxed. Amantallah remained by the door, almost casually leaning against the doorpost. From this vantage point, she could see the crowd and still carry on a conversation with Zif if that was his desire. It certainly wasn't hers.

With as friendly an air as he could muster, Zif said: “If I may, you never answered my question.”

Amantallah thought back to her youth, remembering her father's less than subtle hints that she join the priesthood as had the majority of other white Caits. And yet, for all her trust and belief in the Teacher's ways, she could not even imagine herself wearing the robes and following their ritualistic lifestyles. Succinctly, she said: “It wasn't for me.”

As if reading her mind, he said: “You're not the sort to dust your knees in prayer, are you?”

“No.”

“Because?”

Manny narrowed her eyes in annoyance. She did not like opening up to strangers, let alone one who

undoubtedly had an ulterior motive. “I am a female of action, not of hypocrisy.”

Zif stiffened a little at that. “Nobody’s perfect, Amantallah. You should know that.”

Before she could say another word, they were joined by an unexpected guest. A male Cait wearing long, green robes materialised out of the crowd and stood before Amantallah with a smile. “I see you’ve met High Priest Zif, Shrallah,” he said as he took off his mask with a flourish.

Stunned, it took Amantallah a moment to recognise her brother. “Gruntallah!” she cried with joy. “It has been too long!” Without preamble, she stepped forward and gave him a huge hug.

Hugs are not the Caitian way, and Gruntallah was unsure how to accept the gesture at first, then decided to throw caution to the wind and return the embrace. He found it nice. “I see you’ve been absorbing some of the human’s traits,” he commented.

Manny let go and stepped back. “They have their charms,” she said impishly.

Gruntallah turned and took in the priest. “And you, High Priest Zif. Do you think we have much to learn from the offworlders?” His tone was casual.

Straightening up, the priest said in an offhand manner: “They have their uses.”

Curiously, Manny found herself defending the Federation in a place where she shouldn’t have to. “We

can learn a lot from them," she said firmly. "For one thing, free acceptance of one another without shame."

The priest tipped his head to one side, considering. "We already do that," he said after a pause.

Gruntallash headed off any further comment from his sister. "Speaking of acceptance..." He turned his gaze on Manny. "I was wondering if you were reconsidering whether you really wanted to serve in Starfleet." His gaze turned out to the city and he opened his arms as if he could embrace the entire globe. "You could give us so much more than you could ever give *Starfleet*." The word came out with disdain. He noticed Manny was about to speak, but he held up a finger. "I'm not finished yet. I know you don't want to become part of the priesthood, and that's fair enough. And we don't need anyone else from our clan serving in the government. We're already solidifying our power base there..." He continued as if laying out his grand plan for the Llash clan. "There is one thing you could do for our people, however." He looked over at Zif. "A union between the Llash clan and the priesthood by way of marriage – now that would be prestigious. You could be the mother of generations of white Llash kittens."

Amantallash almost found herself dizzy at the notions and thoughts that came to her. It took her a moment to find her bearings, but when she did, Gruntallash found himself taking an involuntary step backward as she levelled a disgusted glare at her younger sibling. "You demean me and all I have ever done for our world with this

gibberish. You can't even *begin* to understand the things we – your *brother* Krashtallah – and I have done for our world by serving in Starfleet. And to suggest a marriage with *that hatemonger*,” she was literally seething at this point. “I would rather take a dip in an acid bath than lay a *finger* on him, let alone let him father my children.” She turned to leave, then gave them one last salvo. “Besides, I have already chosen my mate. And I am happy with my choice. Very, *very*, happy.” With that said, she turned her back on them and melted back into the party.

Gruntallah watched her go with a sad eye. Zif joined him at his side and laid a hand on his shoulder. “It was good of you to try,” he said in an attempt to placate him.

“I had to,” Gruntallah said with a sigh. “Still, it won’t change anything in the long run. We go forward.”

The priest nodded absently, his mind elsewhere. “Yes, we go forward,” he breathed.

As the evening progressed, Scanner began to wonder what became of his lady. For a while there, she seemed to have disappeared, which was very much out of character for her. He knew just how deeply she took her commitment to her job. He moved through the crowd, politely putting off requests for conversation from a number of individuals whilst he searched for his white kitten. “Now, where did you get to?” he said in his southern American drawl. After a couple of minutes, he

was beginning to worry and fear the worst. Through the crowd, he glimpsed a white form in a sea of tawny and headed in that direction. "Hey!" he yelled. "Where'd y'all get to?"

The white head turned, but it was not his beloved. And the look was definitely not friendly. "I fear you have me mistaken for someone else," he said, as if addressing an errant child.

Scanner had neither time nor patience for pretenders. "That's as plain as the nose on *your* face, sunshine," he said, irritated. "I'm looking Lieutenant Amantallah. We can't find her."

The parsimonious being before him continued in his arrogance. "Perhaps she's better off without you," he said dismissively.

Lieutenant Commander Judd Sandage was not the least bit impressed by the person before him with his long white robe and pretty tree on a rope. He took the mask off his face so his nemesis could see the anger in his eyes. "Listen to me, you pathetic excuse for a sentient being. I am looking for a member of Starfleet, not some floozy from your backwater little planet. Now, where can I find Amantallah?"

Zif's eyes widened in surprise at Scanner's display. He had not had much experience with offworlders, and he had not thought them capable of such passion. He tipped his head in apology and pointed off towards the windows. "I believe I saw her on that balcony a few minutes ago."

Scanner's feelings cooled as he spied Manny's form through the door. "Thank y'all," he said, then disappeared in her direction.

Zif watched him go and considered.

Amantallah started when she heard the doors close behind her. She relaxed a little when she smelled Scanner's scent. She turned towards him, grateful for his presence. "What's the matter?" he asked.

Reading his body language, she responded: "I could ask you the same question."

He grinned sheepishly. "I guess I was worried about you. With all the trouble we've seen today, I just wanted to make sure you were all right." He touched her cheek. "You disappeared for a while there, and that's not what you do."

Manny looked down, feeling a little shamed. "I'm sorry, carra. I was feeling a little unsettled and I felt I needed some time to myself." She stepped forward into his embrace and searched his eyes. "I just had a very weird meeting with my brother, Gruntallah, and Zif, the High Priest."

Scanner started. "Gruntallah is here?" He looked back through the window into the crowd. "What's he look like?"

Amantallah growled. "A pain in the ass, as you would put it," she said angrily.

Rather than pull away, Scanner hugged her tighter. "Family, you can't live with them. You can't kill them," he said with more than a touch of irony. "We come lightyears to get here, and find your brother's joined the dark side."

His beloved collapsed a little in his arms. "I just don't know how I'm going to get through all this," she said. She pulled back partially so she could see his eyes. "I can't lie to you, Scanner. I don't think my family will welcome you at all." She shook her head. "More likely, my parents will reject you completely."

Scanner turned up the corner of his mouth and shrugged. "Sweetheart, I didn't come into this relationship with my eyes closed. I've always known it's a possibility. I just want you to know that it's *you* I'm marrying, not your family. If they don't welcome me into their home, that's okay with me because I still get you. Maybe one day they'll learn to accept me, maybe they won't. That doesn't matter to me so much as how it'll effect *you*. I don't want to be the cause of your being rejected by your kinfolk." He had to say it, even though it could lead somewhere unpleasant for both of them.

Manny sighed, torn. She didn't want to face the next few days, but there was no way out of it. She *had* made her choice, and she was going to wear the repercussions of it. This man, this *human male*, had captured her heart and there was no other choice in the matter. She would see it through with him, one way or the other. "I'm sorry, carra." She sucked in a breath through her teeth that was difficult

as her tight chest hurt. “I love you so much, Scanner,” she said, nuzzling his cheek. “And I can’t wait to become your wife. I’m just worried about the “stuff” we’re going to go through in the next few days.”

He gave her a quick squeeze. “Sweetheart, I don’t care if we get married here, or even if Piper does it in orbit. I just want to get married.” His words were heartfelt and earnest.

Amantallash was tempted to run off and get married right there and then, but she had to give her family a chance to do the right thing. She lovingly licked his cheek, making him laugh. He found it ticklish. “The sooner, the better, carra,” she said.

Inside, Piper had managed to buttonhole Prime Minister Cardtasharp. He was small for a Cait, but despite his size, he was very shrewd. The two of them sized each other up quickly. He was wary of her for some reason, of that Piper was sure.

“Prime Minister, I’m so glad for the opportunity to speak with you.” Piper wore as friendly a smile as she could, and did her best to sound disarming and congenial. She kept her bearing as unthreatening as possible.

Cardtasharp wasn’t buying any of it. Unlike Piper, his stance was purely defensive. “You intend plying me with questions on the subject that brought you here? Would you rather not do that later, in my office, under an official capacity, rather than at the King’s banquet?”

Piper gave one of her trademark cheeky grins. "I would, but your secretary has us scheduled for a meeting later in the week. I don't have that much time. And besides, the matter is far too pressing to be left that long."

The Prime Minister made as if to leave, but found himself unceremoniously blocked by Susanna and Krashtallah, who chose that moment to join the Captain. Walled in, he had nowhere to go. And besides, the Ambassador was not going to miss the opportunity to speak. "Prime Minister, I am glad we have this moment. I wanted to voice my dismay that your government is stalling our talks, or do I have my whiskers tangled?"

Cornered, he had to say something. "Perhaps I can have our appointment moved up on my schedule." It sounded weak, even in his own ears.

Piper chimed in. "There's no time like the present, sir. Are you aware of the circumstances behind our visit to your world?"

Bluff seemed to be the call of the day, and Cardtasharp didn't disappoint. "I gathered it was a friendly visit. Nothing more." His poker face was impressive.

The Captain considered her position and decided to try another tack. She was encountering subterfuge and evasion everywhere she turned, so it was time to try something else. "The *Millennium*'s here to help you with your energy resources problem. It seems your passive energy collection programs aren't keeping up with demand,

and so Starfleet dispatched us to help you bring some antimatter power plants online.”

The Prime Minister almost flinched. This was *not* what he had expected, not at all. Still, he didn't trust the Captain, but neither was he going to look a gift horse in the mouth. His mood lifted markedly. “Starfleet is well informed, Captain. We are facing something of an energy crisis, yet I have it on good report that a solution is forthcoming.”

Piper's brow shot up. She didn't know how they were going to pull that off without dilithium. “As Starfleet has extensive experience in antimatter reactors, we would be happy to advise.”

All the while, Susanna watched the conversation with wonder. What was Piper up to? Did she have secret orders of her own she was not aware of? She knew the Captain was well aware of their *real* reason for being there. She determined to talk to Piper at the first opportunity. With that decided, she tuned back in.

“...assistance you could offer would be appreciated. I will take it up with Minister Gruntallash at his first convenience.” With a quick shake of Piper's hand, he turned and made his way to somewhere the Federation representatives *weren't*.

The three remaining watched him go. They noted that the music was winding down and servants were beginning to clean up. “We need to say goodnight to the

King and get going," Piper said quietly. "I can't imagine there's much more we can achieve here tonight."

Krashtallah peered at the Captain curiously. "What *have* we achieved?"

Piper sighed. "We've discovered that they're going to fight us every step of the way." She looked out over the dwindling crowd. "We're going to have to save this lot in spite of themselves."

Chapter Seven

The next day, Piper assembled her team in the Captain's Ready Room. While she waited for them to arrive, she spent her time nursing a glass of apple juice whilst staring out the viewport at the world revolving below. It seemed so lush and beautiful, but on some level she was aware that a dark cloud was covering it. It had a disease and they had to find the cure before it was too late.

Behind her, the door opened and the last two members of her group entered. She watched them in the reflection of the window as they made their way over to the couch. Manny and Scanner had been behaving like lovesick teenagers since their return from the King's Palace the night before, and she was beginning to wonder how long it was going to last. On one hand, she envied them the "in love" feelings they shared. Their previous declaration of their engagement had heightened their feelings, as it was clear they wanted a short engagement.

However, the Captain was growing more concerned that their feelings might cloud their judgement in a time when she needed them badly. The task at hand would require their special talents, not to mention their individual traits.

And it wasn't just them that had her concerned. She glanced at the door reflection as she heard it slide open to allow Krashtallah and Susanna into the room. She sighed.

This pair were showing every bit of being in love with each other as Manny and Scanner. And these were her core group!

She gave them a chance to get settled, then turned and addressed them. Aside from the two couples and herself, she had asked Sarda and Merete along as well. She always found their insights invaluable.

“I’m glad you all made it this morning,” she said, only half joking. “Before we get into discussing tactics, I wanted to show you something I found last night.” She stepped over to her desk and tapped a button. On the wall opposite where the crew were seated, a holographic screen appeared. It immediately began playback of a video program that had obviously been recorded before the King’s reception. After a moment of music and credits, Zif appeared behind a lectern and began a sermon on peace and loving one’s neighbour.

Piper spoke up. “He starts out harmless enough. He tells everyone how loving and respectful we should be towards one another. He goes on like this for about five minutes.” She spoke up for the computer. “Computer, forward playback to five minutes, forty seconds.” The screen froze for a fraction of a second then continued from the requested point. Zif’s gesticulating was becoming more pronounced the further he got into his message, and his volume had increased to match.

“HOWEVER, the peace and serenity that we enjoy on our God-given world is still threatened by those who

would subvert it! From birth, the enemies of our Teacher demonstrate their utter untrustworthiness and willingness to indulge in all kinds of evil. Two thousand years ago, the Blacks killed our Teacher, and today they continue to undermine our way of life!" At this point, he leaned forward over his lectern and stared into the camera. His voice dropped and his tone conveyed anything but love. "When they come to take them, let them go! Only then shall we be free of their scourge!"

At this point, Piper tapped another button and the picture froze. The image looked like a Caitian version of the devil himself. "It would seem the priesthood is advocating the removal from society of every last black Cait." She said it in a monotone, betraying her absolute loathing for this kind of talk.

Amantallah shuddered. "Zif gives me the shivers, Captain. I spoke to him last night, and he tried to invite me to the priesthood again." She paused, visibly upset. "And when that failed, he used our brother to try to convince me to marry him!" If the pure white Caitian could have turned green, she would have looked like an animated artichoke at that moment.

Scanner took her paw in his hand and gave it a gentle squeeze. "Don't worry about that creep, sugar. He'll never lay a hand on you."

Until this moment, Krashtallah had not realised what had happened out on the balcony. He blinked several times, trying to assimilate what he had heard. In the end,

all he could do was blurt out: “Shrallah! I can't believe he did that to you!”

The hackles on Amantallash's neck rose in anger. She turned and vented at Crash. “Yes, brother, he did that to me. He was trying to create ties between our clan and the priesthood! As if being in Parliament isn't enough for him!”

Sarda, sitting off to the side and observing as he often did, dispassionately commented: “It sounds as if he is trying to create a dynasty for your clan.”

“Sorry?” Merete was unfamiliar with the notion. Her world of Altair Four was run democratically and had done so for all it's recorded history.

The Vulcan steepled his fingers in the same manner as his Captain. She had picked the habit up from him. “In cultures that involve the notion of an elite, there are often families that try to cement their powerbase with a view to it continuing to grow *generationally*. I suspect that is what Gruntallash is trying to do here.”

Susanna's eyes went wide as her jaw slackened. “Do you think he wants to overthrow the King?”

Piper waved a dismissive hand. “Maybe, but I'm inclined to disagree. The people I met last night are rulers of their own little fiefdoms, and, as we've learned, the King has no real power. It would take a simple act of Parliament to overturn the decree he signed yesterday.”

Amantallash threw her hands up in the air in frustration. “Then what is he up to?”

The Captain gave Manny a wan smile. "That is just one of the many questions we need to answer."

"We'll probably find out tonight." Several sets of eyes alighted on Krashtallah. He cast his gaze around and stated: "It is our duty to pay a visit to our family while here. I was going to tell you later, Shrallal, Captain, but now is as good a time as any. I called our mother last night and she invited us to evening meal with the family tonight. Mother seemed delighted at the notion that the entire clan will be able to attend. *Including* Gruntallah."

There was a moment's silence as the notion was considered. Piper broke it with: "It's a golden opportunity to pump him for information." She was about to continue when she noticed the look in her security chief's eyes. "I take it you're not exactly looking forward to it either, Lieutenant."

Caught out, Manny just grinned sheepishly.

"Guess who's coming to dinner," Scanner quoted, letting the irony come out in his voice.

Merete was the first to put two-and-two together. "Oh! You're bringing your boyfriend home for the first time!" she said with delight.

The notion was lost on the Captain and Sarda. Neither of them had had to endure the humiliation of that first evening meeting your significant other's parents. They looked at each other and shrugged in ignorance.

Krashtallah spoke up in remembrance. "It's not the first time you've brought home a suitor, sister. I seem to

remember a whole line of different males you brought home at one time or another when we were still in school."

Manny cuffed her brother soundly. If it had been a human head, Crash would have been knocked unconscious. To the Cait, it was playful reproof. "That was another time and I was still barely more than a kitten." She thought back. "Besides, all they really cared about was the fact they were courting a white kit. I could have had the personality of a mushroom and they would have still been delirious."

Scanner scratched Manny behind her ear. "At least you know I only want you for your fur," he said with a laugh.

The crew shared the merriment. Their pairing was a little unusual, but the love they had for each other was genuine enough for the greatest sceptic to lose their doubts.

Piper brought the meeting back on track. "Okay, people. I was thinking we need to split into pairs to do some good old-fashioned detective work." She turned her attention to Crash. "I want you and the Ambassador to make some enquiries with some of the families of those who have vanished. Start with our missing letter writer's family."

The couple shared a look and Piper took a moment to consider Susanna. Her fur would be a little obvious to the Cait that she was an offworlder. "Ambassador," she said to get her attention. "I would suggest you find something to wear that would make you a little less conspicuous.

Yes, you're feline, but there still aren't many rainbow coloured fluff-balls on Cait. You couldn't be more obvious if you had a neon sign hovering over your head announcing your heritage." Piper made it clear she meant no disrespect, and none was taken. She turned to her third officer and gave him a half-hearted grin. "Crash, I can only hope your newfound fame will make you a little more popular with the people."

Both Krashtallah and Susanna acknowledged their assignment with a nod, so Piper turned her attention to Manny. "Lieutenant, I want you and Scanner to mirror Crash's task. Start at the other end and see what you can find." Once more, their tasks were accepted with a simple nod and a "Yes, Captain."

Surprised, Merete found herself the target of Piper's gaze. "Merete, I have a different task for you," she said, all business.

The Doctor sat up straight in her seat and listened. "Yes, Captain?"

With a chuckle, the Captain sat back in her chair and looked at the ceiling, then turned her gaze back to her friend. There seemed to be a lot of irony going around at the time. "It seems Crash isn't the only one who's a bit of a celebrity after yesterday. I've been contacted by News Prime in the capital, and they want an interview with you. Somehow, they found out you were the one who organised the hostages. Anyhow, I thought it might be a good opportunity for you to see if you can find out what the

news media *really* knows about the disappearances. It's possible they're not reporting anything because they've been gagged. See what you can find out from their people while you're there." She thought for a second, then added: "Take Jenny with you. She can help you with the kids."

Merete gave the Captain a smile through clenched teeth. Dealing with the media was not her forte. "Anything for the cause," she said, with all the enthusiasm of one handling a dead rodent.

Piper paused at this moment, then continued handing out assignments. "Sarda." The Vulcan caught her gaze. "I want you to go down to the main temple for the Teacher's Way. See what you can find out that can help us get a copy of their holy books. And if you bump into Zif, you have my personal permission to nerve pinch him into the afterlife." Her comment brought a dark chuckle from some. "Take Mister Nunn as an escort. He's due for an away mission, and his enthusiasm could be used to your advantage."

Sarda gave her a look that begged the question: "What? Why me?" but let it go. Her found the young officer's effervescent personality almost painful. "Acknowledged, Captain," he said solemnly.

Pushing back a lock of errant blonde hair, Piper said: "I want everyone to keep an eye out for their partners. You are not to take any chances down there. I'll be remaining on board to start organising our smoke screen – fixing

Cait's energy crisis." She quickly stood and broke up the meeting. "Hop to it people! Daylight's a'wasting!"

On the surface of Cait once more, Krashtallah took a moment to get his bearings. Most locals found their homes by scent, but for the unfamiliar this was not helpful. Also, as there were no real *streets* per sé, one couldn't simply follow the numbers. In the modern, technological age, the need for mail had become redundant, and most homes had their own replicators, so they had no need to go out to shop. Given all this, the Cait were a very social people, so there were many who simply did not stay at home and spent most of their time, outside of work hours, socialising.

To help him, Crash took out his tricorder, dialled up its GPS system, and quickly located the dwelling they were targeting. As he did so, he was reminded of the datapadd Ensign Carver had given him shortly before beamdown. To help, he carried a simple bag he had slung over his shoulder. He replaced the tricorder in it, rummaged around for a moment, took out the datapadd, and sat down on a convenient tree root to read its contents. "I'll just be a moment," he told Susanna.

As he did so, his companion took a moment to breathe in the wonderfully clean air of Cait. As the small amounts of CO² produced were easily gobbled up the massive number of trees, the air remained remarkably pure. The smell of peat and decaying bark was present, yet pleasant. It was rare that Susanna got to enjoy such

delights, as her job description kept her either en route in a Starship, or indoors working on treaties between often hostile factions.

A thought occurred to her. "My dear, what do Caits do with their rubbish?"

Crash looked up absently and said: "Foodstuffs are often composted, everything else is recycled."

Susanna gave him a peculiar look. "Everything?"

He gave her a knowing smile. "Yes, even effluent is recycled. Nothing is left to waste." With that said, he turned back to the padd and was quickly engrossed. The more he read, the more the hair on his head stood on end.

Brushing aside her long, effervescent cloak of many colours – her idea of incognito – she stepped over to Crash and looked over his shoulder. "What is it?" she asked.

He stopped reading and looked up at Susanna, concern on his face. "Ensign Carver gave this to me just before we beamed down. The library computer kept searching for me on any information regarding the Teacher's scriptures, and came up empty in the ship's files, and *locally*. So, it connected to Memory Alpha and searched there. It found no copies of the scriptures for us to read or translate, but it did find the report made by an archaeologist, one Harry Jones Jr, who found that the belief system mirrored closely with that of Earth's Christianity. However, it found that, even though there was clear evidence that the religion has continued for at least a millennia, he couldn't find a single Cait who would even

show him a copy of the scriptures. He adds that there are a number of reliquaries, including one of the spikes that killed the Teacher, on display, but a detailed analysis of any of them was denied. His report concluded that, while there were positive elements of the religion, it could not be verified that it was anything more than an elaborate hoax perpetrated on the people of Cait. He concludes that he believes there aren't *any scriptures at all!*" The notion that his people believed in a completely false religion rattled him.

Susanna didn't say anything for a moment. She simply ran her paws through his tidy mane, soothing him. "You certainly didn't expect this when you came home, did you, my dear?"

For a moment, Crash felt the weight of this new knowledge. The longer he remained on his homeworld, the more he was discovering that the ideas and precepts he had grown up with were false. He realised then just how much he had changed in the time he had been away from Cait, how the ideas of the Federation had not only infected him, but also how he had embraced them. The Vulcan notion of Infinite Diversity in Infinite Combinations suggested that all sentience should be respected, and yet his own people still discriminated on very basic levels. It was time for his people to grow up, he thought.

Emboldened, Krashtallah looked skyward, his eyes fixed ahead to a different future. It was going to take some doing, but it was possible. "I'm going to upload this

information to Commander Sarda's padd. He could definitely use it." He made the necessary adjustments to transmit, then stood up. "Let's go," he said with newfound strength. He put his arm around Susanna and started walking, relishing the feeling of having her by his side. He suddenly felt as if he could do anything as long as he had her. The whole idea was new to him, and he found it hard not to get swept up in it. Yet, he found the feelings gave him a strength he had never known or truly understood before.

Beside him, Susanna Carra, Ambassador for the Federation, suddenly began wondering what her future would hold. She was falling, *no, had* fallen for Krashtallah, and a future without him now seemed impossible. And yet, how was she to make her career continue if she was tied to a Starfleet officer? She was not about to even suggest he leave the organisation he loved and was making a difference in. She had taken the liberty of looking up his record – being an Ambassador did have its perks – and found it to be a distinguished one indeed. His contribution had undoubtedly saved the lives of many, and so she couldn't imagine even trying to talk him out of serving in the fleet. His devotion to duty had been recorded a number of times, and Piper had recommended him for citation after citation. His rise to third in command of the fleet's flagship was virtually meteoric, and there was no way she was going to stop him from being all that he

could be. Where that left her, she was uncertain. But for today, she knew her place was by his side.

Within moments, Crash unerringly led them to the entrance to an underground dwelling. Its door was cleverly disguised in the side of a tree trunk, and blended in nicely. They both cast their eyes about for a knob, a button, anything to somehow make their presence known, but came up empty.

Crash shrugged. “I suppose we'll have to do it the old fashioned way.” He leaned forward and knocked.

While they waited, they looked about them for activity, and Crash found it strangely quiet. Most neighbourhoods were relatively busy with kittens playing and mothers chatting. For a modern world, Cait was still very patriarchal, and the males did most of the providing for the family, whilst the females took care of their home and socialising.

Susanna noticed his frown and asked: “What?”

He shook his head. “I'm probably just imagining it, but it's very quiet for this time of day.”

His companion cast her eyes about and suggested: “Perhaps it's just the neighbourhood.”

“No,” he affirmed. “For *anywhere*.”

Before they could continue their conversation, the door opened a crack and a curious eye, surrounded by tawny fur, looked out. “Who is it?” a female voice asked.

So much for Caitian hospitality, Crash thought. He remembered a time when every door was thrown open

wide and strangers were always welcome. Doors were just a way to keep the rain out. Crash gave Susanna a look to tell her she should take the lead.

Putting on her most charming persona, Susanna said: "Hello, my name is Susanna Carra and I'm here on behalf of the Federation. We were led to believe that a young male kit, Drallah, was taken from here recently against his will. Do you know anything about it?"

One thing was clear about the female behind the door – she was terribly conflicted. Crash decided to take the decision out of her hands. "It's such a beautiful day, isn't it? I'm quite thirsty and I know my partner could use some refreshment as well."

As if some secret switch had been thrown, the female opened the door wide and ushered them in. The wooden interior was much like many others on Cait, brightly decorated, yet Crash could tell this was a poorer family. For one, their home was subterranean. Those well off lived in tree houses. Also, the living area was relatively small, definitely smaller than Crash remembered in his own family home.

"Please, make yourselves comfortable. I will bring you some water." The lady of the house offered them two of the three cushions available, the larger two, and then disappeared into a side room to prepare their refreshments.

Susanna sat on her hind quarters and gave Crash a curious look. "How did you do that?"

He gave her a slightly guilty look as he settled onto his own cushion. “It is one of our cultural quirks that you *never* turn away one who needs food or drink. Not even an enemy. It was one of the things we learned from the Teacher. You can’t overcome a thousand year’s tradition so easily.”

“Hmmm.” She thought for a second, then said: “Real or not, the Teacher did give you some good guidelines for living.”

Crash took solace from that thought. “Yes, he did,” he said quietly.

Their host returned and graciously placed bowls before them to sup from, which they gratefully did. Once satisfied, Crash sat back and gave their host a look that nailed her to the spot. “Where is Drallah?”

If one thing was certain, their host was a lousy liar. “I don’t know anybody by that name,” she said, whilst shaking her head vigorously.

Susanna’s eyes widened a little in fright when Crash gave a low growl. “You are Frantapash, and this is your dwelling. You had a lone kitten, Drallah, approximately one year ago, right here in this home. He was black, that’s why his name has no clan affiliation. I gather your husband wouldn’t grant him that right.” He paused only long enough to draw a breath then continued his analysis.

“I notice you’re comfortable with having a black Cait in your home, which is unusual in itself.” His gaze swept the room. “This home is big enough for three. It has three

seats at the meal table, three cushions on the floor. I see down the corridor only two doors. One for you and your husband, and the other for your child.” He stepped over to the smaller cushion and flipped it over. “And this smaller, child-sized cushion is covered with black fur.” He bared his teeth menacingly. “Now, no more lies. *Where is Drallah!?*”

Frantapash backed away from the menacing male, and found she had bumped into Susanna. Startled, she turned and looked and only just now noticed her face in the folds of her cloak. It was not of their world, that was for certain. In her many colours and golden eyes, Frantapash found sympathy.

“I must apologise for my companion,” she said, trying to reach the frightened female. “He sometimes forgets the world isn’t against him.”

Frantapash was torn with indecision for a moment, not sure which way to turn. Crash gave her an out as he let himself down the hallway to find Drallah’s room. Terrified, she turned to Susanna and blurted out: “I didn’t want them to take him! My husband made me do it!”

Something in Susanna’s soul told her it wasn’t entirely true. That there was something she wasn’t telling her. Shrewdly, Susanna asked: “Your husband told you that if you got rid of Drallah, he would sire another kit with you, didn’t he?”

The bald shame so overwhelmed Frantapash that she broke down, curled herself into a ball, and started wailing

with a pain that tore at Susanna's soul. After a minute's tormented bawling, the Ambassador was beginning to wonder if it was going to stop. She wanted to comfort this female, but the notion rebelled against that part of her that was utterly repulsed by a mother who would willingly give up her child for any reason. For the sake of the mission, she put a tender paw on Frantapash's shoulder to soothe her.

Drawn by the noise, Crash appeared at the door and looked in. A look from Susanna told him that she had everything under control, so he returned to his snooping.

Susanna stayed by Frantapash's side and just kept stroking her for at least twenty minutes as she let out her feelings. There was no point in trying to question her at this point, the female was clearly overwhelmed by her emotions and beyond reason. Finally, her keening stopped and she slowly sat up. It seemed a cosmic trial for her to do so. She had no strength left.

“Where is Drallah?” Susanna asked gently.

Frantapash shook her head. Her voice came out in a quiet croak. “I don't know. I was only told he was going to some kind of relocation centre.”

The Ambassador wondered at that a moment. Relocated to *where*? “Who took him?”

The fates were not kind to them. The front door was opened with a bang, and very quickly, Frantapash's husband, Treshtapash, bounded down the stairway,

stopping at its base. He was big for a male, and his tawny fur stood on end, decidedly unfriendly.

“Who are you?” he growled. Without letting Susanna introduce herself, he nailed his wife with a glare, seeing into her soul. “You told them, didn’t you?”

Her fear told him all he needed to know. Without thought he launched himself through the air towards them, claws outstretched. Without anywhere to go, both women cowered in fear, expecting the worst. A black blur from their right caught him in mid-air and the two of them crashed to the floor, furniture flying around them as they rolled around. Both black and tawny fur went flying as claws did their work whilst they grappled for position. The growling and snarling sounded positively primeval. For a moment, Susanna sucked in a breath as it seemed Treshtapash had gained an advantage over Crash as he managed to get on top of him. Remembering his Starfleet training, Crash easily flipped his opponent over his head where he landed heavily on his back, knocking the wind out of him.

Sucking air like a drowning fish, Treshtapash tried to right himself and found himself staring at the business end of a phaser, held by Crash as he stood over him, fury in his eyes. “Give me a reason not to kill you,” Crash said evenly, deadly.

Treshtapash took in Crash’s Starfleet uniform top and figured he had one card to play. “You are Starfleet, you

wouldn't do it." Using surprise, he tried to bat the phaser from Crash's paw.

He wasn't fast enough. Crash shot him cold. His lifeless body slumped to the floor, his tongue slack.

Frantapash wrung her paws in despair. She cried: "You killed him!"

Slowly, Crash settled back on his haunches, being mindful of the places he was bleeding from. He held the phaser casually and turned his gaze to Frantapash. There was nothing friendly in his countenance, and he levelled an angry eye at her. "Your *husband* is a bigoted fool," he spat. "You needn't worry, he'll be back to his hateful self in no time, although he's going to be nursing a tree-sized headache when he wakes up."

He got up, stretched, and headed over to pick up his bag from where he had left it in the hallway. As he did so, Susanna tried one last time to reach Frantapash. "Who took your son?"

The tawny female tore her eyes from her fallen husband. Susanna noted she had made no move to help him. Frantapash then revealed the final horror. "I don't know. They came in the night wearing black robes." She shook her head. "I never saw their faces."

Susanna turned back to Treshtapash. "I suppose *he* made all the arrangements," she said, frustrated.

Frantapash nodded sheepishly then sat back on her haunches, her tail flicking from side to side, as aimless as she was. To Susanna's eyes, she seemed totally lost, and,

try as she might, she felt no real sympathy for her. She looked up, saw Crash was waiting for her by the entrance then joined him as they silently left.

Outside, they walked a short distance, far enough to be out of sight of the Pash residence then found a nice, shaded spot for Crash to tend his wounds. Susanna flipped open her communicator and was about to hail the *Millennium* when Crash laid a gentle paw on hers and closed it. He shook his head. "No need to bother them," he stated quietly.

Susanna watched, curious, as Crash looked about for something. He soon found a small, leafy plant, pulled it up, broke off a section of its large root and then began rubbing it on one of his grazes. He gave her the other portion, and she took this as her cue to rub it on the cuts on his back. She noted, thankfully, that they were mostly superficial. She took the root willingly and settled down behind him as they sat on a small patch of grass. She saw him flinch involuntarily when she touched a sensitive spot, so she tried to avoid the worst of them. Noticing this, Crash guided her paw to them, and got her to tend to every spot.

"What is this root?" she asked, curious.

"My people call it a Lanola root, and it's got wonderful healing and antiseptic properties."

As she rubbed, Susanna asked: "How did you learn about it? I didn't think herbal remedies were part of Starfleet training."

Crash laughed at that. "They're not. You can imagine, I got into a lot of fights when I was a kit. My mother wasn't always available to fix me up, so I had to learn to take care of myself. A kind teacher, Trutatish, a wonderful female, taught me the healing properties of a number of plants. They're fairly easy to find if you know what to look for."

Once done with the more obvious scrapes, Susanna began running her hand over Crash's back and legs, looking for anything she might have missed. He let her do so without concern, grateful for her ministrations. She found a couple, and rubbed the remainder of the root on them. Once done, she sat down next to him and rubbed his neck with her cheek. "Thank you for coming to my rescue," she said, purring.

"You're welcome, my love," he said, so naturally that he missed the impact of *what* he was saying.

Susanna didn't. She stopped him licking his wounds by taking his face in her paws and drawing him to her. "What did you call me?" she asked, surprised by the thumping in her chest.

Stunned, Crash's eyes went wide. "I, uh, ummm." He gulped, then jumped in. "I called you my love, because that's the way I see you, I suppose." He tried to be nonchalant, but the catch in his voice betrayed him.

The smile that came over Susanna's face could have lit up a dead sun. "And you are *my* love, Krashtallah of

the Llash clan.” Always the pragmatic Ambassador, she added: “Now, what are we going to do about it?”

Caught up in the moment, unsure of the future, all Crash could say was: “Let it grow.”

Commander Sarda did indeed find the information Krashtallah had sent him valuable. Unlike Crash, he was unlikely to draw his own conclusions from the data, but it did disturb him. If the Teacher's priesthood had no real scriptural writings then they could simply make it up as they went, and such religions were *very* dangerous.

Not willing to admit he was annoyed by this new information, he took a moment to clear his thoughts and feelings. His state of mind wasn't being helped by his companion. The *Millennium*'s helmsman, Jason Nunn, was having a ball and seemed to be the very epitome of the first-time tourist. The young Australian, with his medium height, Caucasian looks and ever present smile, just stopped before the capitol's temple and gawked.

The building was a rare exception to the rule on Cait of leaving nature alone. A large area had been cleared for it, flattened, then simply grassed over. The overall idea was to draw one's attention to the lone tree – it was obviously quite ancient – growing in the middle of it. It was tall, but also had branches reaching out in all directions that were full of dark green foliage. It wasn't all that different from the rest of the trees about, aside from the fact that it was old – very old.

Behind it was a building that was trying to blend into the landscape, but wasn't quite pulling off the job. It was made of wood, like most other buildings on the planet. Sarda looked at it and seriously wondered if the architect had tried to make it both subtle and over-stated. It stood fifty metres tall, approximately 90 metres long, and twenty metres wide. It had an arched doorway in the centre that was three metres wide, with two doors that met in the middle. Each was opened with a large, brass ring set a little over a metre off the floor. It had a peaked roof, and there appeared to be six large windows on the walls of each of the longer sides. Sarda was certain the details had some special meaning, and the curious part of him begged to find out what it was. Not that he would ever admit that he *had* a curious part.

He took a glance at Jason and knew he would never admit it to *him*. The young man had all the self control of a rabid sehlat. Especially if it came to discovering new objects of interest. The only thing missing right now was Jason taking photographs.

It took a monumental act of self-control when, at that very moment, Jason picked up his tricorder and took a still image of the tree and structure. "Mister Nunn," Sarda said as neutrally as possible, "I would suggest you run some scans of the building, not take photographs for the *Millennium's* recreation deck wall."

The Lieutenant glanced at Sarda, felt in no way chastened, and continued in his abundant enthusiasm.

However, he did make adjustments to the tricorder, and began running a scan of the interior. It took all of five seconds before he turned it over and looked at the bottom, as if it was malfunctioning and the batteries had fallen out of it.

“Are you having a problem, Mister?” Sarda looked at him expectantly.

Jason tried to take another scan, and came up with the same result. “Sir, I get no reading on the temple at all. Could you try with yours?” Whilst fascinated with everything, including the grass, Jason was aware that this was still his first away mission and the last thing he wanted was a black mark on his record.

His fearless leader leaned over his shoulder and checked his readings. “Perhaps you could run a self-diagnostic?” he asked evenly.

Jason tapped the appropriate commands and quickly got the expected result. There was nothing wrong with the device.

Resisting the urge to frown, Sarda took out his own tricorder which he had assembled by hand and ran a scan of his own, and came back as empty as Jason had. Fascinating.

“Did you find something?” Jason was looking up at Sarda a worried look on his face. He was so intent on making a good impression.

Sarda considered the information at hand. There was only one clear explanation for their inability to scan what

was obviously there. Someone was employing a dampening field. He shared this with Jason. The man seemed so happy that he actually sagged with relief.

Sarda looked up at the building, determined. "It would appear we will have to rely on our five senses, Mister Nunn." He started walking towards the temple with long, even strides, and Jason found he had to jog a little to keep up. Within moments, he walked up the stone steps and stood before the doors. Before he could lay a hand on the handle, it opened outward and Sarda found he had to backpedal a little and step to the side to get out of its way. As if he was expecting him, Zif greeted him, by name.

"Commander Sarda, you're right on time." Zif held out his paw, expecting Sarda to take it, unaware of the Vulcan privacies.

Jason Nunn was. He intercepted the paw and shook it firmly with a grin. "Nice to meet you, Mister...."

The priest, a little off balance, turned and gave his version of a smile to Jason. "It's High Priest Zif of the Teacher's Way."

The Lieutenant was not to be outdone. "My, that's quite a mouthful. I'm Lieutenant Jason Nunn of the starship *Millennium*, but my friends just call me Jason. My mates call me Blue."

Zif was unsure if the Lieutenant was making fun of him or serious. "My acolytes call me High Priest, visitors call me Sir," he gave Jason a winning smile, "but you both may call me Zif."

“Thank you, Zif,” Jason continued. He took the Commander's silence as his permission to carry on. “That's quite an honour. I gather you're already acquainted with Commander Sarda.” He indicated Sarda with a simple gesture. Jason poured on his Aussie charm. “You were both at the King's banquet last night, I hear.”

“Yes, we were.” Zif went to speak to Sarda, but Jason caught him.

“We were hoping we could have a look around while we were here. The Federation doesn't know a whole lot about your beliefs, and we thought we'd take care of that oversight while we were in town.”

If there was one way to catch a preacher's attention, it's to draw positive attention to his religion. Zif practically lit up, pushed the door open wide, and gestured for them to follow him inside.

One of the first things that made its impression on the away party's senses was the smell. The highly polished wood fairly shone, yet it still retained a “just cut” smell, even given the centuries. The floor and walls were of the same, polished wood, and even the window frames were of wood.

Another thing Jason noted was the complete absence of chairs. Aside from the image of a tree at one end of the vast room, there was nothing in it save an effigy of the tree out the front and a small podium before it.

As Sarda moved about, he noted how much activity the floor had seen, and it was considerable. It spoke of the

building's great age. As he observed, he kept quiet and let the Lieutenant do the talking.

"This is a lovely building," Jason said, in genuine rapture. "How old is it?"

Zif drew himself up in pride. "It is eight hundred of our years old, Jason. It is the third to have been built here. The first two succumbed to fire over the years, but, fortunately, the Destiny Tree was not harmed."

Jason drew up short. "Is that the tree out the front?" Zif nodded. "What's it's significance?"

The priest had to remind himself that ignorance was simply an opportunity to share and not get annoyed. "The Destiny Tree is the site of our Teacher's death. It is said that he will return here one day to this very spot, so we take care to protect the tree to honour him."

"Fair dinkum?" Jason said. The universal translator didn't know what to make of the Australian idiom, so it simply let the words come out as spoken. "That's awesome!" He looked around him at the windows, which he realised had images impressed in the glass. The images had distorted over the years, but they were still discernible. "Can you tell me what these pictures portray?"

For the next half hour, Zif led Jason from window to window, explaining the history of the Teacher's life on Cait by retelling the stories behind the images. Sarda listened, fascinated, but he only apportioned a part of his mind to that task whilst he observed the rest of the room. Whilst there was very little within the room, it was clear that there

were other, smaller rooms off it at the back. To one side, he noted a pile of cushions that Sarda mused would be provided for older citizens to recline on during meetings. His keen eyes also noted the tiny motion sensors placed in each corner.

They were also not the only people present in the room. Close to the podium was a small group of locals who seemed to be in an attitude of prayer, and Sarda was loath to disturb them. Whilst he did not agree with religion, he did understand many of its positive influences that, in a society that was otherwise unchecked, its absence would result in chaos.

He also noted he wasn't the only one who was curious. One of the devotees, a young female, he guessed, kept looking at them out of the corner of her eye.

Finally, Jason gestured towards the doors at the rear of the building. "What's in there?" he asked baldly.

Zif glanced at the doors and said: "Most of them are for private use, but I can show you the museum, if you'd like." Although they had taken up a considerable amount of the priest's time, he continued to be gracious.

"Crikey!" Jason said, making sure he once again used a term the universal translator would have no idea of. "Let's boogy."

By now, with all of Jason's jargon, Zif's head was spinning. He had no idea what the young human was saying half the time, and he was too polite to ask him what he meant. As Jason made his way towards the doors, Zif

took his actions as an affirmative, took a key out of the back of his amulet, then opened the right most door before ushering them both inside.

The air was decidedly mustier in this room, yet everything was very well kept. Sarda noticed that not a speck of dust was to be seen anywhere.

Proudly, Zif showed them the objects on a waist-high bench that ran the length of the room. It was covered with red velvet and each object had a small name plaque before it. It became clear to the Starfleet crew that Zif revered the items greatly, and would not even deign to touch one. To test that theory, Jason reached out for one of the items, and found his hand quickly, and not kindly, batted away.

“You mustn’t touch the reliquaries!” Zif almost shrieked. The priest took a moment to collect himself, then apologised. “I’m sorry, as outsiders, you would not understand the importance of the items before you. For instance...” he indicated a small dagger with a flourish. “This was the dagger that failed to kill Tixis the Great five hundred years ago.”

Jason looked at Zif incredulously. “It *failed* to kill him?” He rolled his eyes. “Where I come from that would make it bloody useless, not an object of worship.”

The priest smiled. “I am used to people scoffing, Lieutenant. A jealous Cait cornered Tixis in the last sanctuary and plunged this dagger into his chest. He expected to kill Tixis, but he simply pulled it out and

dropped it to the floor, without a drop of blood shed! He lived for another fifty years after that.”

The Vulcan raised his eyebrows. “Are you saying that all of these items are linked to some kind of miracle?” he asked, masking his disdain.

Zif was a little startled at first. This was the first time Sarda had spoken. “I can assure you, the miracles were real and well documented.”

Finishing his look around the room, Jason asked: “I see a number of objects, sir. But I am curious to see a copy of your holy book I’ve heard so much about. I hear a couple of my crewmates quoting from it from time to time and I’d like to read it myself.”

Sucking a breath between his teeth, Zif tried to look apologetic. “I’m sorry, but the scriptures are for the Preisthood’s eyes only.”

The Lieutenant did a good job of looking downcast, even though he had expected this answer. “Bugger. I was really hoping to be able to out-quote them and send them in a tizzy. You see, without knowing for sure they’re quoting the true blue book, I can’t be certain they’re not leading me up the garden path.”

This time, Zif shook his head in utter confusion. “Sorry?”

Sarda translated. He had observed the younger Aussie’s idioms for some time. “He is concerned that, without knowing the real content of the book, that our friends may be misquoting it.”

Understanding dawned in the priest's eyes. "Ah. Hmm." He fished around in his robe for a second and produced a small brown book. "Here is a copy of the most oft quoted scriptures that are taught to our young. I'm afraid it's in Caitian, but I'm sure your friends could translate it for you."

Jason took the gift gratefully, leafed through it quickly, found it full of glyphs that made no sense to him whatsoever. He pocketed it with a smile. "Thanks, mate."

As Zif made to usher them out, Jason held up a finger. "Scuse me, but I was wondering if you could tell me what *that* is." He then pointed towards an item that looked a little like a rail spike sitting on a box a little higher than the rest.

Stepping over to the object, Zif looked upon it with a beatific smile. His adoration was clear. "This," he held a hand just over it, "is our most treasured possession. It is one of the spikes used to kill our Teacher that terrible day so long ago."

Jason thought Zif reminded him of his old Anglican pastor back in his home town of Parkes. There were times when he would reveal some hidden truth with just that level of personal intensity. Curious, he bent over to study it more closely. "Is that dried blood on it?" he asked.

Zif nodded.

Fascinated, the Commander asked evenly, with a hint of scepticism: "How is that possible if your "Teacher" was killed two millennia ago?"

Jason wondered if the priest could have had a credit for every time he had been asked that question.

Zif answered politely. “Sir, we've been a technologically advanced culture for several thousand years. It is encased in a stasis field that is powered in perpetuity by an underground thermal generator. As long as this planet's core stays warm, this relic will be preserved for all time.”

A notion came to Sarda at that point, but he kept it to himself. It answered a number of questions he had.

Without a word, Jason whipped out his tricorder to take a still photograph. Zif immediately held up a paw. “I'm afraid you cannot take scans in the museum. These objects are sacred and are not to be disturbed.”

Sarda spoke in his authoritarian monotone. “We are already aware a dampening field is in effect, Zif. I expect the Lieutenant is simply trying to take an image for his collection.”

The priest looked conflicted for a moment, then relented. Jason stepped back, set the tricorder for a high-resolution, wide angled shot, then took it with a grin. “Good one. Thanks again, mate.”

That done, Zif showed them out of the “museum” and made sure he locked it behind him.

Sarda had a passing shot for him. “If it is impossible to make scans to verify the authenticity of your “reliquaries”, how can we know they are what they purport to be?”

The priest shrugged. “We go by faith, Commander.”

“What if one simply is not the kind of being who can go by blind faith?” he probed.

“Then you can never be a true believer, sir. One can never truly know *all* the facts.” Zif had used this argument before, that was plain.

Sarda nodded sagely. “But what if you cannot be sure of *any* of them?”

Without an intelligent argument, Zif simply changed the subject as he led them to the door. “Lieutenant, you told me earlier that your females call you “Blue”. Why is that?”

The young man roared at the misunderstanding. He slapped Zif on the shoulder and gave him toothy grin. “Mate, Aussies call *everyone* “mate”. Not just the females I know. No, I’m called Blue because I’m a redhead like Commander Sarda here.”

Zif paused to contemplate this information, and found himself totally lost. “What kind of culture calls someone something they are not and finds it amusing, even endearing?”

Jason just tossed his head and said, cheekily: “We’re just a huge bundle of contradictions.”

Before they exited, Sarda checked back at the other occupants of the hall and found the young female Cait was gone. He thought nothing of it, and continued out into the sunshine. Once outside, Zif quickly took his leave of them and disappeared indoors once more. Jason watched him go

and mused: "You know, I think he's white simply because he never spends any time in the sunlight."

As they walked through the grasses they compared notes. "I'm not sure we just learned a lot more than we already knew," Jason said.

Sarda shook his head. "Actually, we learned much. We managed to retrieve a small amount of the "scriptures", learned some of the "Teacher's" life story, and, most of all, that they have something to hide."

Jason looked upon his compatriot with admiration. "With the dampening field, you mean."

Sarda pulled up short in the shade of the Destiny Tree. "Not only that. He mentioned they have been technologically advanced for millennia, yet we have no evidence of hardcopy scripture. It may be the only copies are digital. Finding them in a computer network could be literally impossible." His brow furrowed. "They could also be heavily encrypted." He allowed himself the luxury of a sigh. "I *am* curious about that spike," he admitted. "If it is in a stasis field, there could still be viable DNA on it that could help with the identity of the "Teacher"."

"How would we get it with all the security?" Jason queried. "I saw motion detectors in the hall and "museum", a cypher indented key for the museum lock, not to mention the IR beam across the doorway and the pressure sensors I assume are under the shelf. And to top it off, there are exterior cameras on all the external corners."

Sarda had missed the last items. He shot the younger officer an enquiring look. "I wasn't always Starfleet, Commander," Jason said. "When I was a kid, I sometimes helped myself to things that weren't mine." His face wore a mask of humour mixed with shame. He dug out the small book Zif had given him and flipped open the first page. "I wish I had someone handy to read this," he said.

"You could always just ask," a voice said from overhead.

Both officers looked up and saw the voice's owner. It was the young Cait Sarda had seen inside. She was tawny, small, and seemed quite content to laze in the branches of the tree. She also looked at them with an intensity they both found unsettling. Jason spoke for them. "And why would you do that?"

The female looked off into the distance as if she hadn't a care in the world. "You don't ask a friend for information about someone, you ask his enemy." She shot them a look and pointed off at the temple. "I am their enemy."

Sarda tipped his head to side. "Why?"

This time she scowled. "I don't like anyone who distorts a beautiful message like the scriptures and twists it to suit their own purposes."

"And how would you know this?" Sarda asked.

"Because I've read them."

Chapter Eight

Merete AndrusTaurus had seen some strange places in her lifetime, but this would have to have been one of the weirdest. In an odd way, it reminded her of the bridge of the *Millennium* with its hustle and bustle. The similarities ended there.

The offices of News Prime were a peculiarity on a world that seemed to have everything made from wood or replicated plastics. Having tapped one wall, she found it to be made of transparent aluminium, which had been specially treated so, with just a tap of a control, one could make the wall opaque on demand. It totally negated the need for windows in a building that was essentially one gigantic glass box.

On their way into the complex, Merete had taken a moment to see the damage brought by Martin's bomb. She had seen the video of the event (the external security cameras had recorded it) and had marvelled at Martin's callous disregard for the safety of other beings. Once on the north face of the building, Merete had been surprised by the efficiency of the company's maintenance department. The dish had already been replaced, a new coat of paint applied to the superstructure, and the only remaining indicators were the burnt foliage and a scorch mark on the building. Impressive.

“I bet someone got some overtime for that job,” Jenny commented under her breath.

Once inside, Merete quickly found the reception area staffed by a striking young female Cait called Prissy. At their surprised looks, Prissy informed them that they were very informal at News Prime and, for the sake of simplifying communication, they dropped their clan affiliations within the staff and also for offworlders. Prissy's whole name was Prisstacall, but, considering her job and her exposure to Federation ways, especially human, Prissy had taken a likening to shortening her name to “Prissy”.

It certainly fit, Merete thought. Whilst she and Jenny were dressed in their Starfleet uniform reds, Prissy was one of the most flamboyantly dressed Cait she had seen – and that included the King. Her gossamer thin top was a rainbow of colours that seemed to shift with your viewpoint. She had taken the time to actually colour her fur atop her head pink, and, dangling from each ear, was a pair of white gold hoops. She looked like she had stepped from the pages of a teenage magazine.

While they waited for their interviewer, Jenny could not help but enquire where she could buy a top like Prissy's.

“I'll have the co-ordinates for the shop for you before you leave,” she said with her cheery, and decidedly youthful, voice.

At that moment, Rogen shifted in his flying pram to try to get a look at the strange building. He was dazzled by the different coloured walls that tended to throw one's perspective out of whack. The sound drew Prissy's attention, and she bounded out from behind her desk to coo over the children. She glanced at Merete. "Are they your kits?" she asked. "They're gorgeous!"

Motherly pride is a strong emotion, and Merete could not help by smile broadly. "They are, and they are."

Prissy gave Merete a knowing look and grin. "What are their names?"

Merete leaned over and adjusted Piper's harness. "This little lady is Piper AndrusVerandi," she then messed her son's hair, "and this young male is Rogen AndrusVerandi."

"May I?" Prissy picked up Rogen and held him high. The child squealed with glee. "They're so cute! Their father must be very proud."

A dark cloud passed over Merete's face and the joy in her eyes left her. Her voice became tinged with sadness. "I'm sure he is."

Prissy noted the sudden change and recognised it. "Has their father passed?" At Merete's silent nod, Prissy added: "I'm sorry."

A side door opened, splitting an image that Picasso would have been proud of. "Prissy, put that child down. It's not time for midday meal yet."

With a chuckle, Prissy gave Rogen to Jenny, who had her hands out ready to take him. "I'm afraid young Rogen would only be a snack," Prissy said with a cheeky grin.

Merete gave her full attention to their new arrival. He was tall for a Caitian male, with a deep richness to his colouring. His fur had been taken care of so consistently and professionally that she was certain he didn't have a single loose hair. He wore a loose fitting formal shirt ironed to perfection. His air was that of the consummate professional.

"Doctor AndrusTaurus, I presume?" His voice was well educated and his manner cultured. His friendliness was cleverly designed to gain him what he wanted. He held out a paw which Merete took gladly.

Merete indicated her companions. "This is Ensign Jenny Rapid, and my children Rogen and Piper."

"I am Treshtascene, but you can call me Tresh. Thank you for coming." He indicated the door behind him. "Would you please come with me?"

Like an old-fashioned gentleman, Tresh held the door open while Merete and Jenny negotiated the hover pram through the door. Once past, he stepped past them and led them on a short journey through a number of corridors to a large conference room with a beautifully carved wooden table dominating the centre of the room. In the metal building with its mad splashes of colour, the table seemed to be the only thing that truly belonged. It was

ringed by a number of leather chairs which were, curiously, split down the back with a gap of about five centimetres. The reason for this became plain when Tresh sat down and slipped his tail through the space.

Merete and Jennifer took seats, after taking the children out of the pram and placing them on the floor with a few toys to play with.

“If I may?” Tresh took out a larger than usual datapadd and toggled the audio record button. “Now, I was hoping to get a little background information, Doctor, before we talk about the hostage situation.”

Merete considered his words. “If you scratch my back, I'll scratch yours.”

Tresh was unfamiliar with the saying. “Excuse me?”

The Doctor put her hands on the table, spreading her fingers. “I mean, I'll answer your questions if you answer some of mine.”

Their host immediately went on his guard, his suspicion level high. He felt like he was being played. “What questions?”

With the door wide open, Merete stepped through, choosing her words carefully. “Captain Piper has become aware of a disturbing number of missing black Caits and she fears that they're being deprived of their basic sentient rights.”

“Or worse,” Tresh added. Still suspicious, he asked: “Are you here in an official Federation capacity?”

Merete brushed down her jacket with its Commander's bars near her wrists. "I would have thought the uniform would have given that away," she said with only a touch of sarcasm.

Tresh narrowed his eyes, his conflict obvious. "Why would a Federation Doctor from Altair Four care about a few missing Caits?" he asked, probing.

"Because, regardless of their colour, species or whatever, they're *sentients, people*, and they deserve the protection of Federation law." Merete's voice dropped a few decibels. "I was hoping we could help each other out."

Folding like a house of cards, Tresh sank back into his seat. "I'd love to, but there's not much I can do. We tried running a story on the missing blacks, and the director squashed it." He pointed at the ceiling. "When I queried it, he told me it was orders from above."

Merete leaned forward, showing her concern. "How high?"

Tresh sighed. "I got the impression it was government high."

The Doctor took a moment to consider the matter, then looked up into Tresh's eyes. "I'll tell you what. If you give me the information you got for the story, when we deal with the situation with the blacks – and we *will* – I'll give you an exclusive from the Captain herself. Do we have an agreement?"

Tresh fairly salivated at the prospect, but was still reserved. "I'll have to get permission from the boss."

“Just make sure it doesn't get back to the government,” Merete warned. “Are you sure he will keep it to himself?”

The reporter grimaced. “No, I'm not.” He tapped his nails on the desk, creating a resonating rattle within the wood.

“I thought News Prime was the best source of information on Cait,” Jenny quipped.

Tresh groaned. “Things are not what they once were, Miss Rapid. Prime might be the best source of information, but that has to come with the approval of the Ministry of Information, and so what goes out to the people isn't always one hundred percent accurate information.”

Merete curled a lip in disgust. “You mean lies.”

“We are unwilling accomplices in a campaign of misinformation,” Tresh dodged.

The Doctor stood up and paced the floor. “No matter how you pretty it up, the public deserves better.” She pointed an accusing finger at the reporter. “They deserve the truth.”

Tresh held up his paws in resignation. “I know they do,” he said with a little heat. “But what can I do about it?”

She ceased her pacing and leaned over the desk. “You can tell me what you know and help us make things right. Wouldn't you like to be able to report the truth once more and not worry about the consequences? Wouldn't

you like News Prime to be an honourable institution again?"

That caught the reporter's attention. His pride in his industry was strong. "All right, Doctor, you have a deal." He leaned forward and began manipulating his datapadd. "Do you have a padd of your own I can link this to?"

Merete frowned. "No, but you should be able to download whatever you need to my medical tricorder." She reached into a side panel of the pram and took out her ever-present tricorder. She never went anywhere without the tools of her trade.

It took a moment for Tresh to configure the devices for a link, then he uploaded the report directly to its databank. "You will be able to download it to your ship's computer when you get back."

Once complete, Merete gave the reporter a sweet smile as she replaced the tricorder in the pram's panel. "Okay, Tresh, let's talk about what *you* wanted to know."

After talking to two different families that morning, Amantallah felt like banging her head against a tree - repeatedly. Whilst the greetings were quite consistent, that being of the honour of having a white Cait within their household, the families involved went into complete denial upon the mention of their missing clans person. No matter how hard she and Scanner pressed them, they refused to even admit they would even *produce* a black family

member. That alone offended Manny, and she often found herself biting her tongue.

It seemed that the only reason the blacks had been reported missing at all was due to a friend outside the family making it known.

As they walked to the local community transporter so they could make their way to their next denial session, Scanner looked around him at the houses nestled into the tree's branches. Each was beautiful in its own, natural way, and yet it wasn't how they appeared that was speaking to him. "Have you considered whether you'd like to settle down and raise a family here?" he asked.

Amantallash was not impressed with the idea. "I love my homeworld, Scanner, but I wouldn't want to live here. I don't like the way my people are behaving over a stupid thing like colour."

They walked on a bit, then Scanner asked another question that brought his fiancé to a halt. "When would you consider us adopting some kids?"

Manny almost blanched. "*What?*"

Scanner looked around him at the homes about them. He gestured at the sense of family values they entailed. "Amantallash, I want to start a family sooner, rather than later. I'm not getting any younger, and I'd like to be able to play with them while I'm still up for it."

Manny clucked her tongue. "You're not that old, Judd," she said pleasantly reproving. "You've got plenty of parenting years left in you."

“For a Cait, yes, there's so much life left. We've both got similar lifespans, but Caits grow up a lot faster than humans. If we were to adopt a human child, for instance, by the time our child was grown I'd already be well into my sixties and considering retirement.” Scanner gave a gentle sigh, then started walking towards the transporter station again.

Manny pulled him up short and held him with an arm in each paw.. “You're serious, aren't you?” she said looking him in the eye. She was fairly broadcasting the trepidation she felt. “You want to start a family as soon as possible.” Her tone became almost pleading. “Don't you think we might be rushing that a little?”

Scanner looked into her eyes and saw the fear there. “What's the matter, sugar? Are you afraid you won't make a good mother?”

Confused, Manny spun away, searching for the right words. “No, it's not that. I suppose I don't know the first thing about raising a human child.” She turned back to him, the worry clear in her eyes. “I admit it, I'm scared about adopting a child because I don't know what to do with one.”

Her husband-to-be surprised her by simply holding out his hands, beckoning to her to step over and take them. The look in his brown eyes was one of adoration. She was reluctant at first, then she slowly took his hands. He gave hers a gentle squeeze and said something that amazed her. “Sweetheart, I know you'll make a wonderful mother. And

I'm surprised you overlooked the obvious. There are children on *this* planet that need parents who will love them. I was thinking we could give a couple of black kittens a home."

Shocked more by the notion that the idea simply hadn't come to her first than the old cultural bias that still dogged her, she saw the beauty of his thought. It *would* be a wonderful thing to do for the children, and what better place to raise them than a place where they wouldn't suffer the daily humiliation she knew her brother had had to endure when they grew up.

The more she examined the idea, the more she liked it. As Judd had pointed out, Caits matured more rapidly than humans, so his age would not be a problem. And raising Cait children would be something she could at least grasp. She loved Merete's children, but they were different enough from her own species to often leave her worried about not knowing what do to.

Overjoyed, Amantallash took Judd into a crushing hug and rubbed her cheek against his. "I love you, Judd! You are such a good man! I think that's a wonderful idea! When this mission's over, we should talk to the Captain about it before we break orbit."

"So, how does one get married on this planet?" Judd lovingly asked her neck.

Manny pulled back a little, remembering his comment from a couple of days before. She thought for a moment. "Weddings on Cait are usually pretty big affairs

that can take months to arrange.” Her eyes narrowed for a moment as she considered the matter. “What we could do is simply ask the High Priest to marry us – no.” She sighed. “He won’t do it. Zif would never officiate over a wedding between me and an offworlder.”

“You’re probably right about that,” Scanner said drolly. “Do you have something equivalent to getting eloped?”

The word didn’t quite translate. The quizzical look on Manny’s face said that. Judd rephrased. “Is there some way we can just run off and get married quickly and with a minimum of fuss?”

Manny was uncomfortable with the idea. “I’m not crazy about that, carra.”

Scanner laughed out loud. “It seems no matter what culture you’re from, a lady wants a big, lavish wedding.”

His fiance grinned. “Something like that.”

The engineer looked off into the distance as a thought came to him. “What if we could do both?”

Manny was shocked. “How?”

Her man simply smiled. “You let me worry about that.”

In a plush office in the huge, wooden Government building, two well dressed Caits got together to discuss their energy crisis.

“How goes Plan Do or Die?” asked the first.

The second grimaced. “Why do you insist on such a ridiculous name for our project?”

The first shrugged. “I have watched too many of the human's B-movies.”

The reference was lost on the second. “I'm going to pretend I didn't hear that. I can't be bothered learning a new human reference. I've had enough of them recently.”

“Different cultures have a tendency to clash.” First stepped around the room, taking note of the many books that lined the shelves. Whilst many of them were philosophical in nature, he suspected their owner simply kept them for show. Most of them looked like they were fresh from the bookshop.

Second sighed, and tried to bring the meeting back on line. “Let's get down to business. The plan's behind schedule. We simply don't have enough resources to get it all out in time.”

First scowled. This was not good. They had only a limited amount of time before their window of opportunity closed forever. “Then get some more workers,” he said evenly, yet callously malicious.

Incredulous, Second snarled: “Where from? There's only so many we can get before we raise suspicions.”

“Hah!” First gave a brief growl as he ceased his pacing, then pointed at the ceiling. “Don't you think we've got enough problems already with Starfleet hovering over our heads?”

Second sniffed, unconcerned. "I thought their captain said they were here to help us with our energy problems."

First moved extremely quickly for a male of his age. The whack he delivered to the side of Second's head made it spin. "Idiot!" He spat furiously. "You think Starfleet is going to send its *flagship* to help us keep the lights on? They're here investigating the missing blacks!" He pointed out the window for emphasis. "It's only a matter of time before they cross the lawn looking for the culprit! Now, what are you going to do about it?"

Second tried to appear a little less clueless than he actually was. "Hurry up?" he suggested meekly.

"And cover your tracks. And above all: *keep your mouth shut!!*" With that, First spun about and stalked from the room, making sure he slammed the door behind him.

"What now?" the owner of the office muttered to himself. Somehow, he had to find a way to "recruit" some more. He turned, stared out the window and as a glimmer of an idea formed in his mind, he made a call.

Thinking lightning could not possibly strike twice, Merete and Jenny made their way over to the Starshine Cafe for a welcome cup of brew. They chatted gaily about life, the universe, and pretty much everything and took great delight discussing the tall trees and wonderful sights of Cait's capital. They had checked out the museum and the local version of an art gallery, which they were still

trying to figure out. The Cait version of art was very impressionistic mixed with a little surrealism. At times, Jenny had turned her head and looked up at the art upside-down as if that would somehow give her a better understanding of what she was seeing.

Once they had seen the main sights, they found themselves famished and headed over to the cafe for lunch. It was a short walk, only two kilometres, so they decided to stretch their legs.

“Did you hear Manny is going to get married?” Merete said as the cafe was coming into sight.

Jenny perked up at that information. “I was wondering how long it was going to take the boss to pop the question.” She looked up at the trees and the sky beyond. “He’s a good man, Doc. He’ll take good care of her.”

Merete smiled. “Talk about an odd couple,” she said rather wistfully.

Her companion sympathised. It hadn’t been that long since Merete had lost her husband. The feelings were still close to the surface. Jenny leaned over and put her arm around her friend’s shoulders. “Still, we’ve seen a number of successful interspecies marriages. Ambassador Sarek and the Lady Amanda, for one.”

“I’m not worried about that,” the Doctor said, letting her downcast feelings show through her quiet tone. “The two of them fawn all over each other like lovestruck teenagers. It’s just that families can be killers. You don’t

have to be of different species for in-laws to hate you. They can destroy a marriage just because they don't like you. And given the atmosphere we've found since we got here, that's a very definite maybe." She blinked and threw her friend a look that spoke volumes.

Jenny grimaced. "I see what you mean," she said with feeling. Looking up, they found themselves at the foot of the stairs to the cafe. Now they were here, they found themselves wondering whether this was such a good idea. It had still only been a matter of hours since their ordeal, and the memory of Red waving a phaser in their faces was still fresh. Merete looked down at her children riding in the hover pram, happy and totally oblivious to the dangers of life. At the moment, they were poking at each other and gurgling. There were times she wished she could be as carefree as they. However, her life had often been cruel and had taught her the realities of the universe. It was a dangerous place at the best of times. She looked up at the cafe door again, and decided once more she was going to enjoy this life, regardless of what it threw at her. She owed it to Rogen, and she owed it to her children. He wouldn't want her living in fear, that she knew. So, once again, she chose to live.

Pushing the pram before her, she put out a foot and took the first step up the stairs and inside. Once there, she found herself surprised at the large number of people there. Yesterday, it was fairly quiet. Today, it was a hive of activity. Once inside, Merete noticed her hands were

shaking, so she clenched her fists to control it. She pushed the pram through the crowd and over to the same table they had taken the last time they were here, which was fortunately unoccupied at the time. She took Piper Jr out of it and sat her on her knee. She looked over the table to Jenny, who had slid into the seat on the other side. She was doing a good job of hiding her trepidation, but not a perfect one. "How are you doing?" she asked.

Jenny grimaced. "As well as can be expected," she said. She bounced Rogen Jr on her knee and was rewarded with a delighted chuckle.

Surprisingly, they were joined by the waitress who had served them the day before. She wasn't quite as chipper, but she greeted them like they were long lost family. "I am sooo glad to see you two again! You guys are, like, real heroes! You saved us all!" She took hold of both women by the shoulders, and rubbed cheeks as if they were siblings.

The Doctor looked up at the young lass with a thin smile. "Shhh. I don't want anyone to know who we are!" she said, her tone imploring. "We just came in for a coffee."

The waitress ducked her head in apology. "Oh, sorry."

Trying to restore the girl's spirits, Merete asked: "What's your name?"

Dark brown eyes looked out from under long lashes. "I'm Tishtasingh, but my friends just call me Tish."

Merete patted her hand and gave her a winning smile. "Well, Tish, could you please bring us two Cappuccinos, please?"

"My pleasure is to serve!" With a cheeky smile she added: "I'll leave you to give the kits the breast milk!" Delighted to be considered a friend, Tish spun about and made her way through the milling throng to fill their orders.

Jenny gazed about her with a touch of annoyance. "I suppose everybody wants to see where the action was," she said. "Tourists!"

"Careful," Merete shot back. "We fall into that classification, too."

The engineer nodded. "Point taken." She gave a sheepish grin. "At least all the attention's got to be good for business."

Feeling a little uncomfortable with the people gawking at the burn marks where Red's phaser had taken out the security devices, the pair sat in silence for a minute. Trying to focus elsewhere, they turned their attention to the forest outside the window. A light rain had just begun to fall and some of the droplets had made their way past the leaves and were now spattering the window, giving the flora outside a slightly distorted image.

They were brought back to reality a moment later with a crash. Tish had reappeared at their table with the store owner at her side. As she placed the paper cup cappuccinos on the table, her boss began clapping loudly to

gain everyone's attention. As he did so, Merete started shrinking back in her seat. She did not like where this was going.

The owner raised his voice so all could be heard. "Doctor AndrusTaurus and friend, you honour us with your presence here today. To be honest, I thought I would never see you again, but I am glad to be able to thank you personally for your brave actions yesterday. You saved not only my cafe, but the lives of many other people! I want you to know that as long as you live, you are welcome here. And I will never charge you, or your children to eat here. Thank you!" Then he did something few offworlders have ever witnessed. A low growl started in his throat, and the other Caits in the cafe joined in. It quickly grew into a roar that was simply deafening.

Bright pink and totally embarrassed, Merete suddenly realised that this was their way of honouring a person. For a moment, she was fearful, and her children looked about them with alarm at the sound. They began crying, and both she and Jenny clutched them close and covered their ears as the roar continued for a few seconds more before dying out. As one, each Cait bowed, then left them to their business.

However, they were not the only species represented in the cafe that day. As soon as the noise started returning to normal the other offworlders began crowding around.

An Andorian female asked: "Are you *really* Merete AndrusTaurus?"

A Bolian male asked: "Can I have your autograph?"

A Gorn asked her if she was married.

With all these people crowding around, not only were the two women getting agitated, so were the babies. They were soon howling, and the Doctor found it amazing that these people paid them no heed. They had stars in their eyes, and nothing else mattered.

Fortunately, Tish came to their rescue. She ducked under the outstretched arm of the Gorn and turned to face him and the crowd. "I know you would all like to meet the good Doctor, but she is our guest here and on behalf of the management, I must ask you to give our honoured guests some privacy." Two other male Caits joined her and scowled at the alien patrons, leaving them in no doubt that their presence was not appreciated. One by one, they either drifted off into other parts of the cafe or, miffed, they left the building. It made no difference to Tish, she was just glad they were gone.

Stressed, Merete spoke gratefully. "Thanks for that."

Tish graced Merete with a friendly grin. "No need. You're one of us, now, and we take care of our own. Enjoy your coffees, ladies. We'll make sure *they*," she indicated those alien to her world, "won't bother you again." With that said, she turned and went to look for other needy patrons.

Merete gave a slight scowl. "I wonder what she meant by that," she said. She took her cup and finally got to take a sip of her coffee. And, true to the rumour, she found it was delicious.

After taking a drink of her own, Jenny chipped in: "You heard the owner. He practically wants you as family."

Appreciative of her brew, Merete said with a grin: "I'd consider having his babies if he continues bringing me coffees like this one!"

They enjoyed another half hour relaxing in the presence of so many friendly people. The owner and his staff treated Merete and Jenny like royalty, and playfully kept the children occupied over at the Caitian mats. When the time came for them to leave and head back to the ship, the locals reluctantly let them go. Cheeks were rubbed and tears shed.

The owner took Merete by the hands and spoke solemnly. "Merete, you have only to ask and I, Tisktabrisk and the clan Brisk will come to your aid, any time."

Merete bowed deeply, expressing her deep honour. "Thank you so much sir. I will always remember that with joy in my heart."

Her words brought a huge smile to Tisktabrisk's face, who once again bowed before squeezing her hands and brushing her cheeks with his own.

It was at this point that Merete began wondering what had happened to her pram. In all the earlier

confusion she had lost track of it. After casting her gaze about for a minute, she finally spotted it against the far wall. She mused that one of the staff had put it there out of the way. She walked over to it, with Rogen on her hip, and was dismayed when she found it. The hatch on the side where she kept her tricorder had been forced open. She looked around inside and found it was empty.

“Damn,” she swore out loud.

Tish and Jenny joined her when they saw her anger. “What's up?” Jenny asked.

Merete scowled, angry. “Someone has stolen my medical tricorder,” she said.

Tish growled. “I am so sorry, Merete. For this to happen in our cafe is awful.” She touched Merete's arm gently and said with all sincerity: “Please accept our deepest apologies.”

The Doctor shook her head. “It's not your fault, Tish. I just had some important information on it. Lucky for me I get it to automatically upload any new data directly to the ship's computer.” She took out her communicator and flipped it open. “*Millennium* computer, this is Doctor Merete AndrusTaurus. Identify.”

A computerised female voice replied. “Identified. Doctor Merete AndrusTaurus.”

“Computer, enable self-destruct of medical tricorder twenty-one by my order. Enable.” Merete gave a thin smile. She said quietly to her friends. “Whoever it

was, they're going to get a nasty surprise when it melts on them.”

The three of them shared a dark chuckle, then the two women gave Tish a quick hug before heading outside to transport home.

Once more, the forested world of Cait became real to the eyes of those transporting down from the *Millennium*. Piper took a deep breath of the clear air of Cait and found herself reminiscing about her home world, Proxima Beta. Like Cait, the Proximans had a great reverence for nature, and did their level best to make their impact on that world as minimal as possible. She turned her gaze upward and took in the homes built into the trees, trees that had seen no fire for millennia. She wondered how they would fare if a forest fire broke out and shuddered. The loss of life would be colossal.

The public transporter unit she was standing on gave a warning beep, the message simple: Get off! The three away members, Piper, Sarda and Jason Nunn stepped forward and off to the side to allow those waiting to be able to beam in. They watched a local couple of tawny Caits beam in and immediately step off the platform and make their way off to their home to the left. Piper watched them as they walked and remembered Crash once telling her how the people of his world were a very relaxed, happy-go-lucky people who always had time for anybody and everybody. Yet the people she was watching seemed

to be hurrying, almost fearful. Piper frowned to herself. Something was very wrong here.

Sarda produced his tricorder and switched it to navigation mode. As every dwelling on Cait was found by their GPS co-ordinates – there were no addresses in a world with no real streets – the need for electronic guidance was almost paramount. There were two ways of finding any home. Once your navigator was online, you could find them by their clan domicile, or by numbered co-ordinates. If you knew the names of those living in a certain home, it was a simple thing to find them and beam over using the public transporters. Or if you were a little more well off, you could own your own flitter.

It took only a matter of seconds before Sarda was pointing off to the right at a tree with a subterranean dwelling next to it. Piper followed his finger and saw a very nondescript dwelling that did nothing to draw any attention to itself. And, judging from what Commander Sarda had told her, that was exactly what the occupants wanted.

Piper brushed down her favourite bright purple jumpsuit – they were travelling incognito – and led the way. For once she was grateful for the change of clothing. The walking boots she had chosen did a lot better on this terrain than did her uniform shoes. They kept as silent as the locals were. Piper mused that there seemed to be no joy here at all. It was nothing like what Crash was so fond of remembering.

A moment later, they were standing in the stairwell knocking on the old wooden door to the underground home. As instructed, she knocked four times, then waited. She didn't have to have Caitian hearing to know someone was on the other side of the door, peering at them through the tiny spyglass set at eye level.

Without a word, the door was opened and they were quickly ushered inside. Jason gave their acquaintance from the Destiny Tree a welcome nod as she led them down a short hallway and into a large common area full of Caitian resting mats. Their host turned and finally spoke: "I'm sorry for all the secrecy, but the mainstream believers don't have much time for us. If they knew this home was used for private worship they would stop us."

Sarda bowed respectfully. "We understand the need for subterfuge, Casttashack. May I introduce my Captain, Piper. Captain Piper, Casttashack. This is the young lady we met under the Destiny Tree earlier."

Casttashack tossed her head playfully. "Lady?! I like the sound of that." She stepped forward and grasped Piper's hand warmly. "We ladies need to stick together, don't we?"

The young Cait's humour was appealing to Piper, who returned the grip with a friendly smile. "As do all people who seek the truth," she said.

Casttashack looked deeply into the Captain's eyes. "I may be young, Captain, but I see much. You seek the truth, but you don't yet know it." She gave her a huge grin

of delight. "You've come to the right place." She turned and shouted over her shoulder. "You can come out now!"

Two doors on the far wall opened and a group of about twelve Caits came out to join their friend. The away team tensed at their sudden appearance, and Casttashack, seeing this, put up her hands in peace. "Captain," she said, "my friends mean you no harm, if you'll pardon the cliché. I swear on my life."

Piper saw the truth of it in her eyes, and relaxed, the others taking their cues from her. Jason kept a hand close to the pistol phaser clipped to his belt underneath his oilskin coat.

Casttashack introduced Piper to a friend of hers, a tall, tawny Caitian with friendly, blue eyes. His name was Krestapan. His handshake was as warm as Casttashack's.

"I apologise for startling you, Captain, but we need to take precautions." Krestapan was friendly, but also wary. "I need to make sure you weren't here on behalf of the government and the religious establishment. It would have meant jail terms for most of us."

"How do you know we aren't?" Piper asked incredulously.

Krestapan placed a loving paw on Casttashack's head. "This young one is something of a seer. You could say she's a sentient lie detector." The younger Cait looked up at him fondly.

If there was one thing Piper was getting from these people, it was a feeling of brotherly love. There was

nothing false in them, they genuinely wanted to help. So, Piper relaxed a little more and allowed her hosts to offer them somewhere to sit. Once comfortable, Krestapan curled up before her and pushed himself up on his front paws into a sitting position. One impression the Captain got was that these people seemed on one hand wary, and on the other hand at peace. It was a peculiar dichotomy.

“Captain Piper, let me explain a little of who we are. Myself and my friends here are people who became aware of the Teacher's *true* teachings and are simply trying to follow them without interference from those who are lost in fabricated superstitions.” The certainty of his convictions was clear in his voice.

Piper lifted the corner of her mouth with a wry smile. “Let me guess. Zif and his pals.”

Krestapan's eyes narrowed slightly, considering her words. “I see you are one who likes to talk straight, Captain. I can do that. Zif and the rest of the priesthood have been keeping the truths of the Teacher to themselves for over a millennia and doling it out in a way that suits them. You would be surprised, Captain, if you knew just how powerful Zif is. The King would not be in power if Zif didn't want him there.”

Surprised, Piper raised her brows. “How is that so?”

“Through the power of the media, Captain.” Krestapan turned and asked for a portable broadcast viewer. One was brought quickly by willing hands, and he

quickly tuned it to the appropriate channel. "Captain, Zif has a daily slot on his *own* channel where he gives his sermons to the willing masses. As the holder of the scriptures, he can use them in any way he sees fit and twist them to mean anything he wishes. Some of the time, I've caught him out quoting scriptures that simply don't exist."

That caught the Captain's attention. "How do you know that?" she asked, more than a little curiously.

Krestapan gave a deep sigh. "Because, Captain, like my friends here and elsewhere, we have had the privilege of actually *reading* them. We do so every day to clean out the clutter of the lies we have been told since we were kits."

His personal convictions put the Captain a little on edge. Testing, she said: "I suppose Zif would label you and your people a cult."

There was no fooling Krestapan. "I suppose he would, and I can tell you are concerned we are." He nodded respectfully. "I would expect no less from the Captain of a Federation Starship. You stand for the principles and articles of your Federation. My friends and I stand for the ways taught to us by the Teacher. In many ways, they parallel." He leaned forward a little to punctuate his next statement. "I can assure you of one thing, Captain. You have nothing to fear from *us*."

The unspoken hint was clear. "Who is that I *should* be fearful of?" Piper asked.

Casttashack spoke up at that point. "Captain, how could you be so naïve?" she blurted out in amazement.

Her mentor patted her leg in mild reproof whilst directing his attention to the Captain. "You have to forgive my sister, Captain. She is still young." He turned to Casttashack. "The Captain is anything but naïve, my dear. She just needs to be clear about what I think." He looked over at Jason for a split second, then back at Captain. "I'm sure the Captain can understand that youths sometimes speak out of turn."

Piper laughed at that. "Yes, they do. But with training, they eventually overcome it." Playfully, she added: "Most of the time."

Sarda, kneeling on a cushion next to Piper, spoke up with his typical serenity. "You haven't answered the Captain's question, sir."

In no way put off or intimidated by Sarda, Krestapan nodded his agreement. "You are correct, my friend. I have not. The people you need to be concerned about are those within the government who have turned our lovely, friendly society into a fear zone." He turned his full attention to the Captain. "Surely you have noticed the air of fear since your arrival. One can no longer go out doors without worrying that something bad will happen to them, that danger isn't lurking just around the next corner. And when people like Martin Luther come along and make everyone believe that it really *is* a dangerous world, all sense of security is lost. We have lost our way, Captain."

At this point, he raised the portable televiser and showed Piper what it displayed. Zif was standing behind his pulpit, railing against the world once more, informing the people about the blight on their world in the form of black Caits. That their scourge must be wiped out once and for all. At that point she made a mental note that Crash should have extra security when he visited the planet.

The sadness in Krestapan's eyes was profound. "It is people like Zif who preach fear and hatred that are bringing anything *but* peace to our world. He is advocating *genocide*, Captain, and the people in government and those in law enforcement do *nothing*." He cast a glance at the doorway. "There will soon come a day when Zif turns his attention to us and anyone else who opposes him and his kind."

Piper cast her gaze about and noticed that the feeling was mutual. These people weren't mad at Zif and his people, just sorrowful that this state of affairs had come to their world. She realised at that moment that these people were consummate pacifists. If the government came busting down their door they would be taken, willingly, to the slaughter.

The notion repulsed her on a very deep level. They had every right to their pacifist views, but that they be hunted down because their view differed from others was as *intolerant* as one could get. Plus it was against the Articles of Federation, which was supposed to be

protecting these people. The list of crimes being committed by this state just kept getting longer.

The Captain made a snap decision. "Commander Sarda, have security post a guard here. I want to know if a single hair on their heads have been harmed. They are now under *our* protection." She looked Krestapan in the eye as she handed him her communicator. "I want you to keep in touch with my ship. If you Zif or his people give you *any* trouble call me." Sarda nodded his understanding.

The male Cait looked upon the item as a gift from God. "Thank you, Captain. I knew you would be a just woman, an answer to my prayers."

Piper, honestly, said: "I don't know about that, but I cannot sit idly by and let innocents fall." She slapped her crossed legs. "Now, I need to know one thing. Do you have a copy of the scriptures for me to read? You understand I need to know what they contain if I'm to effectively counter Zif's claims."

For a moment, the Captain was afraid he was going to refuse her as he ground his teeth momentarily. He caught Piper's sceptical look and smiled apologetically. "Captain, don't confuse my trepidation as reluctance. My problem is that, without proper interpretation, you wouldn't understand what you're reading."

"Sorry?"

Krestapan dove right in. "Captain, without someone who is trained to understand what they're reading,

and without God's guidance, you won't understand the true intent of what is written."

Piper's eyes narrowed in annoyance. "You're starting to sound a little like Zif."

Lost for words, Krestapan moved his jaw from side to side as he considered what to say. Fortunately, Casttashack came to his rescue. "Captain Piper, I volunteer to come with you to read the scriptures to you." She reached into her vest pocket and extracted a small padd. She touched the screen and glyphs similar to those in Jason's booklet scrolled down the display. "I am sure you will have many questions about what is written, and I would be happy to share with you what I have learned."

At that, the Captain's expression brightened markedly. "Now, that's more like it!"

As evening fell, the inevitable drew nearer and nearer, and four intrepid souls walked towards their destiny. For two of them, it was a homecoming of the worst kind. For the other two, it was walking into the unknown.

As they made their way towards the Llash clan's home in middle suburbia, Crash and Manny looked up through the windows they had stared out through when they were growing up. For Manny in particular, it was strange as it seemed as if only months had passed since she had last been here, when in fact it had been years. She had

to remind herself that her recent experiences of home had literally all been in her head.

Crash had not laid eyes on this dwelling since he had left Cait around fifteen years before. He had never intended to return, but he was not about to let his family get the better of him. He had left this world a frightened kitten and returned a confident Commander from Starfleet. He narrowed his eyes, determined. There was no way he was going to let them get the better of him.

Scanner had to remind himself he was well and truly a seasoned adult and that he had nothing to fear from his fiance's parents. In his time, he had faced Klingons, Romulans, Orions and Tholians, to name a few. The thought gave him courage. His soon to be in-laws should pale in comparison.

Susanna simply looked up at the house and thought it was kind of quaint.

And it was. As houses went, this one should grace the pages of Caitian Home Beautiful. Mrs Llash had spent many hours painting, decorating and creating different ways to make their house more a home – in true Caitian fashion. The colours she had employed were many, various, and dazzling, usually running in ribbons that seemed to dance before their eyes. The home was a good ten metres off the ground, with the home spread out all over the tree. Whilst the building materials were light – mainly the local version of pine – the tree itself was an old redwood that had stood for hundreds of years.

From their viewpoint, Crash and Manny could even see their old bedrooms, and each wondered if they were still decorated the way they had left them. Amantallash stared at hers and somehow knew her mother would have left it untouched. She relished the idea that she *would* be welcomed home, but worried at what her parent's reaction would be when she announced her impending marriage to Judd. It was going to be a disaster, of that she was certain.

Their first problem of the evening became clear when they reached the base of the tree and found no stairs. The only way to get inside was to climb up the tree. They looked up at the entrance way, essentially a square hole in the bottom of the dwelling adjacent to the tree, and considered how they were going to get Scanner up there. Fortunately, Judd had planned ahead.

Reaching to his belt, he gave his fiance a smile and twisted a dial. The levitation boots he was wearing fired up and he lifted off the ground a fraction. He held his hands out to Amantallash. "Want a lift?"

She took a quick look at the tree, then thought the better of it and placed her feet on Scanner's and wrapped her arms around him, placing her head on his shoulder. With another adjustment on his belt device, the two of them slowly ascended up the side of the tree and into the house.

That left Crash and Susanna. "Last one up the tree gets breakfast," Susanna called as she bounded forward and sank her claws into the bark. Crash wasn't caught off

guard and raced up the side of the tree next to her. Regardless of his greater size, Susanna just beat him inside and sat on her haunches, giving him a cheeky smile. "Big isn't always better, my dear," she said slyly.

"Easy for you to say, Susanna," Crash said without heat, a slight smile curling his lips. He turned and knocked on the ornately carved wooden door. He didn't want to be here, but there was no point putting off the inevitable.

A moment later, the door was opened by a female who could only have been their mother. Pashtallah was the image of her daughter, save her colouring, and the smile she wore was so bright it could have warmed the world for an hour. "Hello, my kits! It's so nice to have you home!" She rubbed her cheek on Amantallah's, then Krashtallah's, then smiled a greeting to her guests. "Hello!"

Crash introduced them. "Mother, this is Ambassador Susanna Carra," he waved towards with her with a loving smile, then indicated Scanner, "and this is Lieutenant Commander Judd "Scanner" Sandage, Chief Engineer of the *Millennium*. Susanna, Scanner, this is our Mother, Pashtallah."

Scanner shook her paw and Susanna brushed cheeks.

Their mother stepped aside and ushered them in. "Please, enjoy our clan's hospitality."

Those who were new to the home found it warm and inviting, as did Amantallah. Crash, however, had to

suppress a shiver as the memories of his childhood came flooding back. Of a child who desperately desired his parent's approval, and never received any. Who yearned for some display of love or affection from them, and got very little, and that from his mother, and only when his father was not present. He saw it as her being willing to accept him as her son conditionally, as long as it didn't cause her a problem with her husband. It was true that she had been his advocate to push for his education, but he suspected his father had agreed just to get him out of the house.

Amantallah ran a paw over the dining table and chairs that her parents had bought when she was a child. It was a Federation affectation, not a Caitian tradition, but the idea was catching on. She looked over at the meat cooler and saw a drawing still attached to it she had drawn when she was barely a year old. "I can't believe you still have that, Mother," she said, pointing to the picture.

"I kept all your pictures, dear," Pashtallah said in that voice only mothers possess. A voice of love and encouragement and acceptance.

Her words pierced Crash's heart. His parent's brazen preference for Amantallah was still bothering him today. There had been a clear hierarchy among the children. Amantallah, the golden one, Gruntallah the ordinary, and Krashtallah the despised. Suddenly feeling panicked, Crash started looking for an exit. A gentle touch on his elbow helped calm him. Susanna was very much

aware of his distress, and she reached out to him to remind him that someone in the room loved him deeply. Once more, her presence gave him the courage to push through.

As if she hadn't noticed, Pashtallah looked at her son and asked him how he was. "I am fine, Mother," he said, his voice straining to sound normal.

She would not be fooled. She stepped over towards him and looked up into his eyes. She had always been about thirty centimetres shorter than he, but she always seemed to be viewing him as if from above. "You are not happy to be here, are you, my son?"

Crash's nerves were so raw he actually flinched when she addressed him so. Recognising him as her son was a rare thing for him. He was startled.

"You are not." Pashtallah's voice was certain, final. "I don't blame you." She sighed, her voice one of resignation. "We put you through so much when you were little. With all the hysteria about black Caits over the centuries, I would have thought we might have learned something by now." She stared at the floor, her shame coming to the surface. Crash could never remember his mother voicing her feelings like this before. "For what it's worth, my son, I'm sorry." She took his hand and was surprised to find it shaking. "I failed you, I know. I just hope that when you leave this world again on your Starship, it won't be the last time I see you."

When she stopped speaking, the silence that pervaded the room was concrete. No-one dared even

breathe. Finally, Crash found his voice once more and said with more strength than he felt: "I forgive you, Mother. You did the best you could, considering the circumstances." He gave her hand a gentle squeeze, then did something he had never done before. He rubbed her cheek with his own, affectionately. When he stepped back, he could swear he could see tears in her eyes.

She turned her attention to her guests, firstly to Susanna, simply because of her proximity to Crash. "And how do you know my son?" she asked, in that lovely, probing "what are your intentions?" manner mothers have.

Susanna poured on the charm. Eyes wide, whiskers arched forward, she took Pashtallash's paw and gave it a gentle shake. "I am Susanna Carra, Ambassador for the Federation. I am currently working with Captain Piper and the crew of the starship *Millennium* to help with the situation on Cait."

Pashtallash's eyes widened. "I wasn't aware we had one."

Her guest shrugged. "It's a long story."

Mother considered her words. "You haven't answered my question, you know," she said slyly.

Honestly, Susanna thought for a moment, then said: "Only in the nicest possible ways," she said by way of answer.

It seemed to delight Pashtallash, who beamed at her, then turned her attention to her last guest, Scanner.

“And how do you find yourself in the home of the Llash clan?”

Before he could say a word, Amantallash blurted out: “We’re getting married, Mother.”

All eyes turned to Amantallash. She seemed as if a great burden had been lifted from her shoulders, yet the fear of rejection was in full force.

Her mother narrowed her eyes. “What you are saying is going to be impossible.” Her tone broached no argument.

Scanner asserted himself at that moment. “Mrs Llash, I have served with your daughter for over a year on the *Millennium*, and in that time I’ve fallen deeply, madly in love with her. And she with me.” He had hints of imploring in his voice, yet he was firm. Amantallash stepped over and took his hand. Scanner continued, a touch of steel in his voice. “We *are* going to get married, with or without your family’s blessing. I had just hoped y’all would at least give us a hearing.”

Pashtallash looked them both in the eye and sighed. “Marrying for love doesn’t always work out, kits.” She ushered everyone over to the table, and they sat, making sure the chair at the head of the table remained empty. “Can I get you anything to drink?” she asked, then disappeared into the kitchen area to get some bowls without waiting for a reply. She took the opportunity to think the matter through.

She came back a couple of minutes later with a large tray sporting five bowls of spring water and a mug of the same – for Scanner. Everyone took a drink before turning their attention back to Mother, who engaged Judd. She reached out and placed her paw gently on his hand.

“I do not have anything against you personally,” she said, and her expression reflected this. She seemed even genuinely fond of him. “You obviously know you cannot produce offspring, yet the pair of you want to marry. I always considered that marriage was about making a life – and a family – together.”

Judd relaxed into his chair without extricating his hand. He had taken classes in negotiating back in the Academy, and right now he was glad for it. “We are considering adopting, Mrs. Llash,” he said respectfully.

“Ah.” One problem considered, she thought. The larger one was still on the table. She gestured towards entrance. “Are you aware that hardly anyone on the other side of that door will understand, much less approve? I implore you to consider the lack of understanding you will get from our kind.” She placed a loving paw on one of Amantallash's. “My daughter is special in our society, Scanner, and there are many out there who would have her for themselves. You would be in mortal danger if you were to make your intentions public. Someone may try to kill you before you can marry her. Our people have already got problems seeing beyond colour, but the notion of a white Cait marrying an offworlder would raise great

jealousy.” She looked him in the eye, then glanced at Amantallash. “Are you certain you want to go through with this?” she asked fearfully.

The couple reached across the table and took hand in paw. Their difference in appearance meant nothing to them as long as they could be together. “Absolutely,” they said in unison.

Resigned, Pashtallash reached forward and placed her paws on theirs. “Then I want you to leave this house now and come back tomorrow – married. Your father would never approve of your union, and would do anything to stop it. But he can’t do anything about it if you’re *already* married.” She stood, and ushered the others up. “I will make your excuses for this evening, but I want you to return tomorrow night – married. Then you can present yourselves to him and he will have no choice but to honour you. Until then, you would be a marked man.” She shooed them. “Go before anyone sees you.”

Surprised they were being bundled out, the four of them stood. They uttered their “thank yous”, then Crash flipped open his communicator. “Krashtallah to *Millennium*. Four to beam up.” He gave a fond, parting look at his mother as he vanished from before her.

Time cannot be measured when one is a being transported, but to Krashtallah’s eyes, his wooden home dissolved before his eyes to be replaced with the plush metallic look of the *Millennium*’s transporter room. The four of them turned, gave each other a long look in silence,

then left the room without a word. In silent agreement, they headed to the tree to talk things over.

As they walked, Krashtallah found himself considering the situation and drawing some interesting conclusions. Things on Cait were taking confusing and very sudden steps, and he could not help but feel swept up in them. He wondered if the Maker of all was trying to tell him something. One thing was certain, he had a few decisions of his own to make. They soon came to the rec. deck doors and stepped through. Once through, he stopped in his tracks, took Susanna's hand, and stepped to one side. When Scanner asked what he was doing, he just waved at him. "I'll be with you in a minute," he said.

Judd seemed to understand something was up and simply gave him a nod, then continued on to the tree. Besides, it gave him the opportunity to discuss the matter with his fiance in private.

Crash found a spot on a mat near a corner where there was a certain amount of privacy, and sat, drawing Susanna down beside him. She looked at him, worried about him. "Are you all right, dear?" she asked.

He took a deep breath to calm his nerves. "I'm fine. I just wanted to talk to you about something before we join the others."

Susanna squeezed his paw. "Whatever it is, I'm here for you," she said, lovingly supportive.

Crash looked her in the eyes and smiled. "For how long?" he said, voicing his thoughts out loud.

His girlfriend was confused, and it showed. She went through a gamut of different expressions before light dawned. "For as long as you need me," she said with an endearing smile.

Fighting the tightness in his chest, Crash said: "What if I said: for the rest of my life?" His eyes searched hers, looking for the answer he so desperately wanted to hear.

She wasn't going to disappoint him. "Krashtallah, my love, are you sure this is what you want? One of us is going to have to leave their career."

Her mate smiled, then took her hand. "Not necessarily," he said cryptically. "Susanna Carra, you have captured my heart like no other female ever has, and I simply can't imagine living my life without you. When Judd and Amantallah marry, I want it to be a double wedding. Will you be my life's mate – my wife?"

Susanna was amazed at the plethora of feelings that were flowing through her at the moment. Joy, fear, delight, hope, all in one package. She had to admit that the future was uncertain for them, but she also recognised that she didn't want to face that future without this amazing Cait by her side. She didn't know it, but she was crying. "Yes, my love, I will. And yes, why not make it a double?"

Crash was so overjoyed that he gave Susanna a huge hug, then the two of them began rubbing noses and

cheeks in sheer delight. Filled with joy, the two of them jumped up and bounded over to the tree to join the others.

Judd noticed them as they drew near, looked up and gave them a cocky smile. "I suppose we're having a double wedding, then?" he asked.

Stunned, the pair stopped mid-stride. "How did you know that?" Susanna blurted.

"I didn't make Commander in Starfleet without learning something along the way. The pair of you have had eyes only for each other since you met, and I can't imagine there was anything else you wanted to discuss so suddenly right now." Happy for them, Judd stepped forward and shook both their hands. "Congratulations."

Amantallash did likewise, giving both of them a lick on the cheek, and the four of them sat to make plans.

Naturally, it wasn't to be. No sooner had they begun discussing their preparations than the Captain called them all to her ready room for a meeting.

Chapter Nine

Shortly after Krashtallah and his band beamed out, Slashtallah arrived home, bounding in the door, fully expecting to find his wayward children waiting for him. It was not to be. He had come home to a largely empty house. Only his wife was sitting at the table, waiting for him with a hot meal already prepared for him.

“Where's the kits?” he asked, confused.

His wife noted that he hadn't said “good evening” or asked her how she was. No, the only thing that entered his mind these days was what he wanted. Without showing how she was feeling – she'd had a lot of practice at that – she smiled thinly and told him: “Krash and Manny had to give their apologies for this evening. They'll be here tomorrow night for dinner.”

Clearly displeased, her husband dropped down into his chair and started eating his meal without further preamble. “I take it you told Grun not to bother, either,” he growled.

“I did.” She watched as he finished his meal in silence. She had long ago stopped asking her husband about his day. His job in the transport industry was the same, day-in, day-out. And he had long ago dropped any pretence of actually being interested in *her* day. This was how most evenings went these days. Eat, no conversation,

and then her husband, distressingly, put on the televiser and watched that awful priest Zif carry on with his constant messages of hate. It was the same old stuff, day after day, and Slash seemed to buy right into it. His attitude was reflecting his viewing choices, and recently she had even begun sleeping in Amantallah's room to get some peace. The truly sad thing, Pash reflected, was that her husband had not objected to her choice.

Once he was finished, he got up and took his dish to the washer, opened it, and put it inside. With the door open, he noted it already contained five bowls and a mug. It was the mug that caught his attention. Only an offworlder would need a mug. Hooking the handle with a finger, he extracted it and hung it out for his wife to see.

"Had visitors, have you?" he asked, his tone daring her to lie to him.

Terrified, Pashtallah had to think quickly. Fortunately, an idea came to her. "A human Starfleet officer came by earlier. He was an engineer and he was looking for you to discuss transport issues regarding our planet's energy problems."

Her husband's eyes narrowed as he considered her words. There was a ring of truth, but there just wasn't any need for someone in Starfleet to come and talk to him about *anything*. "Nice try," he said, a low growl starting in his throat, "but I don't believe you." He took a menacing step towards her, letting the mug drop from his hand and

enjoying the sound as it shattered on the floorboards. "Now, I want to hear the truth."

Unwilling to give up the children, she continued. "I *was* telling you the truth. A Starfleet Engineer *did* come by," she implored.

Slashtallah took another step forward. "Stop lying to me!" he snarled, baring his teeth.

"I'm not!" Pashtallah wailed as she slipped and fell off the back of the chair.

Her husband stopped as a thought came to him. "If a human Starfleet officer came here today, *what was his name?*" He smiled sadistically. He had her now.

Doing the only thing she could think of to save herself and still keep her secret, she said: "His name is Commander Judd Sandage of the Starship *Millennium*."

Slashtallah was stunned. She had actually given him a real human name. He looked at his wife sideways as he glared at her, considering whether this was just a tactic or the truth. There was a way to test whether she was lying, however. He stomped over to the video communicator and made a call.

As Krashtallah, Amantallah, Susanna Carra and Scanner made their way down a corridor on the way to the Captain's Ready Room, Judd received notification of an incoming call.

"Who the hell could that be?" he asked out loud. He stepped over to a comm panel and hit the Receive

button. An unfamiliar male Cait appeared on the panel, with a decidedly familiar background. Behind him stood a very frightened looking Pashtallash. Scanner realised with a start he was staring at his future father-in-law – and he was not happy. “Commander Sandage here,” he said, feigning a lack of recognition.

Behind Scanner came a quick inhale of breath as a startled Amantallash recognised him. “Father, why are you calling us?”

Slashtallash glowered into the screen. “Your mother told me that a human Starfleet officer, Commander Sandage, came by earlier for something. Is that true?”

The group were all thinking the same thing. Funny he only mentioned Judd.

As he was the one being called, Judd spoke for himself. “Yes, sir, I was there earlier. Your wife is an excellent hostess. You should be proud. Not many Caits I’ve met have been thoughtful enough to be ready to cater for offworlders when they visit. I enjoyed the mug of fresh water.” He smiled as he gave the complement.

Judd’s up-front manner put Slashtallash at ease. He was making no attempt at subterfuge. He just wasn’t telling him all the facts.

The angry Cait still looked suspicious, but placated at least for now. “I hear my daughter is visiting tomorrow night for dinner,” he said matter-of-factly. “Perhaps you could join her and we can discuss what you came here today for.”

Scanner had no idea what Pashtallah had told her husband, but one thing was for sure – it wasn't the truth. He would just have to wing that one when he got there. “I would be delighted to escort her to dinner tomorrow night,” he said in all truthfulness.

Amantallah joined him at his side and said quickly: “Goodbye Father,” before toggling the panel off. She looked at her fiance with worry in her eyes. “Did you see the look on Mother's face?”

“Yeah,” he said, more than a little annoyed. “Your father's a real piece of work.”

Krashtallah spoke up behind him, his tone sarcastic. “You don't know the half of it, Scanner.”

It was Susanna who brought them back to earth. “People, are we forgetting something?”

Tapping the comms panel once again, Scanner called Piper and apologised for their tardiness and informed her they would be there in a minute.

It was more like forty-five seconds.

Piper's door whooshed open and the four of them found themselves joining the Captain, Sarda, Jason Nunn, Merete and a young, tawny female Cait they were unfamiliar with. She seemed startled to discover there were not only Cait serving on this ship, but that one was white and the other black! It was such a rarity in her society for one of them to appear in a clan, let alone one of each.

The Captain made the introductions and Casttashack found herself shaking paws with three of the oddest felines she had ever met. The black with a leadership position. The white who answered to him. And the fluffy offworlder who adored the black. Just when she thought she had seen it all, the Maker was throwing her something completely new.

Piper mediated. "It seems to have been a busy day for all of us, but I thought it would be best if the good Doctor goes first."

Merete smiled gratefully. She had to get back to her kids once she was done. "Thanks, Piper." She began handing out hard copies of the information Treshtascene had given her. Each copy was a centimetre thick. "This is the information that Treshtascene, a reporter with News Prime, has compiled regarding the missing black Caits. I've gone over some of it, and it's amazing how many blacks have actually disappeared. I'd put it close to seventy in the last three weeks."

Crash's eyes went wide at the news. There were so few of his kind that there would be precious few of them left. He was fast becoming an endangered species.

"It was a fortunate thing I got this at all. The tricorder Treshtascene transferred it to was stolen shortly after." Merete shook her head at the memory. "What an afternoon," she said with a slight smile. "Jenny and I went back to the cafe we were held hostage at for a coffee. It was stolen while we were there." Her smile broadened as

she recalled. "The owner, Tisktabrisk, treated us as if we were the King and Queen ourselves." She shot Crash a perplexed look. "The one thing I couldn't understand was all the roaring. What was that about?"

At that point the Llash siblings roared with laughter. Even Casttashack gave a chuckle.

"What is it?" Piper asked once their laughing had subsided some.

Crash spoke up in mirth. "Doctor, you are now an honorary Cait. The Hero's Roar is given to honour another's bravery, but it has the side benefit of the instigator offering to make you a clan member. If you didn't decline his offer, which I don't think you would have done as you wouldn't have understood what was happening, then you automatically are considered part of his clan. If you ever need something while you're here you can call upon any member of his clan and they will treat you like family because, as far as they are concerned, you *are* family. To the Cait, you are now Merete AndrusTaurustaBrisk, and you'll be addressed as such."

By this stage, Merete had flushed hot pink, but the warm smile on her face spoke of the depth of the honour the cafe owner had bestowed upon her. "That was very sweet of him," she said.

Scanner rolled his eyes. "As if your name wasn't long enough already."

The Doctor wore a mock frown. “That's coming from Lieutenant Commander Judd “Scanner” Sandage. Hmm.”

Piper laughed along with the rest, then recalled something Merete had said that bothered her. “Someone stole your tricorder?”

Merete shrugged. It was no big deal. It was a simple thing to replicate another one. “Yes. I think someone souvenired it while Jenny and I were distracted by the crowd of tourists looking for autographs.”

The Captain knew where Merete kept her tricorder. “Why steal just the tricorder? Why not steal the whole pram? They would have had to break the lock.”

That thought gave the Doctor pause. A thought disturbed her. “They would have had to know what they were looking for. Only the tricorder was missing.”

Sarda considered the logic of the situation. “It would appear someone was aware there was sensitive information on it and retrieved it.”

That led to a terrifying thought. “If that's the case,” Merete said with a shiver, “then Treshtascene could be in danger.”

Not one for inaction, Piper mashed a button on her desk. “Security, locate a Caitian reporter, Treshtascene, who works for News Prime. Offer him a security detail and let him know we believe his life may be in danger.”

The officer on duty acknowledged the order, and Piper turned back to her people. “Thanks for that, Merete. I know the kids probably need a feed by now.”

The Doctor laughed. “More likely they just want their Mum.” With that said, she exited and left the others to their chat.

The Captain turned to her tardy officers. “So, how did the four of you go with your inquiries?” Her manner was upbeat, but not hopeful.

Scanner ran his hand along Amantallah's face, then pointed to a spot between her eyes. “See this mark right here? This is where Manny spent the day banging her head against a wall.”

“Ah-ha.” Piper said, sarcasm lacing her voice. “You got nowhere.” She rapped her fingernails on her desk in frustration.

Amantallah tipped her head to the side as she thought back over her day. “I had hoped my fur would have made people more trusting, but most wouldn't even admit they had even *had* a black clansman.”

Their First Officer asked: “Do you think it may be a matter of shame?”

Krashtallah answered that one. “I'm not so sure, Commander. When we visited Drallah's family, we found them unhelpful, but we did discover that a group of people wearing black robes had come for him in the night. They let him go, willingly,” at this he let his anger show, “and then tried to cover it up.” His eyes narrowed as he brought

his temper under control. "However, Captain," he said more evenly, "upon reflection, I think his mother gave him up more out of fear than shame. I believe her husband bribed her with a replacement child she hoped would be tawny. I think she feared the future if she didn't give him up because everyone else was giving up theirs. Perhaps she feared she would be the only one left with a black kit."

Susanna noted that Crash had deliberately not given all the details. As she sat next to him, she could feel the muscles in his body tense as he recalled the incident. She realised he was worried something like that might happen again, and he was afraid for her. She slipped her paw into his and gave his fingers a gentle squeeze.

At this point, Scanner found the need to satisfy his curiosity. He asked: "Crash, it's been my experience that felines in general tend to mate throughout their adult lives, yet the Cait seem to limit themselves to only one or two litters. Why is that?"

Piper's brows shot up at his forwardness. A species' reproduction was not something people talked about in polite conversation. "Scanner!" she hissed as she waved at him, annoyed at his lack of etiquette.

"It is not a question to be embarrassed about, Captain," Krashtallah stated calmly. "As you're aware, the Cait are very ecologically minded. We have, through the generations, leaned towards limiting our population growth so we can keep an ecological balance with nature. Also, we do not "have sex" for fun. We enjoy physical

contact for basic intimacy, but we do not engage in intercourse for recreation as many other species do. It is purely for procreation. As such, most pregnancies are planned and very few unexpected children are brought into the world.” He made his statement without shame, completely matter-of-fact.

In the corner, Sarda nodded his agreement with the sentiment. “It is a commendable attitude, Commander. Very logical.”

Scanner was not so agreeable. “It’s a good thing Merete and Rogen weren’t thinking that way, or little Piper and Rogen wouldn’t be with us.”

Crash had to accede that point. “True.”

Tapping the desk with a nail, Piper brought the meeting back on track. “All right, then, Crash. Did you get anything out of your brother?”

Crash, Manny, Scanner and Susanna all squirmed for a moment. Their personal issues had resulted in their meeting with Gruntallash being postponed. Susanna spoke for the group.

“Captain, an issue of a personal matter came up while we were there and the dinner had to be put off until tomorrow night.” Susanna used her best diplomatic manner.

Piper scowled. “What happened?” she asked, more than a little annoyed.

Scanner recounted their meeting with Pashtallash only an hour before, and how it had ended with their being

bundled out. Piper's annoyance abated a little when she realised Pashtallash had only acted out of their best interests. She sighed. "Just when I thought this universe was weird enough," she said introspectively.

Scanner sat forward in his seat and looked his friend and Captain in the eye. "Piper, I need a favour."

Manny, Crash and Susanna also sat forward as one. Crash said: "Actually, we all do."

"This should be good," Piper said with a thin smile. She tried to make the most out of life's little curve-balls, but sometimes it all came a little too fast.

The others looked to Scanner to be their spokesperson. "Piper, we need you to perform a wedding for us. We need it to happen first thing in the morning."

The Captain assumed that Crash and Susanna were performing as witnesses. "I suppose I can dust off my dress uniform for an hour in the morning, but that's the best I can do. No party, no reception. We don't have the time. We'll have to celebrate later."

Scanner grimaced and Piper wondered why. "You don't quite have all the facts, Piper. Crash and Susanna want to get married, too. We want it to be a double wedding."

The Captain's friends were not sure they had ever seen her gobsmacked before, but there was always a first time. And this was it. Piper just sat behind her desk, jaw dangling, eyes wide, speechless. It took her a moment for her brain to get back into gear, and she found herself

resisting her first impulse which was to say: "Are you out of your mind?" She looked from one couple to the other, then at each individual, then shook her head in wonder. She turned her attention to Crash alone.

"You went from infatuation to marriage pretty quickly, Crash." She let the concern she felt show.

Keeping the Captain's gaze, Crash let her see his resolve. "Yes, Captain. It *is* typical of my people in such matters. Once we decide to marry, we set our hearts on making it work and growing the love we have for each other." He squeezed his fiance's hand. "As we will do."

Scanner frowned. "Not every Cait thinks like you do, my friend. It's a pity your father doesn't share your ideas."

Manny was hurt by his comments. "Our father wasn't always that way, Scanner," she said, defending him. "I remember he used to be very affectionate towards her." Her brother nodded his agreement.

"I wonder what changed him," Susanna said thoughtfully.

Casttashack spoke for the first time with her serene voice. "Zif did." As the others turned their mostly curious eyes at her, she added: "One of the things he preaches is that men should rule over women and be the master of his house."

Jason Nunn also broke his silence. "Is that according to the scriptures?" he asked.

The young Cait shook her head, no. “He interprets the teaching that a man needs to *lead* his household as to somehow rule over it. It’s not the same thing.”

The Llash siblings stared at her as if she had grown an extra tail. “How would a youngling like yourself know this?” Crash asked.

“Because I’ve studied and even committed a fair amount of them to memory.” She said this with a certain measure of pride.

Crash and Manny shared a look that described how appalled they were. “Only priests are supposed to read them,” said a very troubled Crash.

Casttashack smiled at them contentedly and twirled her tail in delight. She was in her element. “That is what they would have you believe. The Teacher wanted everyone to know his teachings, *all of them*. Not just an elite few.” She looked at the Captain. “We tend to find this kind of reaction all the time among our people. We are so conditioned from youth to think that only the priests should be allowed to read the scriptures, that when one is given the opportunity to read them for themselves, they baulk at the very thought of it.”

“With knowledge comes power,” Piper said, pondering their situation. She scowled for a second as she realised they had gotten off track. She looked the four fiances in the eye, one by one. “Are you absolutely sure you want to go through with this?” she asked, totally serious. “I will not be happy if you express *any* regrets. If

you think you'll have any, *any*, then you should *not* go through with it. Do I make myself clear?"

All four nodded. She asked each one, in turn if they were certain this was the way they wanted it. Each one said yes, without hesitation.

"Then meet me in the Rec. deck at oh-nine-hundred hours tomorrow morning. We'll do it then. Any preparations you want to make beforehand you had better do tonight after this meeting. Clear?" Once again, Piper received nods from all. "Then let's get back to business."

Being a world famous reporter for News Prime had its perks. Not every place on the planet had a convenient transporter pad, and some news events happened on the oceans where beaming in was not recommended. So each reporter was encouraged to learn to fly, and drive, their company owned flitter. Treshtascene's was the executive model, sleek enough to look official, but with only so much of the trimmings. Still, he didn't mind. Tresh loved to fly.

As he drove himself home from work, he took great delight skimming over the tops of the trees for a short time before climbing to cruising altitude. It wasn't the done thing buzzing other people's homes, but it was still fun. Once he was in the right flightpath, Tresh settled down and let the autopilot fly. He lazily reached over and turned on the music player.

His favourite Caitian musician's hit songs began playing and he sat back to enjoy them. He liked this particular Cait as he had strong insights into the hearts of females. Rather than belittle them and treat them as objects to be conquered, he sang as if the males needed to make them feel valued, wanted, desired. He had always been unlucky in love himself. It seemed most of the females he had met simply got stars in their eyes when they discovered who he was, and he found their behaviour changed. Oh, well. He knew when the time came he would have a lot to offer.

As the music played, Tresh found himself singing along. It had been a good day, and he had managed to not only help out the Starfleet Doctor with her search for clues to the missing blacks, but he had more importantly secured the exclusive for an interview with Captain Piper herself! When they found them, he thought. That could take time. He made a mental note to see if he could dig up any new information. They quicker they solved the puzzle, the quicker he got his exclusive.

Noting the familiar landmarks of home, Tresh disengaged the autopilot and took the controls. The flitter buffeted a little with a sudden gust of wind, then settled into a glide path he had used hundreds of times. With an expert hand, he brought the craft down through the trees, extended its landing pads, and landed with hardly a bump next to his home.

He looked up, fondly, at the fruits of his success through the windshield, then opened the door to get out. He turned, picked up his briefcase with his personal recording datapadd in it, and stepped away from the vehicle.

Something punched him in the chest. Startled, he looked down and saw a black shaft protruding between his ribs. With a shock of recognition, he recognised it as a crossbow bolt, the choice weapon of assassins on their world. They were used because they were practically silent.

He dropped his briefcase as he slumped to his knees. He wanted to pull out the bolt, but he didn't have the strength. On some level, he knew that it had pierced his heart and that his time was over. He tried to cry out, but the nerve toxin coating the shaft was already taking effect, paralysing his lungs, what remained of his heart, his throat, and his jaw. Finally unable to even move his eyes, his last image was of his home as he slumped to the floor. His dying thought was that of regret. He was going to miss out on the exclusive.

He never saw the figure in the body-hugging black suit dart from tree to tree, taking the best advantage of the natural cover. The swift Cait darted forward, hid in the shadow of the flitter, then quickly grabbed the briefcase, securing it in the black bag he wore on his back, along with his crossbow. He then reached under the flitter's seat and removed the communications jammer he had placed there

earlier that day. He was not one to give people chances. He took a last look at his victim, lying in a pool of his own blood, then darted off into the trees. His orders had been to leave the bolt behind as a message, he reminded himself as he ran. He had been careful to wipe any traces of his existence from it, so he had nothing to fear. The only thing he felt was pride in a job well done.

It wasn't a neighbour who found Treshtascene, or even a friend or family member. His body was found only minutes later by Lieutenant Brankovian, the Andorian security officer under Amantallash. He had beamed down on the orders of the Captain herself when he had reported that Treshtascene had been uncontactable. Within seconds of materialising next to Tresh's home, he had noticed the prone form of its owner. He raced over to offer aid, but his antennae already registered a drop in his body temperature. It was too late.

Frustrated, he flipped open his communicator. "Lieutenant Brankovian to the *Millennium*. I need Doctor AndrusTaurus down here. We have a body."

Just to be certain, he dropped down on his heels and felt for a pulse inside Tresh's elbow. He found nothing. Careful not to disturb the scene, he began documenting it. Amantallash had not only trained her people to be good at guard duty, but she had trained them to be excellent investigators. He quickly took a three-dimensional image

of the scene from all angles so he could recreate it later holographically if required.

He also began scanning for anything out of the ordinary. Aside from the crossbow bolt, which the tricorder noted was covered in some kind of toxin, he found nothing. As he expanded his search radius, he heard the sound of someone materialising and turned to find the Doctor. As she darted forward towards the patient he cried: "Careful Doctor! That bolt is poisoned!"

Merete pulled up short and gave him a thankful nod. She ran her medical tricorder over the corpse swiftly, confirming he was long gone. She sat down on her heels next to him, being careful to avoid the blood pool, and gazed into his slack face. Any trace that the gentleman she had met only hours before was still around was gone. Despondent, she pulled on a pair of latex gloves, then gently closed his eyes.

"I'm sorry, my friend," she said sadly.

She got up and flipped open her communicator. Even though she, technically, had jurisdiction as this was a Starfleet matter, she always considered it polite to inform the local authorities. Once she finished talking with the local police dispatcher, she called her own people and ordered a guerney for the deceased. They were going to give him a proper autopsy.

Shortly after, the area was a hive of activity as the locals did their own documenting. As this was undoubtedly going to be a messy investigation, they were

happy to leave the matter in Starfleet's hands. Most of the investigators recognised the assassin's signature, and they wanted to have nothing to do with it. While they feared the assassins, they did at least inform her who was behind it.

Nobody knew who they were, or where they were from, but they were known of, and that was enough for most people.

Whilst Brankovian listened as Merete discussed the situation with the locals, he busied himself trying to find the position the killer fired from. He had taken note of the position of the body, extrapolated the most likely way he had been standing when shot, checked the bolt angle, then traced back along the bolt's most likely trajectory. There were a couple of trees along that line, and he checked each one methodically. Even after night had properly fallen, it took a while for it to become completely dark in this region at this time of year, so he kept diligently working under a portable spotlight he had ordered from the ship.

His patience paid off. On the third tree he tested, he found impressions in the soil behind it where the assassin must have stood. He photographed this and the tree, then he examined the tree bark and found the assassin had made a fatal error. As he had leaned against it to take the shot, he had left behind a single hair that had worked its way free of his clothing. Brankovian picked it up gently with a pair of tweezers and looked at it. His colour perception was not too bad in any light. Andorians see colour with their antennae, not their eyes. He was

uncertain in the light from the floodlamp, but he thought it was white.

That night, Scanner put Project Wedding into motion. Even before he had proposed to Manny, he had known that there was a real possibility that their wedding would take place on the ship when the time came, so he had begun making plans for that very eventuality. While he hadn't covered quite everything, he had most of the pieces in place so that they could make the finishing touches easily.

Knowing who he would need to do what, he quickly organised a very willing group of people who happily gathered to put everything in place. Leaving them to their work, Scanner put the final piece in place by making a general announcement over the ship's intercom, inviting anyone not on duty to join them for their wedding.

With all the bases covered, Scanner, Manny, Crash and Susanna retired to their rooms to:

(a) try to get some sleep, and

(b) prepare themselves for their wedding ceremony.

Naturally, there was very little of (a) and a lot more of (b) going on.

Chapter Ten

Oh-nine-hundred hours – ship's time – the next morning, found most of the off-duty crew members crowded into the Rec. deck to view the wedding. Most remembered the last one held here, and the tragedy that had ensued only days later. They hoped that history would not repeat itself.

There was little pre-amble with this service. No-one walked the ladies down the aisle. They simply stood beside their man and waited for Piper to begin. Both females had chosen each other to be their witnesses. The males had done their own thing.

Krashtallah had asked Carman Valastro, the ship's navigator, to be his witness, whereas Scanner had asked Sarda to be his best man. Both invitees were honoured, and were dressed in their dress uniforms that were starched to perfection. Their uniforms weren't that different from the normal red jacket and pants with white undershirt, except for their jackets, which came halfway down their thighs.

The six of them stood before the huge crowd under the shade of the Oak. The ladies noted that the entire Rec. deck had been decorated with white ribbons and bows. Scanner had even managed to organise a small podium for Piper, which was similarly decorated.

While the grooms wore their dress uniforms as well, the brides had gone their own ways. Amantallah simply stood as she was born, in her natural fur except for the simple pink flower garland on her head being held in place by her ears. She had obviously spent some time in the shower as her fur was incredibly soft, virtually translucent and shining. Afterward, she had spent an hour brushing every inch of herself. The final result was extraordinary. Her fur was fluffy from head to tail, yet very natural.

When it came to fluffy, Susanna had that cornered. Like Manny, she had spent hours preening herself. Unlike Manny, she wore an ankle-length, gossamer-thin, see-through, white dress that shimmered as she moved. It flowed over her form from her shoulders down her lithe frame and just covered her feet, as well as her arms. To Krashtallah, there was no more beautiful being in the universe. Likewise, Scanner only had eyes for his bride. The beholder's eyes were truly dazzled by beauty.

As Piper took her place behind the podium, a hush came over the crowd. Someone thoughtfully channelled the sound throughout the ship on the intercom so all could hear. She greeted each couple with a smile, took a final look at the world circling below them through the window behind her, then began.

“For longer than most people remember, ship's captains have had a singular privilege of being able to unite people in marriage. Today, that joy is doubled. Today, we

witness Lieutenant Commander Judd Samuel Sandage join Lieutenant Amantallah in marriage; and also Lieutenant Commander Krashtallah and Ambassador Susanna Carra."

Piper always loved performing weddings, but she had only done so a handful of times, and the last time she had done so had ended in tears for one of her dearest friends. Today, she was true to her word and was wearing her dress uniform. Her honey blonde hair was tied back in her usual ponytail, through a silver ring that held it in place. Her make-up was scarce as was her personal style, but she had been blessed with natural beauty, and even though she was in her early forties, she still caught the eye of most men. Her green eyes beheld her friends on their happiest day, yet she kept from them the fear that it would end badly for them. Working in Starfleet was frequently dangerous.

The Captain led them through their vows one pair at a time, starting with Scanner and Manny. She held off on presenting them until she had run Krashtallah and Susanna through theirs. No rings or other jewellery were exchanged as they didn't apply to any of the cultures represented. The vows involved were pretty standard regardless of species. The notion of loving, honouring, respecting, and not forsaking one another applied no matter who was taking part. Marriage was an institution held in high regard by most civilised cultures.

Once each had formalised their vow by answering in the affirmative, Piper finally turned to the crowd, a broad grin on her face. This was the part she liked the most. “As each couple had confirmed their commitment by the exchanging of vows, I now pronounce them husbands and wives! You may now kiss or be otherwise affectionate with each other!”

The crowd cheered as the four newly-weds shared in the mirth as each couple hugged and rubbed cheeks, Scanner planting a huge kiss on his bride's lips. For all of them, the joy within them felt barely containable, yet the time was tinged with a little sadness. What would normally have led to at least a couple of days off would have to be postponed. Immediately following their wedding, they had to go back to work.

Piper took both ladies by the arm and tugged them forward, as they, too dragged their husbands. “Ladies and Gentlemen!” The audience quietened for a moment. “I present to you: Mr and Mrs Judd Sandage and Mr and Mrs Krashtallah!”

Both couples shared a moment of laughter at the presentation as they moved forward through the crowd. Piper didn't begrudge them the few minutes of happiness as they worked their way through the throng of well wishers. Once they made the door, each couple then ran off in a different direction towards their quarters. Piper had previously informed them they could have half an hour to settle down (or whatever else they needed to do) before she

expected them to report back for duty in her Ready Room. It was unfortunate it had to be this way, but duty called.

The Captain's Ready Room was decorated in Piper's usual style with touches of purple here and there. Some thought it feminine and reflected the Captain's gender. The facts were it reminded her of her homeworld with its purple sun. On a small table off to one side sat two models of Constitution-class starships and one dreadnought. At a casual glance, the two Constitution-class appeared identical. Upon closer inspection, one would notice small, structural differences and the different call letters. One read: *U.S.S. Exeter NCC-1672*, the other *U.S.S. Enterprise NCC-1701*. The dreadnought read: *U.S.S. Star Empire NCC-2116*. The *Exeter* had been Piper's first commission, after it had been salvaged due to the ingenuity of her crew, which she saw through to her refit. The *Enterprise* had been the first ship she had served on under Captain James Kirk. The *Star Empire* was technically her first command as she had Captained the ship temporarily during the Rittenhouse crisis years before when she had been merely a Lieutenant. That incident had led her to her first big jump in rank – to Lieutenant Commander.

Piper liked to look at the models from time to time to remind herself of the path that had led her here. It was also a reminder that life was short and that nothing lasts forever. The *Enterprise* the model represented had been destroyed years before. And although she had shared

many adventures with her crew, and then the crews of the *Hood*, *Exeter* and *Millennium*, it sometimes seemed to all coalesce into a blur. She could recall in detail the crises that she had faced, but they had come with such frequency that her life seemed to be rushing by. She considered for a moment whether she needed a holiday, then cast the notion aside. There was nothing she would rather be doing than the job she loved so much.

She glanced up at the clock. The half hour she had allotted was nearly over. Sixty seconds to go. She hated not giving the newly-weds more time, but they had brought it on themselves with their insistence over the timing. Her gaze alighted on the other occupants of the room. Sarda was taking a quiet moment to meditate. Jason Nunn seemed to be thinking about something humourous. His eyes were wandering and he was chuckling occasionally. Casttashack was doing what cats were famous for. She was curled up in a corner taking a catnap.

As the clock ticked over, the door opened and four slightly flustered people entered. The newly-weds were a peculiar mix of elated and annoyed. It was to be expected. They had just made vows that would change the course of the rest of their lives, and they'd had no time to even get used to the idea. They headed over to the couch that had been thoughtfully left available for them, and they crowded onto it, making sure that each feline didn't wind up sitting on their tails. In her corner, Casttashack woke and sat up on her haunches. She was content on the floor.

A thought came to Piper and she addressed Manny.

“Before we start, there are a couple of things I thought we should sort out. Have you considered what name you’re going by?”

The new bride looked at her husband. “We talked about it and decided too many people know me as Amantallah alone. So, I’m going with Amantallah Sandage, except with my fellow Cait, where I’ll be known as Amantasandage.” She smiled at that. “It doesn’t sound very Cait, but it does let people know I’m taken.” She grinned, slipped her arm through Scanner’s and snuggled into him lovingly.

Piper looked to Susanna. “And you, Ambassador?”

She glanced at her husband. “Actually, we *haven’t* talked about it. My people’s females adopt their husband’s name, and I intend to adopt mine. So, from now on, I’ll be known as Susanna Llash.”

The pride Crash felt for his wife was written all over him as he lovingly licked her cheek, a gesture she returned.

Piper sighed. “Now that’s out of the way, let’s get down to it. Does everyone know their tasks for today?”

Each being nodded. It was going to be a busy day. Casttashack and Jason Nunn were going to review more of the scriptures. Scanner and Manny were going to talk to more families with missing Caits. Susanna and Crash were going to seek an audience with the King. Sarda was going to turn his attention to scanning the temple thoroughly.

An hour later, Amatallash and Scanner were trudging through the underbrush in a poorer area of Cait, having just come from another stonewalling session. At least the tune had changed this time. Instead of denying they had a black family member, they simply told them she was "missing", and that she often stayed away from home for extended periods.

"Perhaps she is taking a walk through the jungles of Simbra?" the clan leader had suggested in a poor attempt at helpfulness.

Manny was aware of the area. She had done the same thing with her troupe when she was only four. "It doesn't take ten days to walk across Simbra!" she had hissed. "I did it in two when I was a kit."

"Perhaps something happened to her, then."

The Security Chief went nose to nose with the indifferent male. "And I can see how her disappearance has you worried!" she snapped, letting the creep know just how she felt.

He hadn't backed down, but he hadn't held her eyes for long, either. "She may have run off and married someone for all we know."

Manny's eyes had narrowed to slits. "Yes, it's always the victim's fault, isn't it?" she had sneered.

At that point, Scanner had dragged her off and out the door. They were getting nowhere, and she had been in

such a state that he was afraid she was going to start a fight.

Amantallah glowered at her husband. "What were you doing?"

Judd shot her a look. "I could ask you the same thing!"

She stopped, looked him in the eye and snapped: "You interrupted my interrogation!"

Scanner took a breath to calm his nerves, then spoke evenly. "Sweetheart, there are a lot of sad people out there who don't value black Caits like we do. Getting mad at them isn't going to help those who are missing." He paused a second, then added: "And taking out your frustration on me isn't, either."

His wife recoiled as if slapped and was about to come back with a retort when his words sank in. She was taking it out on him. She stepped back and sank to her haunches, feeling as if she had somehow betrayed him. Their marriage was only an hour old and she was already messing it up. "I am so sorry, Judd. You deserve better than that."

Judd squatted before her and took her paw. "I think this whole thing is getting to us. We've been jumping through so many hoops that we're getting pretty raw."

Manny got the double entendre. She looked at him fondly and said: "I know I'm getting pretty roar." With that, she tipped her head back and did just that. She let all her frustration out for about thirty seconds of good, old

fashioned roaring. Scanner joined her and did some yelling of his own. When they were done, they sat back in the grasses and laughed.

“That's better,” Scanner said as he got up on an elbow. He looked at Manny and had to remind himself once again she was his wife now. They had such a whirlwind wedding that the morning's episode seemed surreal. “Are you really my wife?” he asked, trying to touch base.

Amantallah stroked his face, as she gazed upon him as one would a precious jewel. “I am, Judd, and when we get back to the ship we're going to have to work out which of our quarters is better for us both to live in.” She ran her paws down his chest. “I'm not spending another night alone.” Her tone suggested she wanted more than just someone to keep her warm at night.

“What are they doing?” The individual who spoke peered at his monitor, confused.

His companion looked over his shoulder and squinted as if it would help him see better. It didn't, but he felt it helped him to concentrate. “I'd say they're just letting off steam,” he said candidly. He pointed at white Cait they were watching. “She's having a bad day, that we know.”

The pair had been tasked with watching the Starfleet personnel with remote cameras, much like the ones the reporters used. However, theirs were

programmed for stealth and were coloured to blend in with the forest. As such, they were very hard to spot. The only sound they made was when the camera lens zoomed in for close-ups.

“What are they doing now?” The two Starfleet seemed to be fond of each other! The white Cait's body language was all wrong for one who should be marrying a into a noble family or priest. The notion disgusted him.

“I don't know.” His companion squinted again, trying to see what they were saying. “Can you turn up the volume?”

In response, he turned up the volume full. Even at that setting, they heard only muffled sounds.

“I'm going to move it in closer.”

“Are you sure about that?”

“They won't see it. They never do.”

“Hmm.” The second observer felt his friend was a little too cocky. “There's always a first time.”

Regardless of his companion's warning, the operator altered the controls, urging the hover camera to move in closer. He also adjusted the zoom to better see the action.

Just as she was about to kiss Judd, Amantallah's ears flicked to the right as she heard an unexpected noise. On reflex, she whipped out her phaser and fired it at the target that had foolishly revealed itself. It exploded in a blaze of sparks and dropped to the forest floor, quite dead.

The move momentarily startled Judd, but he calmed when he realised what she had shot. He glanced at his wife once again and marvelled that she had taken the shot using her hearing – which was very acute – alone. His curiosity piqued, he moved over to the object's remains, picked them up gingerly and turned them over in his hands. Most of the components he recognised. "Some kind of remotely operated camera," he said, showing them to Manny. She picked up a piece and examined it.

"I've seen one of these before," she said with a frown. "I shot the last one, too." The notion gave her a sense of achievement.

Scanner had heard of the event from his wife earlier. "I know you took great delight in that, sugar." She had, and her recounting the story had given him a laugh. Concerned, he said: "Look at the shell. It's camouflaged. This is designed to spy on people."

Her eyes and ears flicking left and right as if seeking out more, Manny asked: "Who do you think is spying on us?"

Dropping the components into his bag for later study, Scanner said: "I think it would be just about everybody."

"I told you so."

The camera operator sighed and rested his head in his hands. This was not going to go down well with his superiors.

Whilst Jason was finding Casttashack's translation of the scriptures fascinating, including the fact that even though they weren't all written by the same hand, or even in the same millennia, they maintained a surprising symmetry and consistency. He had been making copious amounts of notes, and, even though he didn't agree with everything Casttashack believed, he found it easier for his investigation to agree with her line of reasoning.

They had just reached a point in one of the books telling the story of the Teacher's life when Jason found what he believed was an inconsistency. "Hang on, Casttashack, that's not right."

For one as young as she, Casttashack was amazingly patient. She looked up from reading the text, glanced out the bar's window at her world below, then looked across the table at her student. "What isn't?" she asked serenely for the nth time.

Jason flicked through his notes until he found what he was looking for. "In the other book, this story involved two people he was talking to, not one like in this book."

His teacher gave that smile teachers give any precocious student who asks a silly question. "I have told you before, Jason, that the writers sometimes tell the same story for different reasons and from different viewpoints." She closed her eyes as she considered an example. Inspiration came after a moment. "Say you're talking to someone on a hand-held communicator or telephone. The

person at the other end of the call has someone with them who can hear the whole conversation, but you are unaware of them. Now, from your perspective, there were only two people involved, but from the bystander's, there were three.”

Jason scowled at Casttashack. “That sounds like semantics to me, Casttashack,” he said, scepticism dripping from every word. He frowned as another line of thought intruded. “Casttashack, I have trouble wrapping my tongue around your name. Do you mind if I call you something else, like a nickname?”

Surprised at the notion, her eyes went wide as her tail stood on end. “What do you mean?”

The student for once in the last couple of hours became the teacher. “Where I come from, we have a habit of shortening people's names to make our conversations go quicker, and most nicknames are given fondly and reflect the person in some way. The simplest example I can give you is that if two blokes don't know each other's names, they call each other “mate” until they do. It's friendly, and easy.” He ruffled his curly, red hair. “Now, where I come from, they call me Blue because I have red hair.”

Unlike Zif, Casttashack seemed to see the humour behind the notion. She gave a light laugh that Jason found endearing. “What would you call me, then? Kitten? Tawny? Red eyes?” She thought this was amusing as hers were blue.

Jason gave her a smile the Cheshire cat would have been proud of. "Nah, nothing like that. I'd call you Faith."

It was only one word, but it made Casttashack virtually glow. "I like that," she said happily. "I really do." She looked him in the eye. "I would be honoured if you called me Faith," she said with great dignity.

"Faith it is!" Jason said with a wink. As his mind so often did, it went off on another tangent. He had often heard the Captain remark that his mind was made of ninety degree angles. "Faith, we've gone through four of the five books about the Teacher, and I haven't heard a single reference to the colour of anyone's fur!"

The newly christened Faith nodded. "You're right in that, Jason. I have read the scriptures through many times and I don't recall there being any mention of it. It's like it isn't important."

Jason tapped his pen on his cheek in thought. "Maybe from the scripture's point of view it isn't," he observed.

His friend smiled. "That would be God's point of view," she chided.

"Okay," Jason said, mildly irritated. She kept trying to sway his thinking and sometimes he found it annoying. "Whatever. I mean, we can use that! Do you have any idea when Caits started this whole thing regarding fur colour?"

Faith looked at him blankly. "I don't. I know the scriptures a lot better than I know Cait's history."

With a sigh, Jason put down his notes, picked up his cup of tea and took a sip. “Then maybe we should take a break from studying the scriptures and see if we can find it elsewhere. The origin to finding out about the cause of this racism could be the key.”

“Key?”

Jason had been talking to her, one-to-one, for so long that he'd temporarily forgotten he was talking to an alien from a different culture. “Sorry, I'm using a human term. The key I'm talking about is a piece of information that is vital to solving a mystery.”

Delighted to have learned two new things in five minutes, Faith flicked her tail playfully. “Okay, let's link your computer to Cait's primary archive and see if we can find it.”

“The King is not taking visitors.”

Susanna scowled at her nemesis, a lowly courtier, and bristled. She found the young male's attitude appallingly arrogant. “Are you aware that I am the Federation Ambassador? I have pressing matters to address with the King,” she said, using her most elite tone in an effort to get by this little male.

Unfortunately, he was not impressed. He gave her a bland look and answered her in a nasal monotone. “As I said, the King is indisposed. If you have matters of state to address, you should talk to the Minister for Alien Affairs.”

Susanna had met the Minister for Alien Affairs at the ball. Clueless was a word that best described him. It was an empty portfolio that meant nothing more than a fat paycheque. She drew herself up into a regal bearing. "The matters I wish to discuss cannot be handled by a lowly functionary. I need to see the King."

The "functionary" comment got the courtier's attention. His hackles rose and he almost growled until he remembered who he was addressing. Ambassador Llash was the voice of the Federation, and her position was not to be taken lightly. He tried placating her. "Perhaps the King will be available some time tomorrow?"

"What if I told you the planet was about to fall into the sun, would that get me into seeing the King?" Susanna's patience was beginning to wear thin. Sarcasm was her only vice.

The courtier leaned back on his stool and laughed. He sat in the traditional manner for his people, with his legs folded up before and underneath him. His tail curled behind his head and tossed back and forward merrily. "Only if it didn't affect his re-election chances," he said jovially.

The Ambassador sighed. This stone wall seemed to be as solid as they got. She was about to turn and leave when fortune smiled on her. The side door burst open and the King came running through it on all fours, wearing little more than a purple vest. At the sight of Susanna, he pulled up short and stood on his hind legs, whilst

continuing to move from side to side. The entire effect was of one interrupted in the middle of an exercise session.

“Ambassador!” he said with a pleasant smile. “Fancy meeting you here?”

Susanna gave him a smile that reflected his own, even though it was not heartfelt. That was politics for you. “I had hoped for an audience,” she stated formally, crossing her arms before her. She gave him the impression she wasn’t going to take “no” for an answer.

The King gave her a cheesy grin, giving Susanna pause to wonder if he was truly the right person to be talking to. “I’d love to. Follow me.” He waved jovially at her to follow him as he stepped through the doors behind the aide, into his private sanctum.

With a last, scornful glance at the aide, Susanna stepped through the doors, followed by her bodyguard – Krashtallah. The aide watched her go, then speed dialled a contact. “The Ambassador is here, and she managed to get in.” He nodded then disconnected. His was not to reason why. Just to watch and report.

Once inside, the King grinned amiably, then offered the duo a pair of exquisitely embroidered mats to sit on. “Excuse me for a moment. I’d like to freshen up. Just had my daily exercise.” He panted a little as he spoke, lending the air of one who had truly just come from a tough workout.

Susanna gave him a polite nod, and the King disappeared into a side room. As she cast her eyes about her, she asked Crash: "What do you think?"

He shrugged, nonchallant. As a local who had watched the news, there was little surprise in store for him. The highly polished dark wood panelling nearly reflected their images. There were a few shelves, stocked with books that mainly detailed the terms of previous Kings and the history of Cait. Aside from that, there was the obligatory mahogany style desk, even though it was much lower than a human's desk, a window behind it facing the manicured lawns surrounding the government buildings complex, and a small gilded, yet still lovely, chandelier dangling from the high ceiling.

As for the King, he had gotten over his proximity to the monarch the other night at his over-the-top gala event, and since his enlistment in Starfleet, he had seen enough of the galaxy to know that Cait was only one of many planets in the huge stellar community that was the Federation. Yet, for all that, he still honoured the sovereign by wearing his award.

Crash looked lovingly into the eyes of his mate. "Susanna, I've seen this room hundreds of times on the news vids."

She shook her head. "That's not what I meant. What do you think of the King's behaviour?"

"I've always found him to be a bit eccentric," he said, not wanting to bad mouth his people's leader.

Susanna's eyes tracked over to the door the King had disappeared through. "I don't know. He seems to be a bit flippant. I'm not sure he's the person we should be talking to."

Krashtallah rolled his eyes in good humour. "I don't think we have a whole lot of choice."

"You're right about that." She was about to turn away from watching the door when it opened again and the King rejoined them. Gone was the singlet and slightly bedraggled look. He had returned looking every bit the royal leader he was, although simplified. He wore a simple vest with the royal seal on the right breast.

His clothes weren't the only thing that had changed. So had his demeanour. His jocular face had been left in the bathroom. The serious and reserved mask had been put on. Before they could say anything, he stepped over to a bookshelf and turned on his music player.

The music that issued was vaguely familiar to Crash, but he noticed the King seemed to enjoy it. He faced the player for a moment, seeming to savour the rhythms of the gentle tone. Yet, there was something else in it. Crash's ears started bothering him and twitched slightly. It was if there was something just beyond the range of his natural hearing that was annoying him. Crash glanced at his wife and found her ears twitching as well. However, unlike him, she covered her ears with her paws. "What is it?" he asked.

"Can't you hear that?" she begged, visibly upset.

The King looked at her apologetically. "My apologies, Madame Ambassador, but it's necessary. The hypersonics interfere with the listening devices I am certain are installed in this room. It is the only way we can have a private chat. I was unaware that your species would be able to actually hear it. It is just beyond the Cait's ability."

Understanding the necessity, Susanna took away her paws and simply took the scarf from around her neck and put it over her head, pulling down her ears flat. She then tied it off under her chin. "That's a little better," she said, although her pained expression did not depart completely.

The King sat down before them on his personal mat. "I assume you are not here to talk about our energy crisis," he said.

Susanna nodded, then spoke in her most formal tone. "No, sir, we are not. I have actually been tasked with the duty of determining Cait's fitness to remain a member of the United Federation of Planets."

If the statement surprised the King, he didn't show it. He simply nodded slightly, as if he had actually been expecting her response. "Please, go on," he said politely.

Without batting an eyelid, Susanna continued, exercising her full diplomatic authority and being comfortable in the role. "Sir, you must be aware that the Charter for Sentient Rights, signed by all the members of the Federation, determines that all sentients have the right

to live free of persecution from others. It has come to our attention that this is being violated by your people in respect to their treatment of Caits with black fur. To top it off, we have evidence that many of your dark coloured citizens have gone missing in recent days. Nothing seems to be happening to protect their right to freedom and liberty. Every enquiry we have made has come back fruitless. We know they are being taken, but the families aren't talking out of fear.

“We have also noted that the Cait have adopted two new ministries: The Ministry for Information and the Ministry for Homeworld Security. We have observed their activities and found them to be operating against the spirit of the Federation Charter.” Susanna held his eyes, serious, but not threatening. “How do you respond to these charges, Sir?”

The King showed nothing of his earlier behaviour. He simply sat, considered her words, running a finger over his lips as he thought. After a few moments, he caught her eye once more. “Guilty as charged, I'm afraid.”

Stunned, Susanna blinked. This was not the response she was expecting. Usually, politicians tried to obfuscate, or dodge the issue somehow. The King was simply confessing. She took a moment to consider her next words.

“Sir, your world is standing at a crossroads. If it continues as is has, it will find itself isolated. The Federation would start with sanctions, and if that is not

effective, expulsion from membership.” She softened her tone. “I don't want to see that, and I don't think you want to, either. So, what can we do about it?”

The King's eyes turned to her companion. “Krashtallah, here, will tell you that my position is largely ceremonial. I have very little real power.”

“Not true, sir,” Crash spoke. “You have the power to dissolve parliament and install a new government. You have the power to call for a fresh election.”

The King baulked at that suggestion. “Are you out of your mind?” He stood and began pacing around his office. “There is no guarantee they would not simply have me removed as mentally incompetent, and then install the Queen in my place.” He stopped and levelled a baleful glare at them both. “She would be your worst nightmare. She supports the current regime. I've been dancing around the edges trying to stop it from becoming a full blown forest fire.”

Susanna tipped her head in thought. “What would you need to make it happen?”

“Ha.” The King stopped his pacing and sat down once more. He felt like a conspirator against his own people. The distress he felt was plain to see. “I would need Captain Piper's help to stave off the military.”

Crash started. “Cait has no military,” he said bluntly.

The King levelled a sad eye at him. “A Department of Homeworld Security doesn't exist without some muscle.

You will find that they do, indeed, exist, and that Captain Piper had better watch out. If they launch a strike against the *Millennium*, they just might succeed.”

Shaken, Crash rocked back. The hair on the back of his neck stood on end, and his tail thrashed to and fro. This was not good. “I will warn her, and inform her of the threat. If Captain Piper does decide to back your dismissal of the government, she will act decisively. You can be assured of that.”

For the first time, the King suddenly felt like there was a chance for his world to remain in the Federation that made it strong. Without Federation support, they could easily fall victim to outside aggression. Or even their own.

“What else?” Susanna asked. If they were going to put their cards on the table, they needed to lay them *all* down.

“You would need to take the Ministers involved into custody. You may not be able to hold them under our law, but you *could* charge them with violating Federation law. You will need to hold them for at least a day. It takes that long for a change to become law. Once they’re safely out of the way, I can legally dissolve the offending ministries, and install the opposition party to govern. They have tried voting down the changes, but they don’t have the numbers.”

As Susanna nodded, making mental notes, the King turned his attention to Crash. “You will have a sad duty to perform, sir. You may have to take your brother into

custody as well. I am not certain, but I believe his paws are soaked in blood.”

The words did not shake the Commander. He had been at odds with his brother for so long that it would not effect him much at all. Neither did his words surprise him. “I understand,” he said calmly.

Wanting to cover all bases, there was one other consideration. The King said: “Somehow, you are going to have to deal with Zif and the priesthood. They hold an awful lot of sway.”

Susanna smiled at that. “Fortunately, we have an idea about that. You can leave it with us.”

At this, the King, committed to the course, nodded gravely. “When are we going to start?”

The Ambassador sighed. Her authority was being stretched, but the legal representative of this world was asking for their help. And she was determined to give it. “I would suggest the day after tomorrow. We all need to make preparations. I would suggest that you quietly tell the opposition party leader our intentions. That is, if you can trust him.”

The King pondered that thought. “I will consider that. He *is* a good Cait, but I’m not sure where his loyalties truly lie.” He stood, bringing the meeting to a close. Respectfully, the others stood as well. “I suggest we get together again tomorrow morning at the tenth hour. I will make sure my aide knows the time.”

Crash shook his head. “I don't think that's a good idea. Two meetings so close together will raise suspicions, if this meeting hasn't already. I suggest you take a morning run, as you did today, privately. Once you are in the clear, we will beam you aboard the *Millennium* and continue our discussion there. You will even be able to talk with Captain Piper face-to-face.”

Smiling, the King nodded his agreement. “I like the way you think, Krashtallah. Alright. I normally go for a run at the ninth hour plus a half. Once I am clear, I will stop and wait for you to transport me.”

Susanna shook the King's paw. “Thank you, Your Highness. We will talk again tomorrow.”

Gallantly, the King touched her paw to his lips. “Thank you, Ambassador Carra. I look forward to it.”

Susanna could not help but correct him. “Ahem, sir. It's Ambassador Llash, now. I just got married.”

A genuine smile split the King's face, one that reached his eyes. “Congratulations! Who is the lucky male?”

With that, Crash took his wife's hand. “I am, sir.”

The King placed a paw on each other's shoulder. “May the Maker bless you both. I hope you have many kits together.”

The happy couple shared a look. They didn't even know if they were genetically compatible, yet. Kits could be out of the question, unless they adopted. “We do, too, Your Highness,” they said, accidentally in unison.

With that, they took their leave and walked out, heading for a transport pad home to the *Millennium*.

“Did you get any of that?”

The operator in charge of eavesdropping on the King arched his whiskers downward, no. “Sorry, sir. They seemed to have employed countermeasures.” His tone was respectful, yet fearful.

His superior scowled and bared his teeth, revealing his broken left fang. The Minister would not like this. Yet he still had to report it. The Ambassador was up to something, that he was sure of. What it was, he did not have an inkling.

He walked out of the ultra-modern room that was packed with the latest in observation technologies, and made his way down the pristine corridors to the Minister's office. Whilst the building was dazzling with its modern technology, he found it dreadfully sterile compared with traditional Cait architecture. It seemed classic never went out of style.

Once he arrived at the Minister's office, he stepped into his aide's outer office, and announced himself. “I have urgent information for the Minister,” he reported.

The aide looked at the Minister's itinerary before him, found he was not busy, then enquired as to whether he was welcome.

“Send him in,” the Minister barked.

Without preamble, he marched into the office and saluted. Minister Huttajink scowled up at his lower officer, whom he had personally dubbed “broken fang” so he could remember him. “What is so important you had to interrupt me?”

Broken Fang had no idea what it was he had interrupted, but he didn't care, either. It was not his place to question his superior. “Sir, our people have observed the Federation Ambassador meeting with the King. However, they employed countermeasures, so we have no idea what they talked about.”

Huttajink could guess. While the general word was that Captain Piper was here to help them with their energy problems, the question remained why they needed to bring an Ambassador with them, or that she would need to speak with the King. Something smelled here, that was for certain. Whatever it was, it could ground their plans – permanently. That was something he was not willing to chance. “Increase the surveillance on the Ambassador and the rest of the Starfleet personnel. I want to know anything they let slip.”

“Yes, Minister.” Broken Fang stood there for a moment longer, wondering what to do next.

His superior narrowed his eyes at him in annoyance. He let it show in his tone. “Do you have anything else for me?”

“No, Minister.”

“Then go climb a tree! I have work to do here.”

Chastened, Broken Fang spun on his heel and departed, leaving the Minister to ponder the situation. He thought it prudent to make a few calls.

Chapter Eleven

Frustrated, Sarda frowned at the monitor. It would be illogical to be annoyed at a machine that was performing its function within operational parameters. It was simply unable to work miracles, and that was what it would have taken to penetrate the Temple's Thoron field that was disrupting his equipment.

Noticing his frustration, the Captain sauntered over to his station and looked over his shoulder. "What's up?" she asked.

Without moving, Sarda said: "As I have not been there, Captain, I cannot state for certain. However, I can tell you that, despite several hours of trying different methods, I cannot penetrate the Temple's shielding."

The Captain stifled a smile. If it had been anyone else, her friend would not have indulged in the little joke. Such was their relationship that they had the freedom to be completely honest with one another. Their "link" precluded any attempts at anything else. "So, what's Plan B?" she said jovially.

Sarda straightened and swivelled around in his chair to face her. The lines in his forehead creased as he considered his failure. "I am unaware of there being one."

Reaching behind her, Piper dragged over another chair, straddled it and faced him. She propped her elbows on its back and sat her chin on her cupped hands. "Okay,"

she said thoughtfully. “You’ve tried the obvious. However, when a full frontal attack fails, sometimes you have to go for subtlety and sneak in the back door.”

Her friend raised a brow. “I believe I *was* being subtle,” he said, slightly defensive.

The Captain shook her head. “That’s not what I mean. What is the objective here?”

Sarda took a breath as he considered the problem. “Overall, it is to verify if the items within the “Museum” are real, and to see if anything can be learned from them that could be useful.”

Piper twisted her chair to and fro as the two of them worked on the problem. “All right. I take it you’ve tried everything short of phasering a hole in the roof to see what’s inside.”

The Commander turned and touched a control on his board. “*Seeing* what’s inside is not a problem, Captain. Lieutenant Nunn took a number of still images that I have used to create a three-dimensional image of the room.” He manipulated a few more controls, and Piper suddenly found herself gazing at a small 3D image hovering in space between them. Its detail wasn’t perfect, yet the items were clearly visible on the bench, each one labelled. From the sword to the nail, each was rendered so Piper could make out where each item lay.

“Okay.....” Piper looked at each item, then looked up at her First Officer. “So, what are you hoping to find here? Most of it looks like junk.”

Sarda pointed to the nail occupying the corner. "That is what I am hoping to sample, Captain. It is an iron nail, supposedly held in stasis for the last two thousand years, that purports to have traces of the "Teacher's" blood on it."

The Captain's brows shot up. She understood the implications if they could get a sample of the blood. "So, what's the problem?"

Sarda steeped his fingers in their shared habit as he thought. "The stasis field must be shut down. As long as it is running, the nail may as well be within an impenetrable force field. As time is flowing much more slowly within the field, we cannot interact with it or even enter it. Any molecule trying to pass the interface would become literally frozen in time. It would not be able to move beyond the interface for possibly hundreds of years, depending of the flow of time within the field."

"Ah-ha." Temporal Mechanics was not Piper's strong suit. She had to have a basic understanding to pass the Starfleet Exams, so she did grasp the basics of what Sarda was saying. "So, how do we shut it off?"

"That is the problem, Captain." Sarda stood and ran his fingers through his hair. It was the most expressive he had been for some time, and it made Piper wonder if her old friend was in need of a holiday himself. He would never admit it, but even Vulcans needed a break now and then. "Zif told me that the field is run by geothermal energy. I cannot cool the planet to starve it of energy."

Piper tipped her head back and stared at the ceiling as she thought about the problem. "Where is the generator?"

Sarda stopped and thought back to his conversation with Zif. "I was given the impression that it is somewhere under the Temple."

That comment gave the Captain reason to chuckle. "A friend once told me that when you assume something, you make an "ass" out of "u" and "me". I wouldn't be taking Zif's statements at face value. It would be monumentally coincidental for there to be the right kind of strata under the Temple for a geothermal generator. I'd be looking for an underground conduit used to deliver the energy. If you trace it back to its source, you should find the generator. Shut it down there and you'll have all the access you want."

The Vulcan sat down once more and gazed into his Captain's green eyes with his blue. "And then what? I fear that, if we "borrow" the spike, we could start a furore."

"Hmmm." Piper ran her finger over her lips as she thought. Her eyes narrowed as an idea formed. "What if they never knew we took it?" She turned her attention back to the 3-D image. "How good *is* Mister Nunn's photo? Could we use it to make a copy?"

Sarda put his finger into the image and touched the spike. In response, the spike grew to real size and hovered before them. The forward side was completely realistic. The rear was flat black, as the computer could only

extrapolate on what was known. Upon inspection, Sarda said: "It is possible, Captain. We would have to guess at what lies behind, but it *is* in a stasis field that has supposedly lain dormant for two millennia. I would suggest that no-one knows what the rear of it looks like as it cannot be seen with its back to the corner."

"You're probably right about that one," Piper said with a touch of doubt. "I suppose we can fudge the rear of the spike." She stood up and pushed the chair back where it came from. "Commander, I'll leave Operation Temple Heist in your capable hands." She had no doubt he could pull off the job, only doubt that their intervention would remain undiscovered. "Let me know when you have it in custody. I'd like to have a look at it myself."

Later that evening, the same four people stared up at the Llash home and wondered if this was such a good idea. Still, duty called and they had to answer. They had previously discussed the best ways of dealing with what they were about to encounter, but the space faring people that they were knew that the best laid plans had a bad habit of going completely to heck.

As it was nearing winter, it was a little darker this evening, and the clouds had moved in overhead, threatening rain. All four of them could smell the drenching to come as they knew that soon the skies would open up and send the torrents the forecasters had predicted.

Knowing this made their walk a little easier as they had no wish to get wet. Each couple joined hands as they made their way over the smooth ground, their hearts thumping in their chests. They made their way up to the door in the same fashion as the day before, and stood, waiting, as Scanner knocked.

Once more, it was opened by Pashtallah who wore a broad grin. "Hello, my kits! It's so good to see you! It has been too long!"

The message was clear and understood. They were not to mention anything about their visit the day before, and their father was home. Both Llash siblings gave their mother a huge welcoming hug, and saved the introductions until they were inside. While Pashtallah wasn't entirely unfamiliar with the custom, she acted as if she was and only accepted it to be polite.

The Llash clan leader was no different, visibly, from most of the other male Caits on this world. He was of average height and weight, but his bearing was different. He was the leader of this clan, and no-one could, would, or should challenge him in this home. He looked up from viewing the news on the family viewscreen that occupied a large space on one wall, and took his time getting up. Once there, he looked at the group and sized them up one by one. His opinion of Crash hadn't changed, and he barely registered his presence. Susanna received a token curiosity. Amantallah saw fondness in his gaze. Scanner picked up suspicion from him.

Slashtallah stepped forward to greet them, and was startled when both males stepped in front of the females. "What is the meaning of this?" he growled.

Krashtallah spoke first. "Father, we have nothing to hide from you." He was used to his father's bullying ways, and he was not about to be a party to any more. He began the introductions, by first gesturing to Scanner. "I would like to introduce first, my friend and colleague, Commander Judd Sandage."

Scanner gave his father-in-law a smile and held out his hand. Slashtallah, recognising the gesture, returned the handshake. His bearing was still one of confusion and distrust. "Commander," he said simply as he let go and stepped back.

Now it was time for the bombshell, and Scanner braced himself for the likely detonation. He spoke in a friendly, yet formal tone. "It's good to meet the leader of my wife's clan, sir."

Utter confusion reigned in Slashtallah for only a moment, then the penny dropped. Amazement, wonder, then finally fury burned in his eyes, and yet, he managed to maintain control. He turned his gaze to his daughter and said simply: "Is this true?"

She didn't respond. What Slashtallah had just done was offensive in their culture, and Judd had to do something to save face, otherwise Slash might never respect him. Boldly, Scanner stepped into his line of view and eyed his father-in-law seriously, as his new brother-in-

law had told him. He had also told him that he had his back if it came to it. He spoke calmly and clearly. "Sir, I speak for my clan, not my wife. It is true, she who used to be known as Amantallash is now Amantasandage. She is a credit to my clan and a great testimony to your family's ability to raise successful kits."

There was no challenge to Scanner's statement, and it was not meant as one. It was simply a statement of fact. Torn between rage and duty to honour their customs, Slashtallash just stood there and shook. Crash slowly tensed his muscles, as did Manny should the need arise to defend Judd.

Manny could not help but admire her husband's cool countenance as he stared slightly up at her father. He bore no malice, and projected calm. According to custom, it was his job to speak for her until the time came for less formal conversation. In the middle of introductions such as these, one had to stand on decorum, and her husband was doing brilliantly.

Slash tried staring down the Starfleet officer who stood there as if he owned the place. Judd just looked back at him with respect, but also with the bearing of one who was not going to back down. Knowing he was getting nowhere fast, Slash turned his fury on his son. Without breaking eye contact with Judd, he hissed: "Crash, how could you let this happen to your sister?"

Krashtallash tried not to take enjoyment from his father's predicament, but he could not help himself. With a

sly grin he said affably: "I endorsed it, Father. Commander Sandage is a very good match for her."

The visitors could not help but notice Slash's paw shaking. His claws were slightly visible, and yet Judd continued to stand before his father-in-law as if he didn't have a care in the world. Before Slash could say another word, Scanner said: "Krashtallah, you haven't given your family your good news yet!"

As if this evening could not get any more bizarre for Slash, his eyes went wide in wonder at whatever it could be his wayward son had to tell him. Finally breaking eye contact with Judd and regarding his son as one would a traitor, he asked smugly: "What good news could you possibly bring that would erase this evening's shame?"

Crash eyed his father pityingly. He was beginning to wonder if his father would ever understand. "I see no shame, Father, in the excellent choice your daughter has made in a mate. I do see shame in the way we have been greeted." He turned and introduced his bride. "This lovely female is Federation Ambassador Susanna Llash, my wife."

Trying not to loathe her father-in-law, Susanna gave him a slight bow at the neck.

Dumbfounded, Slash could only stare at her. She stood tall and proud, and stepped forward to be by her husband's side. Her thin, colourful dress did nothing to hide the fine form she was in or the authoritarian bearing that came with her station. Unaware of any custom

regarding receiving foreign dignitaries, he could only bow at the waist to honour her position. Now at his side, Pashtallah did so also. "Ambassador," he said roughly, through a tight throat, "you honour my clan and I with your visit and your choice of mate. Thank you."

Gracious as always, Susanna said: "Sir, you have blessed me with a wonderful husband who will no doubt father many children with me. If I'm at all fortunate, they will look just like him." She looked up at him in sheer adoration, knowing that her comments would rub salt in a sore wound, but not really caring. After this evening, the odds were the only person she would miss from this place would be her mother-in-law.

Knowing that she had just given him a backhanded compliment, Slash went on his guard with her. "Ambassador, how may I address you?" he asked, trying to be friendly with this person who could be very useful to his clan, even though he had already decided not to like her.

Crash gave his wife a quick glance letting her know it was his place to speak. Formally, he stated: "You may call her Susanna as she is a member of our clan, Father."

For the first time that Crash could remember, Slash looked at his son with something akin to gratitude. He wasn't certain there was no avarice in his father's heart, but he was grateful for the moment. "You have brought honour to your clan, Krashtallah. Thank you." It wasn't warm or friendly, but Crash took it.

With the introductions finally over, and with a last baleful look at Scanner from Slash, Pashtallah finally spoke. Her voice was vibrant and cheery. "It's so good to have the family together tonight!" she said, clapping her paws together. "I received a call from Grun that he'll be along shortly." She looked at Scanner and Susanna as she took their arms. "You'll be able to meet him as well."

Both visitors shared a look. While neither of them had dealt directly with Gruntallah from the ball, they had heard the stories. He had turned out to be a real piece of work.

Without asking her husband, Pashtallah stated: "Viewer off." The news disappeared from the wall to be replaced with an image of the forests outside. As each person took a seat on a cushion, she walked into the kitchen to prepare a drink for each of them.

Slash looked slyly at Scanner. "I remember talking to you last night. My mate told me that you had visited yesterday looking for me."

Judd lounged on his side on his cushion, resting on his elbow, legs stretched out. Manny curled up behind him and rested her head on his side. Lovingly, he reached down and rubbed her cheek with the back of his fingers. He then casually looked at their host and replied truthfully: "When I was here yesterday, I was hoping to talk with you. One of the things I wanted to discuss with you was how Cait might deal with transporting the fuels needed to run antimatter reactors. Part of this world's energy problems

lie with your people's unwillingness to mine for minerals. As dilithium can't be replicated, you'd have to mine for it, if you had some to start with. Since we arrived, we haven't found any in our scans, so Cait would have to import some." At this point, Scanner went into great detail regarding the special requirements for transporting dilithium, leaving Slash with no doubts that he knew what he was talking about.

On his cushion, Crash curled up with his bride curled next to him. He'd had only hours to get used to the sensation of having her there, and he took great delight in it. He licked the back of her head, not caring if anyone, especially his father, disapproved. Susanna purred in pleasure. Their enjoyment of one another had to be put on hold when Pash returned bearing bowls of fruit juice for the felines and a mug for Scanner. Judd noted that it wasn't the same one he had drunk from the day before.

As they drank, they took a moment to sit in silence. It was largely uncomfortable, save for the fact that the newly-weds were simply basking in the afterglow of their morning's nuptials. It seemed as if nothing could truly burst their bubble.

As they finished up, the front door was flung open and Gruntallash entered. He was such a frequent visitor that knocking was unnecessary. In his mother's mind, sometimes it seemed as if he'd never left home. It never occurred to her that he was simply mooching off her for her well made dinners.

Stepping inside, it was clear that he'd been caught in a sudden downpour. He had flown here in his government issue flitter, but he still had to walk from it to the tree house. Drenched, he put down his bag, shucked off his governmental garb, stepped back out onto their "porch" and shook himself off. Water went flying in all directions. Once looking a little less like a drowned rat, he stepped back indoors, gave a curt nod to all, then disappeared down the hallway as he made his way to the family sonic shower.

Everyone watched him go, getting the distinct impression that he was not amused. The sonic shower quickly did it's job, and within moments Gruntallash rejoined them, looking a little more like an aspiring leader.

For a moment, he stood and surveyed the group as they sat on their cushions, looking back at him. He wasn't a government minister for nothing, and he quickly gathered what his sister had been talking about at the ball. As for his brother, it was clear he had given himself to an offworlder, and that suited him just fine. He could pollute the Persian genome with his bloodline instead of the Cait.

His father stood and made the introductions. He started with Susanna. "Ambassador Susanna Llash, I'd like to introduce you to my son, Minister for Transportation Gruntallash." She gave him a simple nod from where she was sitting, and he returned it. There was no love lost there.

Slash then turned his attention to Scanner. "Grun, this is Lieutenant Commander Judd Sandage of the *Millennium*, and his wife Amantasandage." Slash made no attempt at softening the blow. He wanted them to be uncomfortable with their union. However, to his annoyance, they seemed to take delight in being reminded of the fact.

Grun was not as reserved as his father. His privileged position in Parliament had spoiled him. "How could you, sister?" he blurted, his eyes narrowed and seeing red. "You must have married since the ball, as the last time I met you, you were single and considering marriage."

"There's no time like the present, brother," Manny said with a grin. "Aren't you happier now you don't have to worry about finding a mate for me? I'm sure Zif will be crushed." She was delighted for an opportunity to mock their religious leader.

Trying to stave off an all out war, Pashtallah clapped her paws together and said: "Time for our meal!"

Those seated stood and quickly moved over to the table and took their seat. Grun glared at his sister, who could care less what he thought. She was still mad at him for his betrayal of her at the ball.

Once seated, Pash quickly laid out their plates for them, with big, juicy slices of meat for all the felines. Susanna asked for a knife and fork so she could slice hers into smaller chunks.

Judd looked down at his plate and found it full of vegetables. The Cait did not cook their meat, so there was little use for stoves and ovens. Not knowing what his favourite foods were, Pash had done her best to replicate something humans would eat without offending the noses of everyone else at the table. Burnt meat did nothing for a Cait's appetite.

“Thanks,” Judd said with a polite smile. He sorted through the local lettuce and tomato variants and tried them, finding them a little tart, but still pleasant. Pash had no idea that he would rather have sunk his teeth into some well cooked catfish, with a side order of cooked vegetables and maybe some cottage fries. “How did you know what my people eat?”

The lady of the house puffed herself up with pride at her success. “I looked it up on the computer and enquired of Memory Alpha. It showed me a good, nutritious human meal without burnt meat. I was surprised your people mostly don't eat raw meat.”

Except for sushi, Judd thought, and he'd never developed a taste for that. He liked his fish cooked. He looked up into Pash's expectant eyes and did not want to crush her. She seemed so eager to please, and he really liked her. There was no way he was going to hurt her by telling her the truth. That in his estimation, she had given him a meal fit for a rabbit. “It's lovely, Mrs. Llash. Thank you for your thoughtfulness.”

“My pleasure,” she said, delighted with her success.

Next to him, Manny slipped her tail over and rubbed her husband between the shoulderblades. She knew her him better than her mother did and that he must be hating his meal. She was very happy with him for caring about her mother's feelings when he'd only known her for one day.

Slash looked over at Grun. "Have you seen the new messages from the government, Grun? About reporting suspicious behaviour?"

His son nodded, yes. "It's proving quite successful. People are calling in already."

The subject matter caught Susanna's attention. Concerned, she asked: "About what?"

Grun looked over at the table at his new sister-in-law and decided there was no harm in telling. "Since Martin Luther and his followers made their grab for the headlines, there have apparently been rumblings among other dissident groups. Rather than sit back and wait for something to happen, the government has decided to be proactive and seek out troublemakers and put a stop to them *before* they can do any damage. So, we've instituted a campaign asking concerned citizens to inform the Ministry of Information regarding people who might be acting suspiciously so they can be brought in for questioning."

The whole scenario did not sit well with the Starfleet crew. They had been taught history lessons from a number of worlds that this kind of approach never

worked and was just another step on the slippery slope into fascism.

Susanna kept up the line of thought. "So, citizens are being brought in for questioning based on nothing more than hearsay. Is any evidence being collected? Are formal charges being laid before people are being incarcerated?"

Confident that their approach was the right one, Grun defended his people's actions. "Would you rather have people with dangerous intent moving around freely in society?"

Susanna put down her cutlery and faced Grun squarely. "You cannot make laws to institute a change of heart. You cannot in a free society tell people what to think. If you do, it is no longer a free society."

Heat was rising in Grun's eyes as he stood his ground. "You can't have a society if you don't have security. People don't want to live in fear that there might be terrorists living next door. They want the government to act to protect them."

Susanna sighed and glanced at her husband, who knew what she was thinking. She levelled at her new family member a gaze full of certainty. "There is an old saying, Grun. Any man who trades freedom for security deserves neither. If a people is trained to think that there are terrorists hiding under every bed, they will believe it and some might even take advantage of that fear and embody it. But if you give people the freedom to think for themselves, and to share those notions without fear of

reprisals just because someone else might disagree with them, only then you can truly be free. Free from fear, and free from the tyranny of political correctness. You see, your government is deciding what is right and wrong regarding things they have no right to, whilst covering up its own hypocrisy regarding its wrongs against the blacks. When you tell the people what is politically right – like telling people it's good to be happy with the government and treason to disagree, you've stepped over the line. What you wind up with is a populace that starts discriminating against its fellows because of imagined slights regarding your imposed rules of what is okay and what is not.”

“Foolishness,” Grun said, waving at her dismissively. “You obviously don't understand the dynamics of our culture. How could you? You're just another offworlder who thinks the universe is wonderful.”

The Ambassador was not about to let that comment go without a fight. “The first way a person who believes in political correctness tries to kill a conversation is to put a label on someone. “You're misinformed”, or “You don't understand”, are just labels. They don't address my arguments, they are simply statements that are designed to shut me down.” She levelled a finger at him. “It is just another example of a system that is rotten to the core. Fear is no basis for running a society. It doesn't work, and it's usually the catalyst for that society's self-destruction.”

Grun swept his arm around him, trying to appear amused by Susanna's statements. “Nobody is trying to

breed fear on Cait. Only a healthy respect for law and order. If you're doing the right thing, then you have nothing to fear from us."

The Ambassador snorted. "Who says the people in power are trustworthy? Who says they don't have an agenda of their own? A system that has no checks and balances is weighted heavily against the people it is supposed to serve." Susanna eyed him thoughtfully. "Have you forgotten your job is to serve the people, not rule them?"

"Ha!" His adversary had hit a sore point and he reacted angrily. He pounded the table with his fist. "The people are sheep. They need the government to think for them. To act for them."

"He's right, you know." From the head of the table, Slash made his position clear. "Zif has been telling us for years that the blacks can't be trusted. And look at what Luther did in the cafe. It could have turned into a bloodbath."

Crash's eyes became slits. He had taken that comment *very* personally. "Does that mean that *I* can't be trusted, either, Father?"

Slash's mouth opened slightly as if he was about to say something, then closed as he noticed the rising hostility coming from his guests.

"I thought so," Crash said with finality. "Did it ever occur to you that you only think that way because someone else told you to?" He waved at the viewscreen

angrily. “You put too much stock into the words of a hatemonger. Zif has an agenda of his own, Father, that has nothing to do with peace and love. He will stop at nothing less than genocide against the black Cait. How do you know it will stop there? When there's nobody left to hate, who will be his next target?” His words came out as a plea for sanity.

Again, Slash could not answer his son. In a way, Manny came to his rescue.

“Father,” she said. “Under your leadership, I have lived a privileged life. I have received a good education, food, and a wonderful roof over my head.”

Slash was in the middle of saying “thank you” when his daughter interrupted him. “I would trade it all if you would just accept Krashtallah for who he is rather than what he looks like.” She bristled with anger and speared the table with a nail. “*He* is the one who stopped Martin Luther and caught him. *He* was the hero of the day. *He* is the third in command of this Federation's biggest starship, whose actions determine the fate of worlds. And you sit there and tell others that he is of no consequence simply because his *fur is black!*”

His daughter's words came as a punch in the stomach to him, and yet Slash was so set in his ways he could do nothing but defend his notions. “How can you say that?” he said, wounded. “The blacks are responsible for the death of the Teacher, and their actions since have been anything but honourable.”

Manny shook her head in wonder. She rubbed her temples, then asked: "Give me an example."

Slash's eyes narrowed as the thought. "Well, Martin Luther's attack, for one."

His daughter rolled her eyes. "I meant other than the two you mentioned," she said, her patience holding on by a thread.

Slash thought. And thought some more. After thirty seconds of silence, he said: "I can't think of one."

Manny went in for the kill. "That's because there aren't any. This whole thing is a conceit. For centuries, black Caits have been persecuted just because a priest said they should be." She held up both paws askance. "Could he have gotten it wrong? Could all of this hate be for nothing?" A notion came to her. "Do you think Martin Luther would have had anything to complain about if he hadn't been persecuted for his colour?"

Trying to make *some* kind of point, Slash said: "Who knows what his motives were?"

Crash's paw came down on the table with a resounding slap. He glared at his father, amazed at his lack of reasoning. "I do. I knew him when we studied together. He was so disgusted with our system and lack of tolerance for people who were different that he changed his name to something he thought was more honourable. The human he named himself after made positive changes that affected their whole world. He was hoping to do the same for us, but out of his frustration for our people's childish

behaviour, he chose the wrong path. He thought you can change a people's perceptions by pointing a gun at them. The only changes you make following that path are for the worst, not the better. The Teacher told us to *love* our fellows. He didn't say just love the tawnys and whites. He said *fellows*."

Both Slash and Grun snorted at that. Grun growled: "And then the blacks killed him for it."

At this point, Manny had had enough. She stood, crossed her arms and scowled down at her father and tawny sibling. "You pair make me sick. For one, we have people who have checked the scriptures and you know what? There is *no mention* of the colour of *anyone* involved in the Teacher's death. Nothing. You have been conned into believing that black is evil, and even though we show you the truth of it, you still value the lie more than you value *your own flesh and blood*." Susanna, Crash and Judd joined her at her side. She pointed a finger at her father and nailed him with a glare. "I'll tell you one thing, Father, I am *glad* I no longer have to bear the name Llash because of you!" She turned and pointed her finger at Grun. "And *you* have brought our house nothing but shame. I am Mrs Manny Sandage, and I am proud to bear that name." She took her husband's arm, then cast an apologetic look at her mother. "I am sorry, Mother, but we will have to cut our visit short."

For all Manny's vitriol, her colour had kept Slash and Grun's mouths shut. Their prejudices regarding the

nature of whites were such that their words and opinions bore extra weight, just because her fur was white. Now she had finished, both tawny males stood up, folded their arms, and turned their backs on her and the others. The message was clear, they were no longer welcome in this family.

Pash understood this also. There was a real possibility she would not see her two children or their mates again. She rushed over and rubbed cheeks with each of the four of them before they left. "I'll miss you," she said. "I'll miss you all."

Scanner smiled. "Don't worry. We'll send you photos of your grandchildren and keep in touch."

"PASHTALLASH!" Slash shouted angrily. Summoned, Pash turned and forlornly stepped over by her husband's side. Yet, defiantly, she did not turn her back on her children. She knew she might receive a beating for it later, but it was worth the cost to her to see them as long as she could before they disappeared in the beam of their ship's transporter and were gone.

As they were taken in the beam, Judd was heard to say: "I didn't know you guys had sheep."

Manny replied: "We used to, but we ate them."

Shortly after arriving back on the *Millennium*, Crash found himself knocking on the Captain's private quarters. It was later in the evening, yet not so late that he would be disturbing her slumber. The door slid aside and a weary, yet sharp, Captain Piper stood with her hand on the

doorframe. She wore her customary purple kaftan that she liked to don after hours, and her blonde hair had been loosened. Crash guessed she had been brushing it when he called.

“What can I do for you, Crash?” she asked as she yawned.

What she said wasn't quite clear, but he understood. “May I speak to you in private, Captain?” he asked.

Perplexed, Piper stood aside to let him in. “I would have thought you'd be spending the evening with your wife,” she said.

“Duty calls, Captain,” Crash said as he stepped inside. “I had an idea, and the sooner we act on it, the better.”

Piper waved for him to sit down, and he did so on her thickly carpeted floor that he liked. “What is it?”

Crash smiled confidently. “I think I have an idea how we can find the missing blacks.”

“Well, that turned out to be a complete fiasco.” Gruntallash licked the last of his fruit juice from his bowl and smacked his lips in pleasure.

Slashtallash rolled his eyes in disgust. “Starfleet has spoiled her, I think.” He got up from his now empty table and stepped over to his favourite cushion. “Viewer on,” he stated, activating the monitor. He called up the appropriate channel, then padded out his cushion before curling up to watch.

His son did likewise and soon the pair of them were engrossed in hearing Zif's latest message to the faithful. He was dressed in his plain cassock with the effigy of the Destiny Tree hanging around his neck, yet his eyes blazed with his characteristic zeal. As usual, he pleaded for Caits to care for one another, as the Teacher had instructed them to, then his message did a complete about turn.

"My friends, it is a glorious time for our people," he said with the joy of one heralding a new age. "The killers of our beloved Teacher have all but been removed from our world. It is a final solution to the problem that has plagued our people for so long. No longer will we have to look over our shoulders for the evil ones. No longer will we live with the fear that our children will become their next victims. Or worse, their sympathisers. No longer will we have to put up with the stain of their existence." He grasped the lectern and stared into the camera, looking each of his viewers in the eye. "However, we must be diligent and not become complacent. We need to take further steps to preserve our future. It may be painful, but we must make sure that their kind will not tarnish our world again!"

As Slashtallah cheered Zif's speech, Gruntallah was left wondering what those steps might be.

Half an hour after Crash knocked on her door, the Captain stood with him before a shimmering forcefield in the brig. On the other side of the electronic barrier sat the

only other three black Caitians they had found, and that only because they had presented themselves in spectacular fashion.

Suddenly aware he had company, Martin Luther popped his head up from where he was curled up on the floor and opened his eyes. He was surprised to find the Captain and Krashtallah standing over him, especially as such a late hour. Suspicious, he narrowed his eyes, his neck hair bristled and his tail shook. "Is it time for my interrogation, Captain?" he said darkly.

Dressed once more in her uniform, Piper gave a slight laugh. Rolling her eyes, she said: "You have nothing to say I need to know."

"Then what..."

Crash cut him off with a growl. "How would you like to do something to actually *help* your fellow blacks?" he said gruffly.

With his companions stirring next to him, Martin sat up. He looked his former friend in the eye. "What do you mean?"

Crash sat down on the floor so he could be face to face. "We have searched for answers to find the missing blacks, and we've found nothing. There is evidence that more blacks are disappearing, yet no-one will tell us anything. To all intents and purposes, they are disappearing into thin air."

Martin crossed his arms and scowled at him. "How do you know they're not simply being killed? I don't plan on joining their number."

Crash shrugged. "You may not have much choice in that. The way things are going at home, they just might execute you for your crimes anyway. Before we leave orbit, we're going to have to beam you down to face the music. Either way, your body will be fed to the recyclers."

The hero in Martin didn't sit well with that. "What do you want of me?"

Crash shifted where he sat. "My guess is that when we beam you down, it won't be long before you'll vanish along with the rest of our black fellows. It's our belief they're being sent *somewhere*, and we need to know where. We want to make you trackable so we can come after you and the rest."

The notion appealed to Luther. "So, if you follow us, you may recover our brethren." His eyes narrowed. "What's in it for me?"

His old friend gave a dark chuckle. "I would have thought that was obvious. You'll be thought of as the hero who brought his fellow blacks home to freedom. You might still wind up going to prison, but your actions will be remembered." He added: "For the right reasons."

Martin tipped his head to the side as he considered their request. "I can live with that," he said, finally. He looked Crash in the eye. "I might think you were actually trying to help me."

“Huh!” Crash said as he curled his lip in disgust.

“My compassion for your sorry skin ended when you pointed a phaser at a friend of mine and her children. I have no patience for cowards who use innocents to make a point. If you wanted to bring attention to the plight of the oppressed blacks, I can think of many ways to do that without involving others. Terrorism is never justified.”

Luther crossed his arms smugly. “That's easy for you to say. You're sitting here in your lovely spaceship galavanting all over the galaxy, while your brother and sister blacks have been suffering at home under an oppressive regime that is hell bent on killing us all. From my point of view, my actions were totally justified.”

“And gained *nothing*.” Crash let that hang in the air for the moment. “The best you have accomplished is possibly postponed your execution. The minority out there who once pitied blacks have now got a reason to hate us because of *you*.” He stood up and glared at Martin Luther. “We are giving you a chance to redeem yourself. Do this, and I'll put in a good word for you when this is all over. If you don't, well, what can I say? Have a nice death.” With that, he turned on his heel and started for the door. The Captain, impressed with her third officer's mettle, gave Luther one last sour look before following.

They nearly made it to the door when Luther cried out: “Stop!”

Crash and the Captain shared a quick smile, then turned and looked at Luther.

With all the humility he could muster, which wasn't much, their captive said: "What do you need me to do?"

An hour after that, Krashtallah finally sauntered into his quarters, totally beat. His legs ached, his back ached, and his body screamed for a sonic shower. As a feline, his natural tendency to self clean remained, yet he had neither the time, nor the inclination to do so.

From her place on what until the previous night was his bed alone, Susanna popped her head up and smiled at him. "Hello, dear. How was your day at work?"

Her husband smiled at her. He loved coming home to her. "I had a tough day at the office, carra. But we got it done. Luther and his pals have been transported down to Cait."

Susanna nodded. They had discussed the strategy earlier. "Good." She frowned. "Why did you call me by my before-name?" Cheekily, she said: "Have you forgotten our wedding already?"

Removing his abbreviated uniform jacket that covered his shoulders, he let himself have a good laugh. "My wife, your before-name is my people's word for darling – carra."

As if a light came on in her head, Susanna's eyes lit up with understanding. "Ah! That's why your people kept snickering when I introduced myself." She positioned her face so she could see herself in the mirror. "Mind you, I do look quite darling, don't I?"

Crash moved right over to her and ran his fingers over her face. "You do at that, my love," he said, totally heartfelt. He let her go and stepped over to the shower. "I'll be back in a minute. I need to feel clean again."

At that, Susanna jumped up off the bed. "I'm coming with you!" she said. "I could use a shower too."

Her husband stopped and looked at her quizzically. "There's not a lot of room in it for both of us," he said, trying to be thoughtful.

In all seriousness, Susanna looked up into his eyes and said: "Then we'll have a lot of fun finding ways to wash each other." As she stepped past him and into the cubical, she said: "Besides, we've got to do our bit to conserve the ship's reserves."

Not believing a word of it, Crash followed her. "Just don't drop the cleansing lotion, or we're both in trouble," he said with a chuckle.

Being closer to the front door had its advantages. Whenever someone knocked, Pashtallah was usually the first one to hear it. The master bedroom was further down the hallway, so when someone tried to announce themselves, they had often missed it. Now Pash had made her daughter's room her own, she could hear a lot better if someone came late to visit.

However, tonight, nobody knocked. Yet somebody let himself in. A number of somebodies. And the first Pashtallah knew of it was when the door creaked open.

Thinking her husband had come looking for her late to either punish her some more, or to get her to fix him a late snack, she opened her eyes and looked to see what he wanted.

What she saw terrified her. Two Caits, of that she was certain, stood just inside the room wearing black robes. Their faces were obscured by hoods and Pash was aware enough to realise they were not here for a social call. She might be subservient to her husband and put up with his abuse, but there was no way she was going to be intimidated by these interlopers. She coiled herself up, ready to spring when out of nowhere one of them stunned her senseless with a phaser. She fell onto the cushion, unconscious.

Behind them in the hall, Slashtallah was dragged out of his room. One of the invaders pointed at his wife. "You can carry her," he ordered. His tone of voice brooked no argument. The phaser he aimed at his chest leant weight.

Furious, but with no other choice, Slash stepped into the room and picked up the limp form of his wife. Struggling with the dead weight of her body, he finally managed to pull her over his shoulders. However, he stumbled a little under the added weight. The feel of a phaser jabbed in his spine encouraged him to do better.

As they quietly left the dwelling and made their way outside to the black, unmarked flitter, one of the

intruders remarked to another: "Funny, she was going to be more trouble than he was. Coward."

Chapter Twelve

The day started pretty much as usual. Piper met Sarda and Merete in the Officer's Mess for breakfast, and were joined by Crash, Susanna, Scanner and Manny. They had their usual breakfasts, shared some banter, and went through their daily calisthenics as if everything was completely normal. They had no idea of the tribulations they would face.

Once they had agreed to their tasks for the day, they set about making things happen. Piper accompanied Sarda to the bridge and watched as he scanned for Martin Luther.

“They are still in the Capitol's Jail, Captain,” Sarda reported needlessly. Piper had learned to recognise her friend's small shifts in emotion, and through their telepathic link she already had her answer. She had felt his small, but noticeable annoyance and disappointment.

Piper pursed her lips as she sat in the Centre Seat. “There were no guarantees with this plan, anyway,” she admitted. “Still, keep an active tag on him. If he moves at all, I want to know about it.”

Her friend and First Officer nodded. He had anticipated the order as he was very familiar with Piper's style, and, like her, he had learned to sense her thoughts and feelings. “Aye, Captain.”

Mr and Mrs Sandage were wrapping up their investigations of the missing black Caits. They were visiting the homes of the last three reported vanishings, and finding a disturbing consistency among them. They were all empty.

At the door of the last home, Judd knocked, then stood back respectively. Manny used her hearing to her advantage and listened for any peep from behind it.

“Nobody's home,” she said, bothered.

Her husband shrugged. “Lots of people work,” he said, unconcerned.

Manny checked her padd. “According to our intel, only the husband works in this house. The wife should be home.” Her whiskers arched downward, displaying her worry. “This isn't right.”

“What isn't?” Scanner had learned long ago to trust his wife's intuition. She was a sensitive, that was known.

“I don't know, but I know how to find out.” After a very quick look around her, Manny pushed through the door and entered the home.

“Hey?!” Scanner yelled, shocked, but not really surprised. He quickly followed down the stairs and into the subterranean living quarters. At the bottom, he stopped and looked over Manny's shoulder. One thing was clear, someone had had one hell of a fight.

Manny stepped over the torn cushions, trying to avoid disturbing potential evidence, and surveyed the home. It was apparent that someone had been surprised

late at night, and that they did not go easily. Claw marks adorned the surfaces in a number of places, and cushion stuffing littered the floor. There was even a smashed clay drinking bowl next to one wall.

“Look at that!” Scanner said in surprise.

Manny followed his pointing finger to a familiar scorch mark on the wall. She carefully stepped over and peered at it closely. To be certain, she scanned it with her tricorder. Sure enough, it had been caused by a phaser set on stun. “You’re right, it’s a phaser mark.” She glanced around the room. “Someone wanted to take them alive.”

“Who and why?” Judd asked, confused.

Manny raised her brows at him. “That’s the sixty-four catfish question,” she said with a slight smile. Her little joke brought some cheer to her mate as he joined her to check out the rest of the dwelling. It took only a moment to confirm that nobody, living or dead, was home.

Scanner looked at her readings. “We’ve got to get this to Piper, fast.” He started towards the door and talked as he went. “I don’t think this is isolated. We’re gonna find this all over, I’m sure.”

Once upstairs, Scanner pushed open the door, enjoying the splash of sunshine over him, then reached for his communicator.

As she reached the top of the stairs, Manny once more felt there was something definitely *wrong*. Instinctively, she pushed her husband as she heard the distant *twack* of a crossbow being fired. She heard him cry

out as he fell forward and to the left, but she had to block him out as she rolled and brought her phaser up and fired, blind.

Two hundred metres away, she saw a figure clad in black jump back from her near miss. He dropped his weapon and ran in the opposite direction away from them.

Wanting to chase her adversary, she first glanced back at Scanner to see if he was okay. As any wife could, she rushed to his aid when she found he was cradling his right elbow. Then she saw a black crossbow bolt through the flesh of his upper arm.

He looked down at it in a daze. "Ah've been shot at with phasers and photon torpedoes, but I don't know *how* I'm going to explain this one."

To Manny's trained eye, he seemed more than just in shock. Something was wrong. His voice was slurred as if he was drunk. She immediately suspected poison. She whipped out her communicator and flipped it open. "Manny to *Millennium*, emergency beam up to sickbay for two!"

The reply was immediate. "Acknowledged."

The world around them changed in a moment from the forest of Cait to that of their modern, functional, sickbay. Before she could move, she was roughly pushed out of the way by Merete who quickly ran a medical tricorder over the engineer. She scowled at the crossbow bolt and said: "I thought so." She turned to her aide, Nurse Stone, and said: "Help me get him on the diagnostics bed."

The muscular human Nurse Stone stepped behind Judd and picked him up under the shoulders. She grunted under his weight, but managed. Judd was in no condition to help as he was delirious and muttering to himself. With Merete taking his legs and feet, they managed to get Judd off the floor and onto the bed.

The next thing Merete did shocked Manny. Already wearing surgical gloves, Merete cut the tail of the bolt off with a laser scalpel, then she grabbed the bolt behind the head and pulled it through his arm and out. The motion caused Judd to cry out in pain before he passed out.

Standing at the end of the bed, Manny fought every step of the way for self-control. She desperately wanted to help her husband, but she knew she would only get in the way. Her duty to Starfleet and the ship warred with her overwhelming need to somehow aid her mate. The Captain came to her rescue. The doors whooshed open and Piper strode in purposefully along with Sarda. The normally stoic Vulcan seemed a little rattled, as did Piper.

“Report, Lieutenant,” she ordered.

Her tone of voice was just the thing to snap Manny back into focus. She stepped away from the bed, turned and faced her Captain, all business. “Captain, an unknown assailant fired at us with a crossbow when we were leaving the last residence. I believe the intent was to silence us. I managed to scare him off with a phaser shot, but I’m afraid he got away.” She was sorry her husband’s assailant escaped, but he was not her first responsibility at that time.

Piper knew this and understood her security officer's concerns. "Can you give me the co-ordinates? I want to send Brankovian down to check it out. He's found some interesting evidence so far regarding our assassins." Her tone was only mildly conversational. Her attention was also divided between her old friend on the table and the business at hand.

Manny nodded and dug out her padd. She handed it to Sarda who organised Brankovian to beam down and investigate.

However, the security officer wasn't finished with her report. "Captain, I believe we have a bigger problem."

That caught Piper's attention. "Go on."

"Every home we visited this morning was empty. In our investigations, we have rarely found a home with nobody there. This time, there was no-one. When we came to the third home, I went in to have a look around. The place looked like someone had had a fight in it. There was even a phaser burn on the wall. If I had to guess, I'd say the occupants have been kidnapped as well."

Hands on hips, the Captain frowned. This was not good. "Were the parents black?" she asked.

Manny shook her head. "No, Captain. They were tawny."

"That didn't take long," she muttered to herself. "Damn!" she cursed, as she hit a wall with her balled fist.

"What is it, Captain?" Manny asked, a little concerned.

Piper looked at her as if she'd grown a third ear. She was surprised she had missed it. "They've escalated," she said. "It's not enough for Zif to oversee the removal of the black Caits. No, now he's got to get rid of the gene from the entire populace."

Perturbed, but stoic, Sarda said: "That would be illogical. Fur, like hair colour, is a trait that is endemic to the entire species. The only way to ensure there would never be any future black Caits is to commit genocide on the entire populace."

Angry at the sheer stupidity of the situation, Piper said: "I don't think Zif and logic have ever met, Sarda." She narrowed her eyes in thought. "I hope we find something useful when you go ahead with your heist." A little hopeful, she looked into his blue eyes. "When do you go ahead with the plan?"

"In one hour, Captain," he said, meeting her gaze.

She crossed her fingers for good luck. "Here's hoping," she said, then turned back to look at her engineer. "And for Scanner, too." She noticed that Manny's attention was already there, and she let it go. One did not get between a woman and her spouse.

Patiently, they waited while Merete worked. She and the unflappable Nurse Stone worked feverishly, injecting this and testing that. In the meantime, Scanner's readings fluctuated, but did not go near the danger line. A little while later, Merete put Scanner's arm in a regenerator

and turned to her expectant audience. Rather than speak to the Captain, she talked to Judd's wife directly.

"He's going to be fine, Manny," she said in that tone doctors use when they're quite sure and wanting to put their patient's families at rest. It was a mixture of confident and friendly. "The individual who shot him, whoever he was, obviously didn't know that his poison would not work on a human. The most it'll give Scanner is a couple of hours sleep and a good hangover." She pushed Manny on the arm with a grateful smile. "It's a good thing he didn't shoot *you*. You would have been dead within a minute." She looked over at the bolt sitting in a sterile tray. "Mind you, if he hit anyone in the right place with that thing, it would have been all over."

Relieved beyond words, Manny gave Merete a bear hug, nuzzled her cheek and said a very grateful: "Thank you." Letting her go, Manny stepped over to the bed, picked up Judd's left hand, and sat with him whilst lovingly caressing it. The others in the room could hear her quietly saying "Thank you" whilst rocking gently.

Piper watched for only a moment, not wanting to intrude, but also feeling like she was violating her security officer's privacy. She was getting a glimpse into the Amantallah she did not know. The vulnerable and needing person that everyone has inside. She was seeing the depth of Manny's love for her husband. For a moment, she felt guilty for grilling her for information, but the times were perilous, and they had little space for niceties.

Quietly, Piper stepped over to the other side of the bed, brushed a lock of hair out of Judd's eyes and whispered: "Get well soon, old friend." She then turned, laid a comforting hand on Manny's shoulder and said: "Stay with him for a little while, then come and see me. Okay?"

Numbly, Manny just nodded and quietly wept.

Half an hour later, once she was convinced that her husband truly *was* going to be alright, Manny tore herself away from sickbay and reported to the bridge. Once she stepped through the turbolift doors, Sarda looked up from the Centre Seat and simply pointed towards the Captain's Ready Room. Getting the drift, she made her way over and tapped on the door chime.

"Come in!" she heard the Captain call through the door.

She hit the button to open it, then stepped through and came face-to-face with the King. Without thought, she dropped to one knee and bowed.

Kraltathat quickly took her by the hand and gently lifted her up. With a voice full of angst, he said: "Don't bow to me, Amantasandage. I don't deserve it. We're in the middle of a nightmare I couldn't stop, and now your husband is paying the price for my mistakes."

Astounded by his humility, Manny's eyes went wide as she looked in eyes she could find no deceit in. She didn't know what to say.

“How is Commander Sandage?” the King asked.

His concern touched her.

Manny moved her jaw and tried to make a sound. It took her a second to find her voice, but when she did, it came out with her usual strength. “The Doctor tells me he's going to be fine.”

The King gave her a genuine smile. “That's great news.” He turned and offered her his seat before the Captain's desk. “Please, we're all friends here.”

Feeling a little out of her element, Manny took the offered chair and looked across the desk at the Captain, who, she observed, was watching the King. She had a look in her eye as if she didn't quite believe him, or that she wanted to. It reminded her that the King was, above all, a politician. They were skilled at deception, and she told herself to remain on her guard. She should not take him at face value.

At this point, Manny took a quick glance about the room and saw that she was a latecomer to the meeting. Jason, Faith and Merete were already here, and had obviously been discussing the situation with the King for some time before her arrival. Her eyes alighted momentarily on Merete, who gave her a confident grin. She felt a pang at that moment, that the Doctor should be looking after Judd, but her mere presence in this room bespoke the fact that her husband was going to be fine. Merete would never have left her old friend if there was a possibility that he wasn't going to be one hundred percent.

The Captain caught her eye and gave her a cheerful grin. “I’m sure Scanner will be back with his beloved engines in no time,” she said. “I should make a note to tell Ensign Rush to make sure everything’s polished before he gets down there. Merete said he’ll wake up with a hell of a hangover and I don’t want him to take it out on her and the engineering crew.”

For an instant, Manny felt like she needed to defend her husband, but she saw the cheeky tilt of her Captain’s head and remembered she and Judd shared a history that went back a lot further than hers did. From behind her, she heard Merete say: “Don’t worry, Jenny can take care of herself.”

Piper brought things back on track. “Anyhow, the King doesn’t have much time before he’s missed. Have we missed anything?” She looked around her and saw only confident faces shaking their heads. They had covered all the bases.

She stood and everyone followed. “Let’s go to work.”

As the crew, plus the King, made their way out, Piper waved at Manny to sit down. A moment later, Sarda stepped into the room and took a seat next to her.

Piper started. “Lieutenant, we need you for a special mission.”

Curious, Manny looked from one to the other of her superiors. “What is it?” she asked, fascinated.

The Captain deferred to her First Officer. "As you're aware, we've decided to *borrow* the spike in the Temple Museum." He said the word as if it offended him. "We considered simply using the transporter, but the Captain thought it might help to shift the responsibility if the subterfuge is discovered."

Manny's brows shot up. "How?"

Piper grimaced. "That's where you come in."

Fifteen minutes later, Manny had her answer. She walked through the Temple as if she owned the place, dressed in a robe identical to those worn by the rest of the Priesthood. Around her neck hung a copy of the Tree of Destiny. The disguise was so effective that no-one gave her a second glance.

Feeling the replica of the spike bounce against her flesh under the robe gave her pause. She felt like she was committing some form of heresy. She had to repeatedly remind herself that, to all intents and purposes, as the Priesthood were playing a major part in the conspiracy, they had made themselves the enemy.

Pretending to view the painted windows, Manny waited for the signal. She found herself fascinated by the images, but struggling to remember what they depicted. The pictures themselves said much, but the player's names were beyond her. She thought back to her childhood and tried to conjure up the classes she had taken that taught all junior Caits about the Teacher. His words, his

philosophies were the cornerstones of their civilisation, and she became irritated with herself that she could not recall the simplest details from his life. She decided then and there to refresh her studies.

Within moments, her communicator vibrated against her thigh where it was bound. She knew she had only fifteen seconds to make her way over to the museum door, and, using the battery operated rake she had replicated from the archives, she quickly picked the lock. As soon as she closed the door behind her the lights went out. Not that she needed one. The light filtering through the small window Jason had photographed was more than enough for her sensitive feline eyes to see by.

The hope was that the underground power generator that Sarda had found – and had just hit with an electro-magnetic pulse to overload it and cause it to shut down – once it was out of action, would not only remove the stasis field around the spike, but also the dampening field around the Temple. For these precious few seconds, Sarda was using the opportunity to scan the complex in detail.

Spying the spike, she stepped over and gazed at it in wonder. It still showed traces of his blood. Reaching out, she was almost surprised when she found she could grasp it. Quickly, she slipped it into a plastic pouch in her robe and put the replica in its place, being careful to make sure it sat just as the original had been. Satisfied, she withdrew her hand and almost didn't make it when the

stasis field's backup power snapped on. As it was, she felt a number of her finger hairs pulled out as the ends of them became frozen in time.

She shook her hand in pain, then looked closely at the stasis field. She saw a number of her hairs protruding from it. Worried she might leave behind tangible evidence, she took out her phaser, set it for a low energy, high temperature setting, and burnt them off. Once done, she had a quick look and saw only the tiniest parts of her fur still remaining within the field.

With that done, she straightened and turned to leave when she heard the sound of a key being inserted in the lock. Without hesitation, she slapped the communicator on her thigh. The prearranged signal was simple. "Get me out of here!"

She had no need to worry. The *Millennium's* transporter officer had been waiting with his finger poised over the controls, ready to extract her. As soon as the console beeped, he hit the controls to beam her up. By the time the museum door opened, Manny had vanished.

"Are you sure you saw someone unlock the door?" a clearly disturbed Zif demanded as he began checking on the reliquaries.

The young trainee priest nodded dumbly. "I think so, sir. At first, I thought it was you, then I saw you come in just after the power went out and realised it couldn't have been."

Not convinced the lad hadn't just been seeing things, Zif made a close inspection of the items. One by one, he painstakingly peered at them without touching them. Nothing seemed to be out of order. As he came to the spike, the lights came back on. The field shimmered for a moment as the power shifted from one source to another. As it did so, it highlighted the tiny white *somethings* on the edge of the field. Curious, he looked more closely and wondered what they were. They were white, that was all he could see.

Curiosity started turning to worry. Whatever they were, they shouldn't have been there at all. "Blane!" he yelled through the still open door.

The one called answered seconds later by poking his head in. "What can I do for you, Boss?" he asked irreverently. The one time engineer turned priest took care of their maintenance issues.

Blane's cheer always annoyed Zif. He found it unbecoming for a priest to always be so happy. Zif pointed at the spike angrily. "What do you think they are?" he asked with a growl.

Blane stepped over and slipped out of his robe, letting it fall to the floor, revealing his rippling muscles under his white fur. When Zif looked at him with a probing eye, he said: "So it won't get in the way." He ushered the others out of the way, then Blane moved his face as close as he could to the field without actually touching it. He ran a cursory eye over the spike and felt

confident it hadn't been moved. He then looked at the white objects. He had a tricorder at hand, but knew it would be futile to try it with the dampening field in place. Whatever was inside the field could not be scanned as the energy within the field was also frozen in time. That included the spike and the objects he was certain were hairs. White ones.

He straightened up and said in all seriousness: "I think they're hairs, Boss. They're white, so they probably belong to one of us. I think they tried to take advantage of the power outage to try to touch it, but got only got close enough for some of their finger hairs to get caught. Must have hurt when he yanked them out." He chuckled at that, then a thought struck him. He bent over and blew on the field. None of the hairs moved. He then sniffed the air. "Can you smell that?" he asked rhetorically. "That's singed hair. Someone wasn't taking chances. They burned the parts of the hair still poking out so we couldn't test them for DNA. Hmm. Clever character."

Zif took another look at the hairs. "Is there any way you can find out who did it?" he asked.

Shaking his head, Blane said: "No. The only way to test those hairs is to turn off the field first."

The head priest baulked at that. "That's not going to happen. No way."

Blane just gave a rueful smile. "Then the only way you're going to find out who was in here is to wait for about a thousand years for the hairs to finally work their

way out.” He pointed at the stake. “Time hasn’t stopped in there, it’s just gotten *very* slow.”

Annoyed, Zif just scowled at the field. Someone had been in here, that was certain. Someone with a key. Someone who might have touched the stake. Someone who had white fur. With each successive revelation, his scowl deepened. The odds were, it was a priest. Only his brethren could have access and the right colouring. An idea came to him. “We might have gotten a picture of him from one of the cameras,” he said, looking up at the one in the corner.

“Nah,” Blane said. “As soon as the power went out the cameras went offline. There’s nothing to see.”

Zif swivelled and looked at his younger assistant. “Was he in the Temple before the power went out?”

“Yes,” he said, fearfully.

The High Priest gave a cruel grin. “Then we’ve got him.”

A short time later, Zif and Blane stood before the computer console dedicated to the Temple’s security. Blane called up the video for the few minutes before the power went out.

“Let’s see now,” said Blane absently, thinking out loud, “if he came in the front door, then we might have some video of him outside. The light’s better there.” He manipulated the controls, and soon they found the individual responsible, walking towards the door.

Whoever it was was clever. They kept the hood of their robe pulled down to prevent recognition. Blane changed camera views and got the same result. His mouth twisted in frustration. He had installed this equipment, and it was making him look bad in front of the Boss. "Okay, let's see what he does inside." By letting the time roll on, and by changing camera views, they were able to keep the perpetrator in view. Once again, they were frustrated by the hood, and by the fact the perpetrator seemed to know where the cameras were.

"Isn't there *something* you can do?" Zif complained imperiously as he paced behind Blane's seat.

Now Blane was starting to lose patience. He growled and said through gritted teeth: "I can't show you an image I do not have."

In the end, the video showed the individual suddenly move towards the museum door, pull *something* out of his robe, and open the door. Just after that, the file ended. Blane sat back. "Now, that's interesting!" he said.

Zif stopped his pacing. "What is?" he asked.

Having figured out part of the puzzle, Blane was starting to recover his sense of humour. "Whoever it was knew just when the power was going to go out. This wasn't random opportunism. This was prearranged. He knew just when to pick the lock."

Tapping the controls again, Blane froze the side profile image of the intruder and zoomed in on the device used to open the door. He leaned over and looked at it.

Whatever it was, it was short, grey, barrel shaped and had a button on the top to activate it. Out of the end of it protruded a thin piece of metal with teeth on it.

“Well, what do you know?” he said in wonder. “I’d love to have one of those!”

Zif leaned in and peered at the image. “What is it?” he said with the tone of a scolding teacher.

Fast tiring of his Boss’ short amount of patience, Blane sat back, gazed up at him and said: “It’s an electric lock pick. They’re quite rare as very few people use cypher indented keys these days.”

Light dawned in Zif’s brain. “I see. Where would you get one of these?” he asked.

Blane’s eyes widened some as he thought about the question. His tail moved to and fro as he considered. “Most thieves would probably have one, that’s for sure. You wouldn’t find one in any shop. You’d have to buy it on the black market or replicate one.” He looked at the design once again. “It may be possible to find out who made it,” he said hopefully. “It might help us.”

With a low growl, Zif accepted that very little was going to be learned today. “Let me know what you find out,” he said as he made to leave. He slipped through the door and into the hallway of their catacombs under the Temple. He began moving towards the broadcasting room for this day’s message. On the outside, he was peaceful, even serene. Inside, he was seething. As far as he was

concerned, someone had violated their most sacred relic, and they were going to pay.

“He's moving, Captain.” Piper had begun moving before Sarda opened his mouth. She had felt the change and reacted. She fairly jumped out of the Centre Seat and quickly joined him at the Science station. On the screen, she could see an internal map of the capital city's jail. On it, three small, green dots began moving together out of the room they were in and down a hall. Within moments, they reached another room and then stopped.

“What do you think, Sarda?” Piper asked. “Time for an interrogation?”

“I do not think so,” Sarda answered, steepling his fingers once more as he was deep in thought. “They would interrogate them individually, not at the same time.” He stared at the screen as if daring it to give up its secrets. Then, miraculously, the dots vanished. Sarda began working the controls to reacquire them.

“What happened, Sarda?” Piper said, wondering what was going on. She pushed her hair out of her face, then took a seat next to her First Officer and began running scans of her own.

“I have determined that they are not jamming us, Captain. And, since there is no way to safely remove the isotope we injected into each of Martin's party, I would suggest they have been beamed out.” Sarda frowned at that. “Usually, that would be impossible.”

Piper nodded her understanding. "Every prison in the Federation has transporter inhibitors operating. For someone to be beamed out, it would have to be with the permission of the Head Warden. The inhibitors would have to be temporarily shut off." She turned her attention back to the console. "Then the question remains," she thought out loud. "Where were they beamed to?" She made a snap decision. "Sarda, you take the planet, I'll look in orbit. They can't be too far away."

Each set about their task avidly. Within moments, Piper exclaimed: "Got them!"

Sarda moved over to join her. He gazed at her screen. Three sources of their Gadolinium isotope were found on a small ship nearby. As they watched, it broke orbit, and began making its way towards the sun.

The notion that their answer for the missing blacks was to be found in them being cast into the sun appalled the Captain, but at this time, she had to remind herself that it only *appeared* to be heading towards the sun. Suddenly finding herself needing to break orbit to follow, she found herself in a conundrum. She was already committed to helping the King with his government's problems, and it would take her ships' resources to combat them. On the other hand, there were a large number of Caitian blacks who possibly needed rescuing.

Once more making the snap decisions that made her famous, she ordered: "Mister Sarda. Organise a team and take the *Cork* out as support to our people on the

surface. The King isn't due to make his announcement 'til tomorrow, so we still have time." She tapped her teeth for a moment as she considered, then added: "Take half the fighter squadron with you for protection. God speed."

Sarda got to his feet and began issuing orders. "Mister Nunn, Mister Valastro, report to the hangar deck." He spoke up for the internal comms system. "Mister Brankovian, report to the hanger deck. Squadron Charlie Alpha, scramble." Charlie squadron was made up of two halves, Alpha and Beta. Not waiting for anyone, he turned and strode for the turbolift and quickly stepped inside. As he turned to face the door, he found Jason Nunn and Carman Valastro had already joined him. With a parting look at Piper, who was watching him as he left, he touched her mind through their telepathic link. He bade her good fortune. She wished him good luck.

As the large and bulky shuttle eased its way through the forward hangar doors, Jason wondered once more why they didn't give these vessels a class designation of their own. "It's just too big to be called a shuttle," he commented to Carman. "It's got full warp capability. It's got phasers, and even a small number of photon torpedoes! Mind you, now I can see why the Captain called it the *Cork*. I swear I heard a popping sound as we left the hangar deck."

As Carman programmed in a course into geosynchronous orbit above the planet, he said: "Right

now, I'm just glad we've got it. Crash and the Ambassador need us."

Jason looked over his shoulder at the rest of their little band. Sarda was manning the Science station, keeping an eye on what was going on below. Brankovian was keeping his eyes and antennae on his weapons station. Behind him, they had a guardian angel. Hearing what they were about to do, Faith had requested to join them. As usual, she was curled up in the corner, trying to stay out of the way. In her hand, she had a small Caitian padd which she was reading the scriptures on. Jason found he had to admire her dedication.

He turned his attention back to the portal before him and watched as the *Millennium* broke orbit. He didn't have to worry. Surrounding them were eight of the starship's fighters, armed and ready for action.

On the bridge of the *Millennium*, Piper was still giving orders. "Keep us within sensor range of that ship, but make sure they can't scan us. Keep us just out of their sensor range. Conn, make sure we don't look like we're in a hurry. We're just going for a brief stroll. Keep us on a parallel course with them. I don't want it to look like we're following them, just in case someone's watching."

"Aye" came from a number of directions as the crew rushed to fulfil her orders. On her chair arm, Piper called up a schematic of the craft they were after. It was clearly Caitian in design, with its sleek curves and

conservative power plant. It even sported solar wings. It wasn't much bigger than an average shuttle craft, yet it contained a number of life forms – all Caitian. It was armed, but with not more than standard phasers. It had an unusually large cargo area, and Piper wondered why.

The Captain looked over her shoulder at the comms officer. "Get me the Ambassador," she asked.

Krashtallah started as his communicator chirped. He was down on the planet, hidden in the King's Palace along with Susanna. He had just finished running a sensor sweep of the room they were in, a small guest room not far from the King's private chambers. They had materialised behind the room in a secret hallway that all palaces throughout the galaxy seemed to have. They accessed the room through a cleverly placed door within a painting that *looked* like a door. Once opened, they jumped out and landed softly on the thick carpet flooring, Crash closing it behind him.

With time to kill, the pair had engaged in "getting to know" each other. It was in the middle of their loveplay that Piper intervened. "This had better be good," Crash growled. He flipped the communicator open. "Krashtallah here," he reported.

The Captain had not missed the subtle tone of annoyance in his voice. "Sorry to interrupt you pair, but I thought you should know we've broken orbit. We've left

the *Cork* behind for support while we take a quick look around the system.”

Crash's mind ticked over quickly. He knew the real reason and understood the Captain's hesitancy to mention it out loud. There were a number of ways someone could intercept their conversation. “Understood,” he said. “I gather Commander Sarda is commanding?”

Crash could almost see his Captain nodding. “Yes, he is. Any hassles, you can give him a call.”

“Thank you, Captain. Krashtallah out.” He flipped the communicator shut and looked sideways at his mate. “That complicates things,” he said, an edge in his voice. “We won't have the full support of the *Millennium* if the King makes his move. The *Cork* will be useful, but it's not a starship.”

Susanna sighed and sat back on her haunches. “I suppose we'll just have to go on faith, my dear,” she said.

Her husband tried to see the full meaning of her words. “Are you being positive, or cynical?”

The Ambassador ran a manicured finger down her lover's cheek. “I've gotten this far in this field of work and seen some amazing things happen that probably shouldn't have. I just guess sometimes that there is a force beyond ourselves that is determined to keep peace alive in this universe, otherwise we would all have been lost to chaos centuries ago. The law of entropy applies, even to politics, and yet here we are, part of a Federation of worlds striving to bring peace and order to the galaxy.” She gave

a deep, soulful sigh. "It's people like Zif that seem to work for the other side." She looked up into her husband's eyes. She suddenly felt very weak, and she tried to draw strength from him. "You know, sometimes I get very tired of diplomacy. There are so many moments when all I want to do is take a shower after a meeting."

Crash nuzzled her cheek and ran a paw over her shoulders. "I can certainly understand that," he said in as comforting a manner as possible. "I've had to discuss treaties and politics many times in my job as Third Officer and Communication's Chief. There are some people who want to help their fellow beings, and a sad majority that seem only to want to serve themselves. The scariest term in any languages' dictionary is "Career Politician"."

Susanna laughed at that. The laughter helped settle her frayed nerves and she sank into his embrace, letting his scent fill her nostrils. She could not remember a time when she was so content, even in the midst of all this strife.

There was a knock at the door. Susanna looked at her husband, letting him see just how annoyed she was getting. "Is there no peace for the peacemakers?" she asked with a sigh.

"I'm not sure it's in our genetic makeup," Crash said with a smirk as he got up.

"Hey!" Susanna said as he moved towards the door. "Be careful what you ask for. Think of our kits."

That pulled him up short. "You're right about that." He turned and gave her a quick, loving look. "Let's just

hope they'll take after their mother." With that said, he sidled up to the door and stood off to the right of it, his side to the wall. Trying to disguise his voice, he said in a rough bass: "Who is it?"

The friendly voice of Kraltathat came back dully through the thick, ornate wood. "Someone who doesn't think much of your impersonation of me."

Crash opened the door and let the King inside. "I didn't think I sounded that much like you."

Susanna joined her husband at his side. "I don't know. It *was* a pretty good try."

He looked back down at her. "But I *wasn't* trying."

"Then you'll get better with practice," Susanna said with a cheeky smile.

The King gave a cheerful grin. "I don't know about that. I think there are laws against impersonating the sovereign." He stepped away from the door and drew his conspirators further into the room. "I've asked a friend at News Prime to be here in one hour. As they've got the primary share, we'll be able to get the message out to the majority of the people."

Krashtallah's eyes narrowed as he considered the King's actions. "I thought we agreed to make the announcement tomorrow morning?" He scowled at his people's monarch. "Your timing is anything but good. The *Millennium* just broke orbit to chase down a lead on the whereabouts of the missing black Cait. All we've got to support us is the support ship *Cork* and eight fighters."

The King bared his teeth, letting his aggravation show. "How long will they be gone?" he growled. He started pacing to work off some steam.

Crash watched him as he paced. It was times like these when he remembered that politicians, famous people and even Kings were, in the end, just people like he was. Fallible. "The Captain didn't say. Hopefully, she'll be back in time, maybe not." He threw him a lifeline. "I can't see her being gone for over twenty-four hours."

Kraltathat sighed and stopped his pacing when realised he was in a net of his own making. He had no-one but himself to blame for his impatience. "It's too late to stop things now," he said, resigned to his fate. "I've already set the plan in motion."

Susanna laid a concerned paw on the King's shoulder and gave him a gentle rub. She tried to ease his mood by steering the conversation back to their previous subject. "Why didn't you call for a full audience?" she asked gently.

Kraltathat shook his head. "A general press conference would draw too much attention," he said. His voice dropped, reflecting his state of mind. He was anything but confident. "We'll be lucky if we get away with the broadcast at all."

Crash gave him a cheering smile. "If my wife has anything to do with it, we'll be alright. She has a fundamental belief that the universe is on her side."

The King turned his gaze to the Ambassador with a curious eye. "Is that so?"

Susanna just looped her tail about in a demure fashion. "I have lived a charmed life," she said with a sly grin.

Kraltathat just looked down at her and tried to draw from her confidence. "I hope so, for all our sakes." He padded over to the door and opened it a crack. "I'll be back for you both in about fifty minutes. I'll see you then." With that quietly said, he slipped out and walked down the hallway as if he was off on official business. If he had known a pair of golden eyes were watching him, he would have been a lot more careful.

Not that Crash and Susanna cared. They picked up where they had left off.

Chapter Thirteen

The interior of the Caitian shuttle was cramped and unfriendly, to say the least. It was completely utilitarian, nothing more than a large metal box with ventilation to keep the captives alive. Two small light panels in the ceiling gave them a feeble amount of illumination, but it was enough for the average Cait to see clearly. From his place in one corner, Martin Luther mused that the dark interior was more a friend to him than the rest of the captives, who were mainly tawny in colour and who were eyeing he and his two companions with more than a little suspicion.

It took only moments since they were all beamed in for them to collect into two different groups: divided by their colour. The vast majority were tawny, and Martin estimated there were about eighty of them, compared with about seven blacks. It seemed that Zif's purge of their genome was nearing completion.

The collective fear was almost tangible, and Martin found that the ire of many was being turned on him. He assumed it was because some recognised him. He had no idea it was because of the smug look on his face. One tawny male decided he was going to be spokesperson for the Tawnys and stepped forward to challenge him. He peered at him for a moment as if trying to place him. "I

know you, don't I?" he said with all the warmth of a blizzard.

As he and his kind were grossly outnumbered, one would consider a conservative approach to their situation would be prudent. However, that was not Martin's style. Instead of placating his tormentor, he went nose-to-nose with him. He looked down on him as one would peruse an arrogant ant. "I get that all the time," he said in an off-hand manner. "You may call me Martin."

The male before him bristled. "The terrorist?" he growled.

Martin was not put off. "One Cait's terrorist is another Cait's freedom-fighter."

The male scowled at him momentarily, then turned away from him as if he no longer mattered. He turned to a female in the group and addressed her as if they knew each other. "I can understand why *he's* here, Pash," he said. "But I still don't get why *we're* here."

The confusion in the crowd as they discussed their situation was plain. Martin marvelled at their lack of insight. He turned his back on them and engaged his fellow black Caits. "Don't worry, my brothers and sisters. Help is on the way. Just sit back and enjoy the ride."

The last comment drew the attention of the tawny spokesperson. Her rounded on Martin in fury. "How can you expect us to enjoy ourselves? We're prisoners with a bunch of blacks for no good reason going only God knows where."

Martin stepped towards the centre of the room, totally unafraid. If he was going to face his tormentor, he had to follow him, as the male had moved away from him. So much for bravery, he thought. "You don't get it, do you?" he said in bald challenge.

When his antagoniser simply looked at him blankly, Martin said: "This is the next step in Zif's plan! You're all parents of black Caits, aren't you?" It had taken him a few moments to recognise Slashtallah, but the father of Krashtallah was hard to miss. It wasn't his attitude or manner that brought him to mind, simply his, and his wife's, looks.

One by one, the tawnys in the room began nodding. To his disgust, Martin noted that many took a while just admitting they had a black kitten. That led him to wonder if any of the blacks with him were present with their families, but were not standing with them. Yet another cause for him to dislike those whom he was tasked with helping. If what he was doing was going to save the lives of this insufferable lot, he wondered if it was truly worth it. In the back of his mind, he began making contingency plans.

Martin stopped before Slash and appraised him with an annoyed air. If he showed him just how much he loathed the male before him, he might just wind up starting a fight. That would not get him anywhere, but all the same, he wanted to put him in his place. "Slashtallah, of the Llash clan. You will soon owe your life to the son you

have spent your life trying to make miserable, just because of his colouring. It is people like you, with your quiet approval of Zif and his plans for genocide, who have no-one to blame but yourselves for your current predicament.”

When those around him started growling, he decided to push on. He had to make them see reason. “Did you *really* think that Zif was going to stop with just killing off the blacks? In his mind, whose fault is it that they’re here?”

That gave the crowd pause. As the reality of their situation became real to them, many of the females began quietly weeping, along with a number of the males. Some slumped to the floor in defeat, while a defiant few stayed on their feet. They congregated around Martin, and at first he thought they were going to take out their frustrations on him physically. Then, one unfamiliar to Martin addressed him respectfully.

“Martin, what makes you so confident that we are going to get out of this alive?”

If there was one thing that his life had taught him, it was to trust no-one. He simply looked his inquisitor in the eye and said: “I can’t tell you that. However, I can tell you to prepare yourselves. When it comes down, it could get ugly.”

Those who had collected about him nodded their understanding. There was steel in their eye. They were not going to take things lying down. Not when there was a possible way out. Martin’s confidence said that clearly.

Martin held up his paw. "All I can tell you is to prepare yourselves for action," he said with confidence. "Don't rush it. You'll know when to act when the time comes. Act too soon, and you put us all at risk." He looked about him, trying to catch the eye of as many around him as possible. "Am I understood?"

Black and tawny alike joined together in their determination to see this through. For a moment, the colour of their fur mattered little as their mutual need for survival drove them. They were not fooling themselves. They knew they may not all make it home, but there was no way they were going down without a fight.

Martin took stock of those who followed him, and noted that Slashtallah had retreated to a corner, yet his wife was not with him. He turned around and found her standing right next to him. He looked down at her and realised where Crash got his fortitude from. It certainly wasn't from his father.

It seemed so innocuous. It was just a piece of metal. Old, and yet so new.

Merete AndrusTaurus looked down on the spike sitting in its sterile bag and marvelled. This object had been the centrepiece of a religion's museum for two thousand years. It shone in the lights over the table it sat on, even through the plastic bag sitting in a similarly plastic tray. It clearly had some dried blood on it, as well

as slivers of wood from what was claimed to be the Destiny Tree.

The Doctor saw all this as she sat on her roller stool and simply looked at it with her dark eyes. She could not help but have a sense of awe regarding it. A whole species of being connected to their maker through tangible evidences like this one. For the first time in her scientific career, she was hesitant to interfere with it.

Yet she had a duty to perform. Without touching it, she first ran metallurgical scans on the spike. The computer simply reported it as being of a type of unremarkable iron commonly smelted on Cait circa two thousand years before.

She then took a metal scalpel and took the tiniest scrapings of both the blood, and the wood. She laid each on a glass slide then prepared them for genetic testing. She had only one machine for breaking down the genetic codes of lifeforms, and she decided to start with the wooden slivers. As the wood had a much simpler genetic code, it would take much less time to process. She already had a baseline to compare it with as she had already previously tested a piece of fallen bark from the Destiny Tree.

The other reason she tested the wood first was something she was reluctant to admit. It wasn't every day she was asked to test the blood of an individual who was thought to be a messenger from God. Somehow, it seemed sacrilegious. While Merete didn't consider herself a religious person, she still had a great reverence for nature,

whether it was the result of an accident or Creation. Either way, she instinctively felt there was something greater than herself beyond her understanding. Her trepidation made her hesitate.

She looked up at the chronometer in sickbay. It would take approximately half an hour for a full genetic breakdown to be made of the wood. When completed, it would tell her not only what genus of plant it was from, but she would be able to tell its age as well as what individual plant it was from.

Once that was done, she would be able to make a start on examining the blood. That would take much longer, but the results could prove interesting. And hopefully useful.

True to his word, King Kraltathat knocked on the door on time and quickly escorted Crash and Susanna down the corridor and into a large room that was obviously used for press conferences. However, instead of the usual milling throng of reporters there was only one – with his cameraman. As they entered, Kraltathat made a point of locking the doors behind them.

“Are you ready?” the King asked the reporter as he hurried up to the small lectern with the royal seal on the front. He rubbed his paws together nervously.

The exceptionally well groomed reporter calmly looked up at his sovereign as if they were old friends – which they were. Singtalen and Kraltathat went all the

way back to their university days. "As always – sire." He used the word as one would tease a buddy. "You make the news, and I'll report it. We're the definition of symbiosis."

The King curled his lip as he considered the irony of his friend's words. "Well, have I got a scoop for you!" He eyed the door and prayed that it would stay closed, knowing full well that it would not. The whole building was wired for sound and it would only be a matter of time before the guards came battering down the door. "Lets get this done. Are we live yet?"

Singtalen touched his finger to his ear as if he was listening to an incoming call. "We will be in twenty seconds," he said calmly.

Crash eyed the reporter through narrowed lids. He was either the coolest customer he had ever seen, or he had no idea what it was he was about to broadcast. Either way, it would be wise to watch him.

Kraltathat waved for Susanna and Crash to join him behind the lectern. "Could I have one of you on each side, please?" he asked.

Susanna understood why. The King wanted to be seen to have the support of the Federation on one side and Starfleet on the other. It was a shrewd move. She stood to the King's right whilst Crash took up a position on the King's left.

Singtalen lifted up his paw. "We are live in five, four,..." then he counted off the seconds with his fingers.

At one, he pointed towards the King. He was now live to the people of the world.

“My fellow Cait,” he began solemnly. “Our people face a crisis of law, of government, and of conscience. As a member of the United Federation of Planets, we are bound by the principles of IDIC – Infinite Diversity in Infinite Combinations. It observes the right of its members to respect the right of the individual to lead lives that are free from domination and oppression. That its peoples should be free to be themselves and to freedom of expression. And yet in recent times there has been a move afoot to exterminate and oppress a portion of our population. Our black brother and sister Cait, and now I hear their families, have been removed without recourse, without law, without their rights being observed. They have been treated as non-entities in a shameful display of racism that I had hoped our ancient culture would have outgrown millennia ago.”

Kraltathat took hold of the wooden lectern and stared into the camera, doing his utmost to project strength, both physical and of character. Susanna thought it good acting. Little did she realise he was also holding onto it to keep himself from shaking.

He managed to continue without letting the quiver that threatened to show itself. “I have raised my concerns regarding the matter with your legally elected government to deal with, and time and time again I have been stymied. The people you entrusted with running your planet have let

you down by ignoring the law and going their own way regardless – all due to a notion that is as old as it is outdated.”

The doorknob leading into the room twitched as someone tried to open it from the outside. Finding it locked, the twisting became more insistent as whoever it was became more impatient.

Kraltathat did his best to ignore the sound. Time was short. “My people, as your government has failed to abide by the law that governs us all, including those in power, I have been forced to act in the only manner available to me.” At this point, he reached into his cloak and removed a scroll bearing the King's seal, broke the wax bearing his insignia and unrolled it for the camera to see. “As of this moment, I am declaring Parliament dissolved and I am instructing the Leader of the Opposition to form a minority government until a general election can be held.”

The sounds at the door had now become banging. Crash knew it would not be long before they broke through.

Susanna noted the look on the reporter's face was priceless. He'd had no idea what the King was going to do, and that he had been present for a moment in his world's history that would be long remembered. The dumbfounded expression gradually changed to amazement then changed to fear as the pounding on the door grew louder.

Kraltathat kept going regardless. "My fellow Cait. You have been subjected to a cruel and oppressive regime for long enough. Let us remember that we are not only members of a noble and fair Federation, but that our people stood for such qualities when a number of our fellow members were just learning to make steel. Let us not forget who we are, a people who stand for civilization and not hate for hate's sake. Thank you." With a nod, he signalled an end to the interview.

The reporter looked up at the King and marvelled. "My friend, you have a flair for understatement," he said. "Thanks for that. I think it went out live without interruption."

Flipping open his communicator, Crash said: "Let's find out. Crash to *Cork* did the whole message get out?"

Sarda's voice answered. "It did, Commander. Do you require extraction?"

Susanna gave him a look that said "no". "Negative, *Cork*," Crash answered. "We need to stand by the King."

At that point, the door splintered and security forces swarmed into the room. They quickly surrounded the King, Crash and Susanna whilst others insisted Singtalen shut down his equipment.

"Already done," the reporter said, his hands in the air, completely inoffensive.

Into the room strode Queen Feentathat, aloof and not impressed. She scowled at the reporter and said simply: "Get him out of here."

That done, she turned and walked up to the King as if she owned the planet and he had been caught stealing from the cookie jar. All signs of marital affection were absent as she let her true self show. "What do you think you've achieved?" she said, her hands on her hips. "Do you really think the government is just going to resign because you told it to?" She rolled her eyes as she gave a baleful laugh. "Not a chance. We'll have you declared insane before the day is out. Anything you've said will be written off by the people as the ravings of a maniac."

Kraltathat glowered down at his wife. "You underestimate the people you've forgotten that you are *supposed* to represent. They know the truth when they hear it, and they won't let you get away with what you've been doing."

The Queen looked at him as if he had escaped from an asylum. "I never really took you for a fool until now, Kraltathat. Keep the people fed and amused, and you can do anything to them." She waved at him dismissively, and spoke to the security chief at her side. "Lock him in his quarters. Make sure he contacts no-one."

As the security guard reached for the King's arm, Kraltathat knocked his hand aside. When the guard became more insistent and gripped his elbow, Crash brought the edge of his hand down on the guard's. A resounding crack was heard as Crash broke his wrist.

“How dare you lay a hand on the King!” Crash yelled in indignation. Then all hell broke loose as the security guards surged forward.

The fur flew in all directions as both sides forsook weapons for a good, old-fashioned fist-fight. As the guards tried to take the King by force, he not only defended himself, but found Crash and Susanna fighting for him. While Crash was able to use his natural size and aggression to great advantage, it was Susanna's build and claws that were her best weapons. While the Cait's claws were tough, they were not overly long, and were only good for snagging on their opponent's fur. However, Susanna's claws were not only long, they were needle sharp. Anyone who got close enough to feel her fury found themselves turned into feline pin cushions.

And yet, for all their gusto, it took only minutes for the sheer numbers of guards to overwhelm them and pin Crash, Susanna and the King to the floor. While several guards lay strewn about nursing bleeding wounds or simply unconscious, Crash, Susanna and the King kept thrashing around as four guards each pinned them down. Each was stripped of their weapons and communicators.

Tired of the resistance, the Queen stepped forward, took a phaser from the holster of the chief guard, pointed it at Susanna's nose and said: “Stop it or I pull the trigger.”

Staring down the barrel of a phaser was a new one for Susanna, yet it was not enough to panic her. Bloodied and bleeding from several cuts, she just glared at the Queen

with unbridled hatred. However, common sense reigned and she stopped struggling. Crash also stopped struggling to protect his wife. The King heard the Queen's voice and did likewise.

“That's more like it,” Feentathat said. She turned the phaser to the side and looked at the settings. “You know, I don't know if this thing is set to stun or kill, and you know what? I don't care.” She gave the males a vicious look and spat: “If either of you twitch again, I'm going to test it out on *her*.”

The message received and fully understood, both males and Susanna ceased resisting altogether.

“That's more like it,” the Queen purred. She pointed the phaser at the King. “Like I said, take him to his quarters and lock him in.” She glared at him. Any familial love between them either had never existed or had died long ago. She dismissed him with a wave. “I'll deal with him later.”

The guards dragged Kraltathat from the room and out the door. Crash watched him go with a sense of dread. The Queen had overstepped her authority beyond the realm of good sense. The look in her eye was wild, and he wondered to himself whether she was insane. Had the current crisis driven her over the edge, or was he simply seeing the *real* Queen? Either way, she was anything but pleasant company.

Feentathat stepped over towards Crash. “Get them off the floor,” she commanded nastily. The guards were

anything but gentle as they hauled the couple off the carpet and onto their feet. An idea seemed to form in her mind at that point, and a very cruel grin spread across her face. "You know, I have something very special in mind for the two of you." She nodded absently, revelling in the notion. "Yes, very special."

Susanna caught a glimpse of the Queen's eyes and started in fear. They were dead, as of a person who was about to embark on mass murder, and was looking forward to the task.

As pandemonium had begun in the palace after the announcement, so it had begun everywhere else. The normally quiet streets filled with people scared that the rule of law was lost. They began clustering into groups as they tried to make sense of the situation.

In Parliament, Ministers ran to and fro. Aides scurried this way and that, and the Prime Minister's communicator overloaded from all the incoming calls.

Rather than start packing up his office, he called a meeting of his department heads.

In the building directly opposite Parliament, the Leader of the Opposition called his own meeting.

"What are we to do?" the Leader's deputy, Drishtagoth, asked fearfully.

Another asked: "Is this truly for real?"

Their elderly leader stood. Vultanik had been the leader of his world's conservative party for decades. Such

was the level of trust he engendered. While he was getting on in years, he was still strong of mind and body, even though his fur was becoming silver. Vultanik had been Prime Minister more often than he had been leader of the opposition, and he knew the depths of responsibility that position held. He also knew its pitfalls.

In all the time he had been in office, he had never been touched by scandal, and the reason was simple. He had kept his nose clean.

Vultanik raised his hands to silence his fellows. "My fellow Cait. The legally elected King of our world has made a decree dissolving Parliament. I have even received an email to verify it. You all heard the announcement. As we are bound by law to obey such a command, we must follow the order given. We must form an alternative government."

The fear in the room was fairly palpable. Each minister knew the odds of their succeeding at such an endeavour. The current government was well and truly entrenched in their positions. There was no way they were going to stand down.

Vultanik slowly stood, feeling the full weight of the responsibility on his shoulders. He had no illusions regarding his chances of success. He had been in this game too long to expect anything other than complete resistance. Yet, as a Cait of honour, he had to try. "My friends, you know me to be no fool. I know the Prime Minister will at best just throw me out. However, if we do

nothing, we become complicit in his crimes. We cannot sit idly by and allow those who want to bring our world undone to succeed without a fight.” He lowered his voice, revealing the humility that made him a great leader. “Otherwise, we’re no better than they.”

The elderly statesman turned and spoke to his aide. “Please inform the Prime Minister to expect me shortly.” He picked up his cloak and gave his colleagues a wan smile. “We all knew this day had to come. There comes a point when the universe simply says: no more! Enough! Those words have been spoken this day.”

To the consternation of many, Vultanik strode from the room, purpose in every stride. In his mind his task wasn’t futile. It was *necessary*.

Aboard the *Cork*, Brankovian kept trying to raise Crash and Susanna on the communicator, without success. After several attempts, he thumped the panel in frustration. “Nothing!” he hissed.

Carman looked over at him from his station, concern etching his handsome Grecian features. “Is there any way of scanning for them? Is there something that will help us know Crash and the Ambassador from the others?”

At his board, Sarda shook his head. “I am afraid not, Lieutenant. With these sensors, and at this distance, we can only detect lifesigns, not differences in species.”

“What then?” Jason asked, worry for his friend making his voice shake.

Knowing the young man was concerned for the landing party, and that his friends felt the same, Sarda mimicked a sigh. “The only thing we can do is watch and wait. The King informed us that his announcement would not be well received. If he is taken prisoner by the Queen and/or the government forces, we are to make an attempt to retrieve him if – and only if – such an attempt can be made without loss of life. He was quite clear in that.”

Faith spoke up from behind him, quietly, yet with authority. “I understand that, Commander, but the Queen will not be generous with your people. She will likely treat them as traitors. I would expect her to execute them.”

Sarda baulked at such a notion. “Cait has been a member world of the Federation for over a century. Executions were outlawed long ago.”

Faith stood and stepped over to the window and looked out and up at her world. She spoke as she gazed, her voice full of pain and regret. “Commander, you speak from the perspective of one used to civilised behaviour. At heart, the Cait can be quite savage when we want to be. Your friends have not only challenged the government's position, they have done it wearing black fur. They are a prime example of everything the government is trying to get rid of. Black fur and dissension.” She turned and looked Sarda in the eye. “I tell you in all truth, Commander. The Queen will try to have them killed. It's only a matter of when.”

Brankovian grimaced. He felt responsible for the current situation. "I should never have let the Ambassador go without a full security detachment," he said, angry at himself.

Sarda shook his head. "That was not her wish. She believed that it would jeopardise the mission. And the mission is what was most important to her, not her personal safety." Regardless of the logic of her argument, Sarda still wished he had been able to send some security with her as well. Losing her would be more than a waste of resources. As Piper would put it, Susanna was a good person. "Commander Krashtallah is with her," he said, still looking for hope. "He is a very capable officer."

Faith's sigh was soulful. "I'm afraid Crash is more of a liability than an asset to her at the moment."

The *Cork's* commander tried to project some confidence. "Perhaps, perhaps not. Either way, we will not be able to help them until we find them." With that said, Sarda turned back to his console and began programming in searches. Brankovian did the same at his post, whilst Jason flew the craft and Carman watched the skies. Faith did what she did best. She prayed for their safe return.

The light of Cait's sun burned brightly on the viewscreen, bathing the bridge in its yellow glow. Piper had ordered the screen polarised, so it would not result in blindness for the crew. At the moment, the *Millennium*

was slowly passing the inner most planet of Cait's solar system, a small, volcanic piece of rock that proved useful in helping them evade the scanners of the shuttle they were following due to its high iron content and strong Van Allen Belts. The multi-coloured aurorae thrown around the small world by it's magnetic field were truly spectacular, and helped hide the vast starship.

Whilst it was a closely guarded secret that the Federation's new flagship carried a cloaking device, Piper was one to play her cards close to her chest. If their cloaking device was going to continue to be a valuable asset, then the fewer people who knew about it, the better. So, for now, the Captain continued employing every *other* trick in the book to keep them from being discovered.

On the screen, the science officer had thoughtfully put up not only an image of the craft they were pursuing, but a plot of its trajectory. It was clear it was going to miss the sun by a wide margin, but its destination was not yet apparent. Piper was a little frustrated that they could not employ their more powerful sensors to see beyond the sun for the craft's likely destination as it would give their position away, as a submarine gives away its position when it "pings" another craft. The energy wave can be "heard" and its source pinpointed.

"And so we wait," Piper muttered to herself as she idly tapped her chair arm. This was the part she hated.

Krashtallah had no idea where the *Millennium* was at that moment, nor did he particularly care. He was concerned with his wife's safety, and that was a complete unknown to him as she was elsewhere. The Queen had separated them shortly after their meeting and now he was locked in an old fashioned jail cell under the palace. The small, stone walled room was as impregnable as it looked, and the door of solid iron was locked from the outside. The only light into the room filtered through a small, weed encrusted ventilation hole high on the wall – too small to squeeze through.

All he could do was sit in the corner and hope his friends would find him. The odds of that were slim as, to the *Cork's* scanners, he would be just another Caitian heat signature.

He took a few moments to examine himself for wounds. He ached in a number of places where his opponents had broken the skin, but they were superficial and nothing to be concerned about. With that done, he began pacing the cell, but realised that was fruitless after a few minutes, and so, resigned to a possible lengthy stay, he curled up in a ball on the floor to conserve his strength. He needed to be fresh to engage in his wife's rescue, that was certain.

Thinking of his wife opened up a pit of worry within him that threatened to overwhelm him. No matter how capable she was, he could not help the feeling of dread as he thought of the things the Queen was doing to

her. A more ruthless female he had not encountered, and Crash looked forward to the day when she would get her just desserts. He hoped it was sooner rather than later. If she laid one paw or claw on his wife, the law was the last thing the Queen had to worry about. He would kill her himself.

Vultanik watched the hubbub going on around the Parliament building with mild amusement. Whatever the King might have achieved, it had definitely resulted in mass confusion. He slowly made his way to the Prime Minister's chambers, at his age he did nothing quickly, and then waited in his ante-chamber until he was ready to see him.

The Prime Minister's aide, a small, effusive little female with little talent or manners, eyed him coolly. It was plain to Vultanik's eye that she thought little of him. "What do you want?" she had asked when he entered.

There had been a day when manners were of value. Perhaps that time wasn't completely past, Vultanik mused, yet it was anything but valuable to this female. He had half a mind to teach her a lesson, yet this was not the time. He had more pressing matters.

"I believe you are well aware of the import of my visitation," he said, deliberately using phraseology that would confuse the young female. "Please inform the Prime Minister that the Leader of the Opposition demands an interview."

That was clear enough for the aide. Ruffled, and with her tawny fur rippling in consternation, she tapped the buzzer to gain the Prime Minister's attention.

"What do you want?" he said gruffly. Now Vultanik knew where she got her manners from.

A little more respectfully, she answered: "Minister Vultanik's here to see you."

"What does he want?" the Prime Minister growled back through the speaker.

Without bothering to wait, Vultanik stepped forward and hit the button himself. "I believe you know why, Minister Cardtasharp. If you don't have time right now, I'll wait."

The Prime Minister made no attempt to hide his disgust. "I suppose now is as good a time as any, *Minister Vultanik.*"

Behind the aide, the doors to the Prime Minister's rooms opened automatically and the elderly statesman stepped through. He was anything but confident, but his role to play in the King's drama was clear, and he would play it through, as was his duty.

He had thought about what he would say when he stepped inside that room. He had considered a number of approaches, including simply stating that the Prime Minister must resign his post immediately. He had also considered appealing to Cardtasharp's better nature, but that angle he dismissed early. There was no way the Prime Minister was going to give up his post easily.

All the possibilities he had imagined did not include what he encountered, for the Prime Minister was not alone. Sitting, bound with her hands and feet tied together, was the Federation Ambassador, looking as if she had just come from a street fight. Next to her sat the Queen, idly toying with a phaser. She did not even grace the Opposition Leader with a glance. Sitting behind his ornate desk, the Prime Minister sat, looking like the cat who had finally caught the elusive bird. Vultanik almost imagined a feather protruding from his teeth.

“What is the meaning of this?” Vultanik spluttered. “How dare you mistreat the Federation Ambassador. She is protected by interstellar treaty and is entitled to diplomatic immunity.”

Cardtasharp simply glared at his opposite number. “Ambassador Llash is the wife of a Caitian national, which grants her citizenship. Due to her actions supporting the King's little insurrection, we have decided to waive her diplomatic status and charge her with sedition.” His words carried an air of finality.

Vultanik would not be moved. “Her diplomatic status is not contingent on your interpretation of the law, but the mere fact that our treaty with the Federation guarantees its representatives security. If you ignore that, you endanger our status as a Federation member.”

The Prime Minister waved dismissively. “You think I care about our status within the Federation? Our

borders are secure without their protection. The Klingons and Romulans are far from our space.”

The Opposition Leader sighed pityingly. “I never took you for being naïve, Cardtasharp,” he said sadly. “They are not the only antagonists in the universe. Besides, we depend on our Federation allies for trade. As we don’t export our natural resources, all we’ve got is tourism. Without the free flow of tourists, our economy would grind to a halt.”

Feeling insulted, the Prime Minister struck back. “You think the Cait needs offworlders? Do you think we need them bringing in their ideas and diseases?”

Vultanik sighed again and sat down on the only remaining chair. He kept his focus on the Prime Minister whilst keeping an eye on the Queen in his periphery. He spoke calmly, slowly and deliberately. “It is curious how you put those two together, Cardtasharp. If freedom of expression and freedom from oppression are diseases, then I hope to be a carrier. Do you really think that a perfect world can be created at the point of a gun?”

“Freedom can only be gained through force,” Cardtasharp countered. “There will always be oppressors. If you want freedom, you must carry a big gun.”

“And become the bully of the town,” Vultanik stated as a teacher would instruct an arrant student. “Do you know the one thing the bully has not got?”

“Fear, of course.” The Prime Minister radiated confidence.

“No.” Vultanik paused for a second to make sure they were listening. “Friends.” Without waiting for a comeback, he ploughed on. “It is *fear* that drives bullies, *and* oppressive regimes. You fear losing control of the people, of the world. And without a *single good reason*.”

“ENOUGH!” cried the Queen, smacking her paw on her chair arm. “Our world is trying to rid itself of those who would destroy us. It is trying to save itself from energy starvation. The only way we've managed to control the situation is by limiting travel and transporter use by making the people fear its use.” She scowled at the Opposition Leader and he glimpsed some of the madness within her. “Do you have *any* idea of the energy reserve we have left?” She held up her first finger and thumb in a circle. “We have *nothing*.”

“How will this *madness* help our situation?” Vultanik charged. “What possible good can come from hunting black Caits?”

The light came on in Susanna's brain and she put the pieces together. “You *are* using them as a slave force, aren't you? Somehow, somewhere, you're mining energy, and you're using the blacks to do it.”

The Queen grinned cruelly. “For all their crimes over the centuries, it's their just reward. I can't think of a better use for them than to force them to *help* their fellow Cait for once in their lives.”

Susanna turned and hissed at her. “You *are* insane. My husband is black, and his heart is to serve his fellow

Cait and the Federation. He has put his life on the line time and again, while prissy whackos like you do nothing for anyone other than yourselves."

Without a word, the Queen silenced Susanna by stunning her senseless with a single shot from her phaser. The Ambassador slumped to the floor, seemingly lifeless, her tongue lolling out the side of her mouth. Vultanik looked down at her in shock then reached forward to check her pulse.

"Don't!" the Queen shouted. "Or you'll be joining her."

He froze. The Queen was pointing the phaser squarely at his chest. Reluctantly, he straightened up, his eyes glued to the phaser's energy emitter. With a force of will, he turned his attention back to the Prime Minister. "The King, our legally appointed leader, ordered the dissolution of Parliament. If you fail to do so, you will be a government without law. Is this truly the path you want our world to follow?"

For a moment, he thought he might have gotten through to the Prime Minister. He seemed to be indecisive for a second, as if he was having second thoughts. A glance at the Queen steadied him and the cruel mask came down once more. "The King was obviously insane at the time of his announcement," he said with confidence. "Perhaps he was even under duress. As such, any orders he made are obviously of no value. This government will not step down on the word of an insane person."

Vultanik tilted his head to the side as he fought to maintain composure. The situation was spiralling out of control faster than he could manage. "Has the King seen a counsellor? Has he been professionally declared insane? Is he getting treatment?"

The Queen snorted. "What cure is there for treason?"

Vultanik ignored her. "Do you have any legal reason to declare him such?" he reiterated.

Cardtasharp rolled his eyes in disgust. "I don't need any to know he's not in his right mind."

With that said, the Opposition Leader's choices reduced to just one. "Without a legal document declaring the King mentally incapacitated, you don't have a paw to stand on. His order dissolving Parliament stands." Defiantly, he got to his feet. "I am giving you formal notice that, by the King's order, your party's time in power is over. With, or without you, we will be forming our alternative government forthwith." With that said, he turned to leave.

"Don't move," the Queen stated quietly, confidently.

Vultanik obeyed. Without looking, knew what the Queen was doing. He turned back and coolly gazed down at her to see her levelling the phaser at his chest. "What do you plan on doing with that?"

"I *will* shoot you if you take another step," Feentathat said arrogantly.

Vultanik looked at Cardtasharp. "I was saying about the point of a gun...." he said with more than a touch of irony.

A mite of concern crossed Cardtasharp's face. He knew this moment could make or break his world. His esteemed colleague, and he still considered him such, was forcing his hand. He quickly considered his options, and realised there weren't any. With more than a little regret he announced: "By order of this government, I am declaring your actions treasonous. As a result, I will now take steps to have your party declared illegal. You won't be forming anything." He touched a control on the corner of his desk. Within seconds, an armed detail entered the room and surrounded the Opposition Leader. "Take him into custody," he told them, "on charges of treason against the state."

For a moment, it seemed as if Vultanik had aged in the minutes spent in this room. He wilted a little as the security officer took him by the arm. He cast a last, sad look at the Prime Minister as he was led from the room. "Witness the death of democracy," he said quietly as the doors shut behind him.

Cardtasharp watched him go regretfully. However, the die was cast and there were no other avenues to follow. He touched another control and issued the orders he needed to have the Conservative Party shut down permanently.

On the *Cork*, the communicator channel chirped for attention. With Sarda and Brankovian busy searching for their missing members, Jason took the call. “*U.S.S. Cork* here,” he said by way of greeting.

There was the sound of jostling on the other end as someone was fiddling with the communicator. “Do I have this right?” came through faintly, then: “Hello? This is Krestapan here, calling Captain Piper.”

From the rear of the cabin, Faith sat bolt upright. “Can I take this call?” she asked. “I know him.”

Jason took a quick look at Sarda for approval. He simply nodded then turned back to his work. “Go ahead, Faith,” Jason said.

“Krestapan!” Faith said excitedly. She clapped her paws together with glee. “It’s good to hear your voice.”

“Casttashack?” the voice said in askance. “It is good to hear you, too.” His sense of urgency returned. “Please let Captain Piper know that the government has just declared the King to be insane and the Opposition Party is now illegal. They are not going to resign.”

“Oh, no,” Faith said fearfully. She turned to Sarda. “What are we to do?”

The Vulcan spoke up. “Mister Krestapan, this is Commander Sarda. How did you come by this information?”

The answer raised a brow or two. “It was on the News.”

Faith rounded on Sarda. "We need to rescue the Opposition Party members before they're dragged off to by the scruff of their necks to prison," she said.

He turned and looked into her eyes. She was right, he knew. But what she was suggesting was risky. He spoke up once more for the comm unit. "Mister Krestapan, please keep watching the "News" and let us know if they have started taking the Opposition Party members into custody."

"I will do that for you, Commander," Krestapan replied helpfully.

"Thank you, *Cork* out." Sarda cut the connection then turned to Jason. "Prepare for landing, Mister Nunn."

Chapter Fourteen

The deputy Leader of the Opposition, Drishtagoth, stared at the viewscreen in open horror. His worst nightmare was coming about as the Prime Minister made his announcement on the worldwide news broadcast. Not only had he declared the King insane and nullified his order, but he had declared opposition to the government's policies illegal and treasonous. He had even handed down an order that the Conservative Party's officers would be detained and their organisation be disbanded.

In his ten years with the party, he had demonstrated leadership qualities Vultanik had nurtured, and it was clear within the party that he would one day nominate Drishtagoth to be his successor, but that day was still a fair way off. He was still comparatively young, only twenty-five, and, while he was a good orator, he had yet to learn the presence needed to encourage others to follow his lead. Charisma was still a tool he was learning to master.

Drishtagoth considered their situation. As Vultanik had not returned from the Prime Minister's office, he could only assume he had already been taken into custody. He thought back and realised the old Cait knew that would probably be the case. He had to admire him. Regardless of the odds, he did the honourable thing anyway.

At that moment, the Shadow Ministers for Transportation and for Education ran into his office. "Did

you see the news?" the Minister for Education asked. She was a fairly young female from one of the southern continents.

Drishtagoth nodded solemnly. It was time for one of the hardest decisions he'd had to make. "We're going to have to evacuate if we're going to avoid being taken into custody. In the current climate, I'm not sure they wouldn't execute us."

Both ministers nodded agreement, but before they could make their way out of the room they heard the sound of a large shuttlecraft as it passed over their building. Curious, they made their way to the window and peered out. It *was* a shuttle, and a big one at that. The thing was about thirty metres long! But what gave them a sense of elation was the Starfleet insignia on the side. It didn't take them long to realise what it was there for.

Drishtagoth dropped his paw onto his intercom button to broadcast to the whole building. "All members of the party this is Drishtagoth. Evacuate to the front of the building immediately! A Starfleet vessel has come to rescue us!" It sounded corny to his ears, but it got the right response. Ministers and aides alike poured out of their offices and made their way in great haste to the front doors, which, fortunately, automatically opened wide to allow the fifty-plus Caits in office that day to leave.

As Drishtagoth ran out the front door, he saw guards converging on the vessel from the Parliament building about a kilometre away on the other side of the

grassed park. They were firing at the vessel and the Ministers with phaser rifles, but the bolts were being stopped by an energy shield. He didn't know much about starships, but he did know that they carried defensive shields for combat, and right now he was very grateful for them!

On the side of the craft was a door that opened outward and upward, and through this narrow hatch a human could be seen, ushering them inside. As each Cait went inside, they were steered towards the back. Yet, even though they had the element of surprise on their side, it was taking too long, and the guards were getting closer by the second. It would not be long before they would pass through the shield perimeter and do some real damage.

As Drishtagoth's fears of this very thing happening heightened, he jumped when a small fighter swooped by and strafed the ground between the guards and the shuttle with his phasers. The bolts of red light tore up the grass and left great burnt gashes in what was once a manicured lawn. The results were instantaneous and effective. The guards stopped their advance and ran for cover. Some dropped to the ground and started firing on the fighter! Drishtagoth noted that their bolts bounced harmlessly off the fighter's shields as well.

The evacuation took nearly three minutes, and all the while the ministers kept pouring into the shuttle. Just when he thought it could take no more, Drishtagoth realised he was the only one left remaining outside. The

young human waved at him hysterically to get on board, so he ran as fast as his arms and legs could carry him. As he closed, he noticed the guards were converging on the shuttle once more. In a final burst of speed, he barrelled though the doorway and inside, where he used his nails to bring him to a quick stop. The human slapped the door control and the doors slammed shut.

It was no sooner had he done so than he felt the artificial gravity shift as the shuttle took to the air. They had made it! They were safe!

At the controls of the *Cork*, the thought of them being safe was far from Jason's thoughts. The scanners had a number of bogies inbound. Their configuration was unknown, and judging from their size, they were home-grown fighters, approximately twelve in all. He noted they were fitted with phasers. He knew this because they had already scored a few hits on their shields.

To his right, Carman was directing their fighter escort. "Charlie Squadron, you have about a dozen bogies inbound from the north. Please get them off our tail."

The squadron leader already knew of their approach. With supreme confidence, he said: "Roger, *Cork*, we've got your back."

The shuttle rocked as another phaser shot bounced off their shields. Jason spared a glance at the shield display. They still had eighty percent shielding. They should be fine if the fighters did their job. It wasn't like he

was going to engage in a dogfight in the atmosphere. The *Cork* might have been easy to throw around in the vacuum of space, but with the drag of the air outside, and the gravity to boot, the shuttle may as well have had the handling characteristics of a brick.

As the *Cork* continued to climb, Charlie Squadron split off into pairs and went after their Caitian foes. They quickly developed a respect for the sleek design and skill of the feline pilots, but they had not trained at New Miramar. Like their naval counterparts from the twentieth century, the new graduates of Starfleet's fighter academy were the best of the best, and it wasn't long before the Cait fighters were being knocked down by their more experienced adversaries.

From his place manning the sensors, Sarda noted with Vulcan pride that the pilots were trying to disable the fighters, not destroy them. As the Starfleet pilots bobbed, weaved, circled and spun, they managed to keep the upper hand on a decidedly larger number of enemy fighters.

Yet, the Caitian fighters still managed to get in a fair amount of hits to the *Cork*'s shields as she continued her climb into orbit. Jason noted with concern the shields had dropped to fifty percent.

Concern for the Caitian pilots crossed Sarda's thoughts as he noted their altitude. They were now several kilometres up, and if they had to eject, they would die of exposure long before they reached the ground. He toggled on the communicator and switched to a hailing frequency.

“This is the *USS Cork* calling the Caitian forces attacking us,” he said. “I urge you to discontinue your attempts and return to base before there is loss of life on your part.”

The response he received was curt. “Starfleet, you are ordered to land and hand over the Caitian hostages you have taken or we will blow you out of the sky.” As if to punctuate his statement, the shuttle rocked from another shield hit.

Sarda raised a brow at the inconsistency just displayed. Destroying them would also kill their “hostages”. “I assure you, sir,” he said, trying once more to reason with them, “we have taken no hostages. The Opposition Party ministers are our guests.”

“Whatever,” came the terse reply. “You are not leaving without a fight.”

As the shuttle finally passed through the final layers of the atmosphere, and the planet's gravity had become negligible, Jason took great delight in being able to more effectively evade the pursuing fighters. In space, the *Cork* became nimble and he was easily able to evade pursuit.

At this point, Sarda considered their options. They were not welcome on the planet, nor would they be in orbit. Their only other recourse remained to leave. But they could not go to warp without their fighter escort. He decided to find out what range the Caitian fighters had. “Mister Nunn, set a course for Cait's moon. Full impulse.”

“Aye, sir,” Jason responded. Within seconds, the smallish, grey sphere filled the forward viewport and they were on their way. Outside, the flashes from exchanging phaser fire lit the darkness of space. Yet, the further they went, the less it became. A minute later, the firing stopped as the Caitian fighters reached the end of their operational radius. Any further, and they would not have enough fuel to return home. Reluctantly, they ceased their pursuit and headed back to base.

“Yee-hah!” The Squadron Leader gave a whoop as they closed formation around the *Cork*. “That was fun!” Outside the forward viewport, the crew watched as the Squadron Leader gave a victory roll before falling back and flying level with them. Out his side port, Jason shared a salute with him.

From his place at the Science station, Sarda steepled his fingers. His problems had only just begun. He had approximately sixty people aboard a vessel designed for a maximum of thirty. They only had enough oxygen for half an hour and they had nowhere to land.

The *Ingram*-class of starship was large and hardy, but what Piper was asking the *Millennium* to do went way beyond the factory specs. To remain hidden to their sensors, and still be able to keep tabs on the prison shuttle, Piper was hiding her ship in the sun's corona sphere. The shields were getting a workout as they held the harsh

radiation from the star at bay. Without them, the ship would have been reduced to molten slag within seconds.

Within the *Millennium*, the solar winds could be heard as they howled against the shields. In Engineering, Scanner had his hands full nursing the warp engines as they were currently running at high power to fuel the shields and hold the ship steady against the star's massive gravity. He stood before the intermix chamber that sat sandwiched between the matter and antimatter injectors. Each injector was stories high with one that extended upwards several decks, and one down the same. To the naked eye, they simply looked like a long line of lit doughnuts that illuminated as the matter passed them by. At idle, they moved slowly. At the moment, they were moving so quickly they hardly flickered.

Once more, the engineer found himself wondering if the adventure was worth the worry. As the *Millennium* was his ship, as engineers owned every starship they served on, it was his prerogative. The officers who ran it simply got to "borrow" it. As he served under Piper, her tendency to push the limits of her ship's abilities often drove him to sleepless nights. He knew she would never push them too far, she had too much respect for her starship, but there were times when he wondered. This was one of them.

He imagined the plating under his feet was getting warmer, he was so close to the sun. Being this close to a star was unnerving in that they had a nasty tendency at

times to throw out solar flares. That was something his shields could not protect them from. They would quite simply be toasted alive.

Shaking off the willies, he turned and found himself nose to nose with his wife. Momentarily startled, he suppressed a curse word, then gave his bride a broad smile. "What can I do fer you?" he asked. The worry in her eyes took a moment for him to register. "What is it?"

Manny's fur stood on end and she gave an involuntary shiver. "We've had word from the *Cork*. Crash and Susanna have been arrested. The King has been deposed and the government has declared martial law."

Scanner's eyes went wide in amazement. "That didn't take long. If there's one thing your brother's got a knack for, it's getting his nose into trouble." The engineer ducked the paw that was aimed at the back of his head. "Hey!" he said, a little put out. "I'm trying to let you know he can take care of himself."

His wife was distressed. "There is only so much one Cait can do with an entire world against you."

"Hmm," Scanner said thoughtfully. "You know, it wouldn't be the first time."

Manny screwed up her face as she tried to understand what he meant. Then the penny dropped. "The last time one Cait stood up to the whole world he got himself killed."

Scanner sighed. Trying to cheer his wife through her pain was not getting him anywhere. He put his hands

around her waist and drew her to him, then looked her in the eye. "I'm worried about him, too. But if I allow myself to get tied up in knots thinking about it all the time, I won't be able to do anything to help him. Now, I know it's a big ask, but you've got to put them out of your mind. Keep your mind on the task ahead. The sooner we get the black Caits rescued, the sooner we can get back and help Crash and Susanna. You need to focus on that, okay?"

Manny tried not to scowl, and didn't quite manage it. "That's easy for you to say."

Her husband rolled his eyes. "No, it's not. In all the time I've served in Starfleet, I've worked with a lot of people I've come to know and love. Not all of them had survived as long as I have, and if I dwelt on the danger all the time, I wouldn't be any good to anyone." He took Manny's head in his hands. "My darling, I love you and share your pain, but I cain't afford to dwell on it. Neither can you."

The white Caitian closed her eyes and tried to internalise her feelings. She could not allow them to rule her. "All right, husband," she said tightly. "I'll do as you ask."

Scanner smiled. "That's my girl." He started a little as he felt the deck plating move minutely beneath him. He glanced at the warp engine and noted a change in its output. "We're moving."

The pair stepped over to one of the engineering panels and called up an exterior view of the Starship. It

was clear the vessel was on the move as the surface of the sun started rushing by, then got more distant as they moved away. Knowing what was to come next, Manny nuzzled her husband's cheek, then dashed for a turbolift as the Captain called her to the bridge.

“What is it?” Faith could not help but notice the worry in the Vulcan's eyes. It was faint, but it was there. In someone as stoic as he, even a subtle change was noticeable.

Sarda turned and looked into the eyes of the young Caitian. For all her youth, she was very intelligent and perceptive. He considered talking to her later about whether she might be interested in a career in Starfleet. Her talents could be used to good advantage. “*The Millennium* is too far away for us to make a transfer of our passengers. We cannot go to warp safely within this star system, especially as the Captain is now on the other side of the sun. As we are now carrying too many people for our air conditioning system to cope with, we will run out of oxygen in twenty-five minutes.”

Faith considered the situation. “So, we need to find somewhere for our guests to stay.”

Sarda raised a curious brow. “You have an interesting way of looking at the situation.”

Faith gave him a beatific smile. “It comes from wondering who's about to grab your tail all your life. Every Believer lives wondering when the Priests will come

for us. They will only tolerate us for so long. So, we've created a network of what you would call "safe houses" for persecuted Believers. If one day Zif or one of his fellows comes for us, we have somewhere to flee to."

The part of Sarda most affected by Piper tempted him to smile and share his delight. Yet the hard veneer of Vulcan would not permit him. Instead, he simply asked the question: "Do you think they would be willing to hide our "guests" for us?"

Faith shrugged, then smiled with glee. The thought of helping those in desperate need appealed to her. "Why not?" she said. "We've already been sheltering a handful of black Caits for years. What's another sixty politicians?" She laughed from the heart. "And besides, who knows? Maybe we'll be able to convert a few of them." She sidled up to Sarda at his work station. "Are you able to contact Krestapan from here?"

The Commander answered by calling the security officers he had tasked with the preacher's protection. For security, he encrypted the signal. "*Cork* to Ensign Earhaht."

The gravelly voice of the ship's Horta answered quickly. "Earhaht here."

Sarda cut to the chase. "Please put Krestapan on."

A moment later, a cheerful voice came over the speaker. "Hello again, Mister Sarda. What can I do for you?"

The Vulcan deferred to the young Cait. He waved for her to answer. Faith gave him a quick overview of their problem, and Krestapan was only too happy to throw open the door to them. "By all means!" he said. "If there was one thing the Teacher taught us: it's to never turn away someone in need!"

It was at this point that Sarda realised they would have some logistical problems. "I would suggest we beam down the party members to three different locations. You can sequester them from there. We will undoubtedly come under fire soon after we make orbit, so our window of beaming will be short. You must make sure the arrival point is clear of obstacles so we can beam them without incident."

The answer was immediate. "No problem, Mister Sarda. You can beam them down to three of our "chapels". They're fairly large spaces free of furniture." There was a sound of jostling. "Hang on, I'll give you the co-ordinates." Krestapan quickly rattled off three Caitian addresses. "I'll call them now. Come to me first, that'll give the other two chapels time to prepare."

Sarda finished the conversation. "We will begin beaming in approximately five minutes. Please be ready as we will have no time to scan before we beam." As an afterthought, he added: "And Krestapan, thank you."

He could almost see the preacher smiling. It showed in his voice. "You are more than welcome, my friend. Krestapan out."

The connection ended, and Sarda quickly began issuing orders. "Mister Nunn, I need you to warp us into a high, geosynchronous orbit over these co-ordinates. Stay as long as you can. I will beam our guests down as quickly as possible. Raise shields and move off if you have to."

Jason was being stretched with his task, but it wasn't beyond him. He gave a thin-lipped smile at the thought of the challenge. "Aye, sir."

Sarda stood. "Faith, would you please join me? I need to inform our guests of our plans."

Faith rolled her eyes. "Great," she said, with more than a touch of cynicism. In her experience, politicians were all egocentric spoiled children.

"That *is* their destination, isn't it?" Piper asked. She gazed once more at the viewscreen. It displayed an enormous comet that had previously been hidden from view by the system's star. Between them and it flew the shuttle, still unaware they had a predator following them.

The science officer straightened up and took his eyes off the scanner. He didn't like drawing conclusions without solid proof, but all the signs were there. Besides, Piper liked hearing what people thought, regardless of whether they had evidence to back up their claims. "It does appear be, Captain. They are settling into a parabolic course that will bring them alongside the comet in approximately fifteen minutes.

“Hmmm.” Piper sat in her chair, the weight of decision hanging on her. Should she go in now, or allow the shuttle to continue? The comet could simply be a temporary distraction. If she moved in too quickly, she may never find out where the vanished were being held. On the other hand, if she waited too long, she would have a lot more to worry about than just the shuttle. The detritus thrown off by the comet as it neared the sun would prove a little more than hazardous for her ship to fly through.

That was the problem with comets. As they neared a star, they would begin to essentially “melt”. Most comets were a mixture of rock, gasses, water, metals, etc. It depended on where they began life. Some were formed through the same manner as planets, others were the result of planets and/or asteroids exploding. Once more, Piper was hamstrung by being unable to use her ship's powerful scanners.

It was too much of a risk. “Helm: bring us into tractor range of that shuttle. Communications: hail the shuttle and order them to heave to and prepare to be boarded. Battlestations!”

Immediately, the lighting on the bridge dulled to a deep red. As per her orders, the *Millennium* surged forward and quickly closed the gap between it and the shuttle. It took only a moment for them to be noticed before the shuttle broke from its intended flight path and accelerated for the moderate protection of the comet's tail.

Unwilling to play “dodge the rock”, Piper ordered the ship to full impulse power.

Due to the shuttle's inertial dampeners, Martin and his band of Caitian rebels had no idea their shuttle had changed course and was headed into mortal danger.

“Have the tractor beam ready to catch them as soon as they're in range,” Piper said to the weapons officer. “Don't wait for my okay, just grab them.”

“Aye, Captain,” said Manny, who had resumed her station as Security Chief. She felt best when she could contribute to any given situation.

And Piper was glad to have her there. Her marksmanship was legendary. No sooner had the order been given did she see the green coruscating light of the tractor beam latching onto the shuttle. It gave a sudden lurch as the larger vessel began tugging it backwards. Still, the being piloting the shuttle was not going to give up without a fight. It began lurching in different directions as its captain tried to break the starship's hold.

“No you don't,” Piper said under her breath. She turned to Manny. “Put it in the shuttle bay one.”

“Aye,...” Manny frowned. “Captain, I think we've got other things to worry about. Sensors are reading a large vessel in the comet's tail, and it's coming towards us.”

The Captain scowled. This was not good. “How long 'til we get that shuttle into the bay?”

Manny was equally unimpressed by the situation.

“Thirty seconds.”

“Time to intercept large vessel?”

“Twenty seconds.”

“Damn.”

The helmsman spoke up. “Captain, if I may?”

The Captain guessed what he was about to suggest.

“Do it.”

Unhindered by air in the endless vacuum of space, the *USS Millennium* spun on her vertical axis through one hundred and eighty degrees, so it now faced directly *away* from the shuttle. This allowed direct access to the rear clamshell doors, which a thoughtful officer quickly opened. Instead of thirty seconds, the shuttle was now quickly drawn inside in ten.

Piper spun in her chair and faced Manny. “Mister Sandage, send a team to deal with the shuttle and its cargo. I need you here.” She turned back to the viewscreen. “Arm phasers and photon torpedoes.”

As her Chief of Security rushed to fill her orders, she also engaged the weapons systems.

“Communications, warn them off.” The Captain did not want to fight if she didn't have to.

Crash's second offered: “They are responding, Captain.”

“Put them onscreen.”

The view of space before them was instantly replaced by an image of a *very* angry Cait. He wore a

uniform Piper had come to recognise as that worn by Cait's military arm of their Homeworld Security. His tone was anything but welcoming. "What do you mean by taking a vessel of the sovereign government of Cait aboard without their approval?"

The Captain was in no mood for a debate on the matter of sovereignty. "Captain, as a member of the United Federation of Planets, Cait is bound by its law. It is more a member world than an independent world. As such, *we* have jurisdiction here. We have reason to believe that there are a number of Caits aboard that vessel being held against their will. So, I would suggest you think again before accusing *us* of violating individual sentient rights."

The Cait Captain scowled at her, crossed his arms and demanded: "What evidence do you have?"

Piper was getting annoyed at the Cait's lack of basic etiquette. She still didn't even know his name, not that she thought he would be too forthcoming. "Captain...."

Without thinking, the Cait finished the query. "Sontabash."

The Captain smiled thinly at the small victory. "Captain Sontabash, we know that there are a number of black Caitians being held against their will on board the shuttle. We believe there are more here, perhaps even on your ship. We demand their release under Federation law."

Sontabash curled a lip in disdain. "The Caits you refer to are criminals, Captain. Our project here is a form of penal settlement."

Piper raised a curious brow. “What laws have they broken? Last time I looked, it wasn’t a crime to be black.”

Captain Sontabash grimaced. “I am not privy to their criminal history, Captain. It is my job to enforce my orders, not to question them.”

That statement reminded Piper of the defence many of the Nazi officers had given at the Nuremberg trials. “I was just following orders” was hardly a reason to partake in a campaign of genocide. Her opponent seemed so blasé regarding his captives that it rankled her.

“*I’m* questioning your orders, Captain,” Piper stated flatly. She would brook no argument. “Lower your shields and prepare to beam over your captives.”

Sontabash replied with a smirk. “As you can see, Captain Piper, I cannot drop my shields whilst we are within the tail of the comet.”

Not impressed with his cheekiness, Piper scowled. Her tone menacing, she said: “Then I suggest you come out of it.” While she spoke, she was tapping out a text message for the helm officer on her chair arm. It read: Bring us about.

As the Captain engaged her opponent on the viewscreen, her ship began a graceful turn on its vertical axis, once more bringing the forward batteries to bear on the Caitian ship.

“I’ll tell you what, Captain,” Sontabash said casually. “If you want the blacks so badly, you can have them.” He turned and spoke to someone off screen.

Still wondering what he meant by that comment, Piper turned to ask the science officer to scan the other vessel. Anticipating her order, he had already done so, and, mortified, he switched the screen to an exterior view. The bridge crew watched in horror as a hatch on the side of the Caitian ship opened and a group of twenty-odd Caits were blasted out into space as the air rushed out into the vacuum.

Without hesitation, Piper mashed a control on her chair arm. "Piper to all transporter rooms. Locate the spaced Caits and beam them aboard, as quickly as you can! Sickbay, medical emergency to all transporter rooms. Prepare to receive spaced victims." She turned to Manny. "Lower shields. Prepare to take fire." She levelled her Caitian friend with a look of steel. "If they take a single shot at us, open up with everything we've got. Just focus on their weapons and engines. There's no guarantee they don't have more captives on board."

As she finished speaking, the hull was rocked by a phaser blast from their opponent. In response, Manny threw everything in their arsenal back at them. Phaser beams emitted from all five pods simultaneously, as well as photon torpedoes from both tubes. They played over the other ship's shields, but they did not fall. So, Manny kept up a constant barrage as the other ship did likewise. The Starfleet vessel's hull was being scorched in a number of places, but their ablative armour was taking most of the heat.

Within ten seconds, the victims were all beamed aboard and the *Millennium* was able to raise her shields.

Triage for a large group of half-frozen Caits was difficult as it was hard to know who to start on first. Most had started off life black, but now were coated in defrosting ice, condensed from their own bodies or immediately on materialisation. Their eyes were extremely bloodshot, and most had blood hideously issuing from nearly every orifice.

As the most senior nurse on staff, it was up to the stocky Nurse Stone to determine whether they could be saved. She handled the casualties efficiently, quickly scanning them and tagging them for: O.R., giving them palliative care as they were too badly injured to survive, or were already dead. Given the circumstances, it was a miracle they would be able to save about half of them.

Stone noted they were all black Caitians, confirming their suspicions regarding their ultimate destiny. She also noticed they were fairly emaciated, as if they were overworked and definitely underfed.

As she finished categorising them, she rushed to aid in saving the injured. Doctor AndrusTaurus was using O.R.1 and Doctor Harper was in O.R.2. As she looked through the doors, she noted both of them were being aided by sufficiently experienced nurses, so she left them to do their tasks. Satisfied, she helped the remaining staff work with the those waiting for their turn. Within minutes, they

were being joined by a handful of injured Starfleet crew members hurt in the opening barrage. Emotional detachment was not a difficult thing for the usually stoic nurse, but the horrific effects of spacing was enough to chip away at even her strong defences. The images of their ravaged bodies would be with her for a long time.

“I hope the Captain kills these bastards,” she muttered under her breath.

On the hangar deck, the security forces of the *Millennium* had their hands full subduing the crew of the Caitian shuttle. It sat squarely in the middle of the deck, still held in place by the *Millennium's* internal tractor emitter. Until their power unit was disabled, they weren't taking any chances that they might try to fly out again.

Manny's security force fanned out around the small ship, all eyes trained on the doors, waiting for some kind of response to their calls to leave the vessel. Since the craft had literally been dragged on board, there had been no word from the pilot and crew, so the *Millennium* crew were taking no chances.

Voices shouted for the pilot to open the door, yet they were greeted only with silence. Unwilling to wait a moment longer, a small force stormed the vessel and quickly operated the door controls. Phasers held high, eyes staring down their sights, they stepped inside and made their way through the tight corridors, checking the two rooms behind the cockpit. In them, they found nothing

more than a small kitchen and a four person transporter. The silence on board was only broken by the hum of machinery. It was unnerving.

Once in place behind the locked pilot's door, the lead security officer raised his phaser and picked the lock the old fashioned way. He blasted it.

The door slid aside noiselessly, and the security forces stormed into the cockpit, ready to shoot anything that moved. They didn't need to worry. It was also empty.

Frowning at the incongruity of the situation, they turned their attention to the cargo room at the rear of the vessel. Once more, it was locked, and the mechanism was dealt with in the same manner. As the door slid aside, the security force stayed put. This was where they expected to find the captives, but given the lack of crew aboard, there was every possibility they were now facing a hostage situation.

Without looking in, the leader announced: "I am Lieutenant Sven Jorgensen of Starfleet. Is everybody alright in there?"

To his surprise, a black Caitian head popped out through the door wearing a friendly grin. "Took your time, didn't you?"

Jorgensen frowned. He didn't do humour. "Who are you? And where's the crew?"

The Caitian continued grinning and put out his paw to shake. "I'm Martin Luther, and I don't know."

The security officer was unimpressed. "Well, Mister Luther, is everyone in there okay?"

Luther turned back and quickly scanned his group. "We're quite fine in here, Lieutenant. Perhaps you could tell Captain Piper we were successful."

The male's arrogance annoyed the erstwhile Lieutenant, yet he was too much of a professional to show it. He stepped forward and looked through the cargo bay for himself. He was surprised to find that the majority of the captives were tawny. Suspicious, he raised his weapon once more. "Who are you?" he asked in his most no-nonsense tone.

The female he was interrogating just looked down the barrel casually. "My name's Pashtallah. I believe your boss is my daughter. Could you please let her know we're fine?"

Startled, Jorgensen lowered his weapon. "What's going on here?" he blurted out, frustrated.

Luther gave another of his sly grins and spoke to him from behind. "It would seem Zif wasn't satisfied with just targeting blacks, but their families as well."

The situation crystalized in Jorgensen's mind. "I see." He lowered his weapon completely, then took Pashtallah by the hand. "Ma'am, if you would come with me, we'll take you all to the Recreation Deck where we'd like to debrief you."

Touched by the officer's genteel manner, Pashtallah accepted the offer and allowed herself to be

escorted from the ship. Martin Luther and his people followed directly behind them, the rest of the captives afterward. None of them noticed the remainder of the security force gathered around Luther and his followers and kept a sharp eye on them.

Much as she would have liked to, Captain Piper knew that destroying the Caitian vessel was out of the question. The *Millennium* was nimbly moving around, taking fire on her shields from their adversary whilst returning the favour. They were wearing down their opponent's shields, that was certain, but the question was which of the ships would lose theirs first.

It helped that they were clear of the debris thrown out by the comet as it slowly disintegrated. The only down side for them was that their fire was sometimes intercepted by a piece of rock and prematurely detonated. The same was true for the Caitian vessel, however it could not move out of the way of the *Millennium's* weapons due to the proximity of the flotsam about them.

As she watched the battle ensue on the Bridge viewscreen, Piper suddenly got an idea. "Target the asteroid fore and below the enemy vessel with a photon torpedo and fire!"

Manny new better than to question her Captain, so she quickly and efficiently carried out the order. She guessed the Captain's intent, and adjusted her shot to hit the giant rock towards the lower end of it. The torpedo

arced out from the *Millennium's* tubes and pulverised it, sending its pieces in the direction of the enemy ship and raining thousands of kilos of detritus onto its shields. It had the twofold effect of damaging the shields and temporarily blinding it behind the cloud of dust.

Seizing the opportunity, the Captain jumped up and ordered: "Helm, move us two kilometres on course zero mark forty-five. Full impulse. Go!"

The move brought the *Millennium* directly above the alien marauder where she pounded the remainder of her shields with a full barrage of phaser fire. They flared violet for a moment, then went down. Phasers started scoring hull metal while her masters were still trying to discover the source of the pummelling.

"Take out her weapons systems and warp drive," the Captain ordered, the note of triumph clear in her tone. She rejoiced as her opponent reeled as Manny's pinpoint phaser bursts took out the Caitian phaser pods and torpedo launchers first, then went on to disable the ship's warp nacelles.

Piper sat back down in the Conn and tugged down on her uniform. "Perhaps now they'll be in more of a mood to "talk"," she said with a tight grin. The enemy Captain's actions had been reprehensible, and she was determined to make sure he would pay. Just not with the lives of everyone else on the ship.

The Comms officer listened intently for a moment.
“Their Captain is calling and wishing to discuss the terms
of their surrender.”

Manny gave a smirk. “I think he’s worried we’re
going to blow him out of the sky,” she said with a victor’s
confidence. After witnessing his behaviour, she would
have been happy to carry it out.

The Captain rolled her emerald eyes. There were
times like these when she was tempted. However, she
wanted Sontabash brought to justice. Her eyes narrowed
as she thought. There could still be resistance. “Mister
Sandage,” she said, addressing Manny by her married title,
“assemble a boarding party, heavily armed. Find out if
there are any more hostages and put the entire crew in the
brig. I don’t trust any of them.”

After witnessing the atrocity carried out by the
Caitian captain, and his crew’s apparent lack of remorse,
Manny understood the Captain’s command. No-one
capable of such inhumane actions should be allowed to
repeat their mistakes. “Aye, Captain.”

Having accepted the order, Manny put together her
entire security staff, less those tasked with watching
Luther, and had them assemble on the hangar deck as the
Captain made her demands known to their enemy.

Chapter Fifteen

The space above the blue-green world of Cait was quiet, broken only by the occasional passage of the odd satellite. Seen from above, the wisps of cloud could be clearly discerned, some of which were backed by the blue of the world's small oceans. Since the departure of the *Millennium*, the private flotilla had dispersed and gone home.

That peace was broken by the sudden arrival of a pint-sized starship as it dropped out of warp dangerously close to the atmosphere. The *USS Cork* quickly settled into orbit, and her crew began the task of beaming their passengers down as quickly as they could.

In the ship's cockpit, Brankovian looked up from his console and said in his typical urgent whisper: "They're scrambling fighters."

Jason gave a cocky smile as he held the craft steady. "We'll be gone long before they get anywhere near us."

Behind them, Sarda was operating the *Cork's* transporters as quickly as he could. No sooner had one couple beamed down than Faith ushered another forward. Their task was hampered by the device's limitation in that it could only handle two at a time, and each cycle took ten seconds.

Brankovian watched his scanner intently. "They are twenty seconds from firing range," he reported, the worry he was feeling clear.

Jason didn't need to be told. He could see them coming from below. His hand hovered above the controls, ready for the "all clear" from Sarda to proceed, although his ears told him the Vulcan was still busy beaming the politicians down.

"Ten seconds." Brankovian was having trouble staying in his seat.

The distance did not put off the Caitian fighter jocks. They had already begun firing on them, yet due to the distance remaining between them, most of the shots went wild, and the few that found their mark had reduced in energy to insignificant love taps.

"Five seconds." The energy bolts were getting a little more accurate and noisy.

"Done!" Faith shouted as the final pair were beamed out.

A few seconds later, Sarda announced: "Warp speed" as their equipment registered they had rematerialised properly.

Jason dropped his hands onto the controls and fired up the warp drive. As the fighters finally got a bead on the shuttle, it disappeared from the space around Cait, leaving the pilots frustrated their intruder had once more escaped.

“How long do we need for the next drop?” Jason asked as he expertly steered the *Cork* around Cait’s moon at warp four.

At his side, Carman, his eyes wide with something akin to amazement (mixed with more than a dash of terror), watched as the moon slid by them as they tore around it. He glanced back at Sarda, more than a little grateful to not have to watch the spectacle. “Commander?”

Sarda finished the calculations quickly in his head. “It should take us fifty seconds once we’ve dropped out of warp.”

The estimation caught Carman’s attention. With raised eyebrows he asked: “*Should* take us?”

The Vulcan simply raised his eyebrows. “Given we don’t come under fire and that “Murphy’s Law”, as Mister Nunn would put it, doesn’t factor.”

Carman understood the reference. Jason quoted it often enough. The law simply stated: what can go wrong *will* go wrong. “Let’s hope Murphy’s taking a day off.”

“Indeed.” Sarda moved over to the transporter controls. The next two politicians were already standing on the platform waiting for their turn – thoughtfully put there by Faith. Sarda felt the subtle shift in the grav. plating and knew before Jason said it that they had dropped out of warp. With the transporter co-ordinates already entered, Sarda quickly beamed down the first couple. As soon as the first couple disappeared, Faith ushered in the next pair.

From the pilot's chair came a worried voice. "You might want to step on it, Commander. We have incoming!" Once more, Jason didn't need the scanners to see the enemy fighters coming towards them. Although they had swung out and around the planet, it seemed as if they had guessed his next move. He would have happily wagered the pilots were sitting in their cockpits ready to launch.

"We've got twenty seconds before they're in range," Carman stated calmly.

Jason gritted his teeth. "One of these days I'm going to have a few words with Murphy."

Even though it was against his nature, Sarda frowned. He still had three pairs of Caits to beam down. There wasn't enough time.

Lieutenant Nunn had an idea. "Commander, can you beam someone down and correct for a vertical drop?"

Appalled by the notion, Sarda stated: "It would be difficult, but not impossible."

Jason gave him a tight grin. "I'll let you know when, then."

As Carman counted down the seconds as the fighters came into range, Sarda managed to get all but one couple down before Jason had to snap on the shields to avoid them being blasted to bits. The shuttle still rocked as the phaser bolts impacted their protective electronic shield. It was at this point that Jason forced the vessel to drop like a stone towards the planet. Caught off guard, the pilots of

the fighters lost valuable seconds trying to find him as the *Cork* plummeted towards Cait. Jason lowered the shields as Sarda worked to beam down the last couple, trying to adjust for their descent. The Caits dematerialised from the platform, then Sarda's console registered their reintegration below. "Done," he stated succinctly.

Jason slapped the shields control just in time as the craft encountered Cait's atmosphere, rocking the deck plating and knocking those standing off their feet. Forcing the craft's nose down, he used the rapidly thickening atmosphere to buoy them and bounce off and back into space. The friction of the gas against the shields left a blazing trail of fire as if they were a meteor headed for its doom. However, Jason had no intention of letting them have a chance encounter with the ground and skilfully brought them out into space once more.

The manoeuvre did more than avoid enemy fire, the fighter pilots decided following the *Cork's* course was far too dangerous and they stayed out of range as she once more disappeared into warp.

The dungeon door clanked as it was drawn open for the second time in a hundred years. Curious, Crash stood and prepared himself for whatever came. He did not think that his people would employ torture to extract information from him, but, after the government's antics of the last few days, nothing they did would surprise him.

Escorted by two security officers, Crash found himself face-to-face with the Information Minister, Huttajink, and the Minister for Homeworld Security, Smeetablink. Neither of them appeared in a good mood. Without preamble, Huttajink charged: "What is your Starfleet Shuttle doing?"

Crash considered the question. It told him more than he expected. If the *Cork* was bothering them, then the *Millennium* must have been called away. The only reason they would leave would be if they had found the captives. Captain Piper would then have left the *Cork* as support. The question it left him was: should he tell them the truth, or mess with them?

He decided on the latter. "Wouldn't you like to know?" he said with a sly grin. He leaned casually against the wall and examined the back of his right paw.

Grossly impatient, Huttajink pulled out a phaser, pointed it at him and growled: "Tell us what we want to know, or else."

Crash was not intimidated. Shooting him would not give them the answers they sought. He rolled his eyes and sighed. "If I know the Captain well enough, they're probably inserting agents to spy on you and to prepare for the eventual invasion."

His words rattled the pair, that was clear. The hair on their necks rose, yet the look in their eyes wasn't one of anger, Crash thought, it was of fear. Like any petty

dictatorship, the leaders spiralled into a world of paranoia. He had learned this in one of the Captain's lessons.

A scholar of history, Captain Piper was one of the few individuals intent on making sure she did not repeat the mistakes of the past. And to help her crew members do the same, she ran classes on the subject.

The current situation reminded him a little of Earth's Josef Stalin, and how his days were marked by rampant paranoia. He feared any and all, as if there was a subversive under every rock. He decided to use their fear against them.

“Any moment now, the Captain's probably going to give the word and you two will find yourself in here instead of me.” Crash tried to put as much conviction as he could into his statement, then went back to examining his claws.

Smeetablink seemed ready to have kittens, but Huttajink was unconvinced. His job was seeking out truths and lies, and Krashtallah's statement did not quite have the ring of truth. “Perhaps, but I don't think so,” he said, carefully watching Crash's body language. “Starfleet captains are not known for overthrowing governments.”

The comment drew a small laugh from their captive. “Then you don't know Captain Piper. You know, she was once Captain Kirk's protégé. Check out *his* record. It'll keep you up nights.” He laughed once again at his own wit.

The name gave Huttajink reason to pause as he considered Crash's words. James Tiberias Kirk was famous for breaking the rules. If Piper was his student, then she was not to be underestimated, or put in a box for that matter. Still, the information did not solve his immediate problem. "All the same, you are not telling me what I want to know. The *Cork* picked up the Opposition Party members and shortly after made two runs on our world, each time they were chased off by our fighters. I want to know what they were doing."

While trying to keep a straight face, Crash could guess. He knew the *Cork* had only a limited air supply and taking on the entire Opposition Party would overtax the small craft's resources. They were bringing them back and hiding them somewhere. If he had to guess, it would be with the religious zealots. All the while, he had to come up with a convincing lie. "I told you already," he said calmly. "The Captain is inserting agents to prepare for your overthrow."

Huttajink scowled, then shot Crash. As he crumpled to the floor, the Minister said over his body: "Why is it I don't believe you?"

"Now, that's not good." Carman frowned as he stared at the scanner. On it was a beautiful rendering of the Caitian homeworld in three dimensions. And orbiting it, at regular intervals, were little red blips.

“They’re not taking any chances, are they?” Jason said. He tapped one more control on his side of the vessel and powered down the engines. He glanced out the portal at the bleak landscape of Cait’s moon. It closely resembled Earth’s with its grey, dusty tones, yet it was even smaller in size than Terra’s. The lack of natural gravity had put the Cait off colonising it, and so it remained barren, although it was more than pockmarked by meteor hits. It also had a network of caves, and it was in one of these he had hidden the *Cork*. “What I’d give for a cloaking device right now,” he muttered wistfully.

“Such a device would be very advantageous at this intersection,” Sarda interjected. “However, Starfleet still hasn’t installed any in any other vessels other than the *Millennium*. ”

Faith was not constrained by Starfleet niceties. “Commander, did you swallow a dictionary this morning?” she asked cheekily.

Raising an eyebrow was as close as the Vulcan would come to exhibiting mirth, and he left it at that. “It would appear they are expecting us,” he said.

Jason glanced towards the rear of the shuttle. “How many ministers do we have left?”

“Fifteen,” Faith answered. With a little hope, she asked: “That brings us in under the *Cork’s* capabilities, doesn’t it? We don’t *have* to drop them off, do we?”

Sarda did not want to pop her bubble, yet the truth had to be recognised. “We have simply bought ourselves

more time. Our carbon scrubbers have been overtaxed and are in need of replacement. If there were only the five of us, we could continue for weeks as we are. However, we still only have hours with the Ministers on board."

"At least that's better than thirty minutes," Jason said, looking on the bright side.

The Lieutenant's cheerfulness was infectious, and welcome as far as the Commander was concerned. He needed his crew thinking positive thoughts. "I see the fighters are spaced so their intercept time would be about ten seconds," he stated. He steepled his fingers once more in thought. "We need another way to get the Ministers to Cait."

Faith arched her whiskers forward hopefully. "I take it the transporters won't reach that far?"

All four males seated around her in the cockpit shook their heads: no. In their minds, she was too nice to let down verbally.

"All right then," she continued. "The way I see it, we either have to give our ministers to someone else to get them home, or pretend to be something else to get by the fighters." She crossed her arms on the console and laid her head on them.

Carman sat back in his chair and gave a rueful laugh. "I wish we had one of Commander Sarda's projectors attached to this bird."

Curious, Faith gave Sarda a look. "What is he talking about?"

For a split second, Sarda was tempted to take a deep, cleansing breath to let out the stress of the day. I'm spending too much time with the humans, he thought. "The device Mister Valastro is referring to was capable of creating images in space similar to those created by holodecks. To conventional scanners, they appeared solid. However, upon closer scrutiny, they were revealed to be only energy."

Their security officer, Brankovian, nodded at this point, his antennae turning with his eyes as he gazed at Faith, which she found slightly unsettling. "It would have been very convenient to have something like that. It's would be a reverse cloaking device. We could project something around ourselves to make them think that we were something else entirely."

"Like a meteor," Carman chipped in.

"Or a star liner," Jason suggested. He suddenly sat up bolt upright, liking the idea. As he swivelled his seat to work the computer, Carman tapped him on the shoulder.

"I already checked, Jason," he said. "There aren't any due today."

Faith started at that. "That's odd. There's usually a number of ships coming and going."

Sarda moved forward in his seat as he solemnly stated: "It would appear word has gotten out about Cait's political instability. Most of the starliner companies have listed Cait as too great a risk to travel to at present."

Jason shook his head in wonder. "Talk about shooting yourself in the foot," he said in sad amazement. "With an economy so desperately in need of the traveller's credit, you think they'd keep their priorities straight."

"Greed knows no logic," Sarda quoted. "Only itself."

A laugh from Faith brought the other's attention. "Has anyone ever told you that Caits recycle everything?"

The men looked at her blankly.

"Well, we don't," she added. "There is one thing we're superstitious about so we *don't* recycle them."

Sarda, knowing Faith wouldn't be uttering idle words at this point in time, asked the obvious question. "And that is?"

In answer, she showed him some of her pearly teeth as she grinned. "It's better if I show you."

As the airlock doors slid aside, Lieutenant Manny Sandage took a tiny mirror from her flak vest and used it to peer around the door. Instead of beaming onto the Caitian ship, they had decided on using a shuttle. There was no chance of being shot down en route. Manny had taken care of that personally by phasering every external weapons pod on the craft. She preferred coming aboard by shuttle and thus giving her a defensible position rather than beam into a space that could be open to vacuum – or worse.

The mirror showed only two Caits waiting near the door. She took particular note that both of them wore

holstered phasers, but appeared to have nothing in their hands.

“Put your phasers on the floor!” she demanded without showing her head first.

Obediently, the two tawny Caits unholstered their sidearms and placed them on the floor.

“Now, kick them towards the door!” Manny was taking no chances.

Once again, the Caits did as they were told.

Manny glanced at her companions and gave them the nod. As one, they poured through the doorway and swept onto the deck, phasers pointed in all directions. Two of her people immediately put the two found in cuffs and pushed them into a corner. “Stay down!” they were ordered.

As the two Cait officers tried to make sense of the many Starfleet uniforms gathered in the room, one of them drew in a stunned breath when he caught sight of their leader. He caught his friend's attention and indicated Manny. They looked upon her in wide-eyed amazement at the white Cait who led the Starfleet security officers.

One of Manny's people, a human female, noticed their curiosity and asked them pointedly: “Haven't you seen a Starfleet Officer before?”

Without thinking, the first of them simply blurted: “We thought they all belonged to the Tree.”

Baffled, she asked again: “What do you mean?”

The Cait officer looked at her as if she had been born without a brain. "It's their war," he said cryptically.

Manny heard that and stepped over and held her phaser rifle millimetres from the talkative Cait's nose. "The only war I'm fighting," she said angrily, "is against idiots who think there's anything to colour at all."

The captive Caits gave each other an incredulous look. The second looked back at Manny and said: "You're not like any other White we've ever met. It seems they're the ones behind this whole thing."

Manny continued to wave her phaser under their noses. "I choose to take that as a compliment," she said affably. Then, more forcefully: "Now, how many people are there on this ship?"

The two captives glanced at each other, then fell silent, their chins falling to their chests.

Their captor just shrugged. "I don't need you anyway." She stood up, pulled out her tricorder and scanned the interior of the ship. Aside from her squad, there were one hundred and three beings on board. The thing she wanted to know was just how many of them were crew and how many were captives. Not content with the limited information from her tricorder, she stepped over to a computer terminal on the wall and punched in a query. It quickly brought up a three-dimensional image of the ship, including what looked like cargo holds full of Caits. She guessed this was where they were holding their hostages.

She ushered her squad leaders over and indicated the panel. "Team two and three, fan out and take down any crew you find – heavy stun. We'll collect them later and put them in the brig. For now, we need to secure this ship. Team one and I will head for the bridge. Go!"

As teams two and three made their way down the hall and branched off at the end, Manny selected two of her party of eight to remain with the shuttle. "Shoot anything that comes down this hall that doesn't look like us," she told them straight.

"Aye."

The remainder looked up at their leader confidently. They were well trained and felt ready for anything. "Let's go, people!" she said, quickly marching down the hall. She had an appointment with this ship's captain.

On the bridge of the *USS Millennium*, her captain paced to and fro. There was something about this whole thing that did not add up. What was there here for this ship to be hiding in the comet's tail?

"Science," she ordered. "Give me a complete scan of this comet, from top to toe."

The science officer raced to fulfil her wish. As information flooded into his terminal, he diverted some of the more interesting aspects to the Captain's chair screen. Piper sat down and perused the data. It began with a metallurgical analysis, which showed interesting quantities

of iron, nickel, and traces of steel and cast rhodium! Startled, Piper glanced over at the science officer, who was looking at her with a quizzical look on his face.

“What is a manufactured metal doing in a comet?” the Captain voiced her thoughts aloud.

Scanner stepped down from his post at the Engineering station and checked Piper's readouts. “Maybe they built something into the comet?” he suggested.

Possible, Piper thought, but highly unlikely. She voiced her doubts by saying: “What would be the point of that since it's on a bearing straight for the sun?”

Judd bit his lip as he considered the question. “Maybe they're simply building a place for the Blacks to ride the comet into the sun?”

“Ah..., no.” Piper shook her head doubtfully. “Too much effort for too little return.”

Something on the readout caught Scanner's eye. He paused the screen and scrolled back, then tapped the screen. “*That's* what this is all about!” he said victoriously. “This comet's loaded with dilithium!”

Piper gazed at the readout, and confirmed his suspicion. The comet consisted of approximately twenty percent dilithium. Its intrinsic value was obvious. To an energy hungry people like the Cait, this comet was a gold mine.

Scanner put it all together. “They're using the Blacks to mine the comet!” His hands balled into fists. “Bastards!” The anger he was feeling burned in his eyes.

"I say we rescue the Blacks, then cripple their ship and make them ride it into the sun with the comet!"

The Captain reminded herself that Scanner's brother-in-law was a black Cait and it could easily have been him out there with them. She put her hand on her friend's arm and gave him a reassuring smile. "Don't worry, my friend. They'll get justice."

Judd felt the pressure past his feelings and gave his friend a sheepish look. "Sorry, Piper," he said quietly. "These guys just make me burn."

"I know how you feel," she said, letting a little of her own anger show. "But we've still got to do this by the book. Otherwise, we're no better than they are." She brushed a lock of hair out of her eyes as she turned to inspect the data once more.

"Will you look at that?" Scanner said, touching the screen. He fingered a couple of controls to bring the data up on the viewscreen. Inside the head of the comet could be seen a number of chambers and corridors linking them. "They've been busy."

"It's a mine, alright," Piper said. She frowned to herself, a worrying thought occurred to her. "Computer, what effect will it have on the sun when this comet hits?"

"Working," the computer answered. After ten seconds it rendered its answer. "The comet will compress under the gravity, forming one dilithium crystal weighing approximately one hundred and fifty tons. As it nears the star's core, there is a high probability that it will focus the

star's energy and channel it in one focused beam, direction unknown."

The energies within a star were phenomenal, and the thought of them being directed outward in one focussed beam was terrifying.

"Computer," Piper asked, "is it enough energy to destroy a planet?"

"Working," replied the ship's A.I. system. "Yes."

The Captain's eyes widened at the implications. If they didn't change this comet's course soon, it could fry every planet in this system.

Scanner placed a hand on his Captain's arm. "That's not the worst of it, Captain," he said, the concern in his tone apparent. "The odds of the beam hitting a planet are low, but just the simple act of it happening will unbalance this star. It could collapse, or worse, go nova."

Piper looked up at the viewscreen at the comet that now filled it. Beyond, the Caitian star could be seen, and it was growing in size. It would not be long before the comet dived into its heart. "Computer, how much time is there before we can no longer shift the comet's course far enough to avoid hitting the star?"

"Working. Sixteen hours, eleven point five minutes," the computer reported dispassionately.

The Captain and her Chief Engineer shared a worried look. Sixteen hours until doomsday.

“You've got to be kidding.” Jason stared out his forward window with a mixture of awe and amazement.

“Now, that's not something you see everyday,” Carman muttered under his breath.

“Here would be a good place to stop,” Sarda suggested by way of an order.

Jason ran his hands over his console and expertly brought the *Cork* to a halt. At this close range, their craft would appear like any of the other of the plethora of derelict ships floating in space in this location.

“You weren't lying about this place, that's for sure,” Jason said to Faith as she leaned over his shoulder to peer upward and outward. As she got a little too close to an important instrument, he batted her paw away playfully. She simply smiled and sat back on her haunches.

“Take your pick, gentlemen,” she said with a wave. “I told you, Caits tend to give their ships names, and, over time, they develop a personality of their own. Being a superstitious lot, we'd rather “bury” our dead rather than dismantle them, so our leftover or worn out starships are left to float forever in our asteroid belt.”

Sarda ran a scan over the multitude of craft floating around them. He found most of them to be surprisingly intact, yet the state of most of their drive systems was so far gone as to rule them out completely. “Mister Nunn, could you bring us in a course following their orbit, at this relative distance, at three hundred kph?”

Their pilot nodded, understanding that Sarda needed to keep looking for a suitable candidate. If they were going to, even temporarily, raise one of these old ships from the dead, then they were going to have to have a good look. Jason made the necessary adjustments, and within seconds they were cruising alongside the biggest junkyard he had ever seen.

With the vast number of ships, it took some time before Sarda even looked up from his scanners. Carman wondered whether his fearless leader was just being picky, but even he could tell that a number of the craft had been holed, and others had been scavenged, even picked clean. He stole a glance at their internal atmospherics indicator, which was slowly moving towards the red line. "I hope this doesn't take too long," he said quietly, not realising he had verbalised his thoughts.

"It will take as long as it has to, Mister Valastro," Sarda said. He looked up from his scanners. "Park us here, Mister Nunn."

As Jason brought their craft to a stop, Sarda looked about him. "I am concerned that we are not going to find a suitable vehicle quickly enough. Suggestions?"

The other officers were too professional to comment on the Vulcan's request. For a human, it might appear as a show of weakness. In a Vulcan, it was simply a request for data.

"We *could* keep looking," Brankovian said.

Carman shook his head. “It could take forever, and we don't have that long.”

“If only we had that projector,” Jason muttered.

Carman grinned. “Yeah, we could go in looking like the Easter Bunny and they wouldn't know it was us.”

Faith looked out the window at the many ships floating outside, dimly illuminated by the distant sun. “You know, we don't have to actually make one go, we only have to make it *look* like it's flying.”

Jason looked at her blankly. “Huh?”

Sarda picked up her train of thought, however. “Are you suggesting we fly the *Cork* into the shuttle bay of a larger ship, lock the two together, and use the *Cork's* engine to move them both?”

Grinning like a schoolboy, Jason raised his head. “We could run an umbilical from the *Cork* to the other ship to run some of the basics, like the lights and such.”

“And we could extend the *Cork's* warp field to envelop the bigger ship, we could still move at warp speed.” Carman nodded his head. “It could be done.”

All eyes turned on Sarda. Jason spoke for the group. “Were there any ships we've seen that match those specs, Commander?” he asked respectfully.

Without even looking at the computer, Sarda had already decided on one. “Bring us about, Lieutenant. Our craft is two hundred and twenty kilometres behind us.”

Manny took a moment from her search of the ship to flip open her communicator. "Aman...Sandage here." She was still getting used to the change of her name.

Slightly tinny, Piper's voice issued from the tiny speaker. "How goes the hunt?" she asked.

The Security Chief sighed. Her job was never done. She wondered why the Captain was calling, though. It wasn't her style to look over other's shoulders. "We're minutes away from securing the bridge, Captain," she said, hopefully.

"I'm sorry to put this on you, Lieutenant, but we're going to have to speed things up. We've just discovered that if we don't stop this comet soon, it's will probably destroy the star." The edge in the Captain's voice was clear.

The ramifications of her statement came down on her like the proverbial ton of bricks. The stakes in their adventure just went through the roof. "Understood, Captain," she said with a slight quiver. She snapped her communicator shut with a deft flick of her wrist, then reopened it and tuned to her people's private, encrypted channel. "Teams one, two and three. We don't have time to do this neatly anymore. Set your phaser rifles on heavy stun, widest angle. Take down anything that moves. We'll pick through the survivors later and sort the good kits from the bad kits then. Go."

She shut the communicator again, slipped it onto her belt, confident that her people would be successful.

She looked her compatriots in the eyes, making sure they understood the stakes. “Let’s do this quickly and by the numbers. We haven’t had much resistance so far, but that could change when we get to the bridge. Whatever you do, keep your heads down and don’t make me have to write a letter to your families.”

Her people nodded their understanding, and with Manny in the lead they quickly moved forward using their tricorder to find lifeforms, then their phasers to put them to sleep.

The universe was conspiring against him, that Drishtagoth was convinced of. Only hours before, he had watched his friend and party leader walk off to his probable doom, he had been rescued by a Starfleet shuttle which then had been engaged in a shooting match, and finally he and his people had been left with a bunch of religious nuts.

Not that he was ungrateful for their hospitality. Just the opposite. In their hour of need, Krestapan and his people had been more than generous in their willingness to hide them. It was just that these people believed such heretical things that the Priests had never uttered.

Like the subject of their current argument. “Are you meaning to tell me,” Drishtagoth said, “that we don’t really know *what* colour the Teacher was?”

Krestapan wore a beatific smile that was starting to get on his nerves. “Exactly. The scriptures make no

mention of his colour, or that of any of those who killed him. None." He said the last with an open pawed flourish. "We have been lied to for generations."

Like so many who are faced with the impossible notion that their fundamental beliefs are just a pack of lies, Drishtagoth baulked. "No, no. The Priests are all white for a reason," he said, as if that simple fact spoke for itself.

"So what?" Krestapan said airily. "I have read the scriptures from front to back. There is no mention of anyone's colouring, much less anyone even suggesting we should judge an entire portion of our population based purely on the colour of their fur. The Teacher would have never had approved of such thinking."

Drishtagoth looked down at his bowl of tea once more and pondered the situation. He wanted to do *something*, but any action on their part would simply draw attention to themselves and that was what Commander Sarda wished to avoid. He and his people represented the legal government of Cait, yet they were effectively in exile, powerless.

His host, unaware of his personal quandry, pushed a padd into the politician's hand. "If you don't believe me, my friend, read the scriptures for yourself and tell me it isn't so."

Startled at the revelation that he held the Priest's holy scriptures in his hand, he almost dropped it. "I can't read this," he said. "It's for the Priest's eyes only."

Krestapan rocked on his knees, a friendly smile on his face. "Now, that's a conditioned response if I've ever heard one." He touched his paw to his nose, then placed it on his new friend's shoulder. "There is no magic formula to it." He gave a little chuckle. "They read quite well, actually. There are times when the narrative is so captivating you can't put it down."

Drishtagoth gave him an almost incredulous look. "You would make a good book seller," he said, ruefully.

Krestapan sighed. "I just wish I could sell this book to the whole world."

"And profit from it?" Drishtagoth recoiled, offended at the notion.

"No, no," Krestapan said, his hands held high. "Don't get me wrong. I don't care about *money*. I just want the people to know the truth."

Drishtagoth tipped his head to the side, curious. "Why haven't you uploaded it to the Worldnet yet? Then everyone could read it."

"Couldn't if I wanted to. *Someone* out there has released a worm virus into the Worldnet that hunts down and destroys copies of the scriptures if it finds them online." The male's frustration was evident.

"How about uploading it to Memory Alpha? Then people could download it directly from there."

"I wish!" his host said wistfully. "Once martial law was announced, all outside connections were restricted, and besides, I don't have the equipment, or the clearance,

to upload it. It takes someone with the right credentials to upload something to Memory Alpha. I've never had it. Neither have any of our people."

That would be frustrating, Drishtagoth thought. These people were too honest to go about uploading it using dishonest means. If they had a fault, it was that they were *too* nice. He cast his gaze around the room and his eyes alighted once more on their protector, a metre round lump of rock. Only the Starfleet voder on its side suggested it was anything other than a large mineral deposit. "Starfleet!" he said, victoriously.

Krestapan looked at him sideways. "What about it?"

A plan formed in Drishtagoth's mind. If it was true that there really was no basis for the division of colour then the people had a right to know. And the best way of getting the message out was to publish the scriptures in a place where everyone could read them freely. Then, perhaps, the Prime Minister's house of cards would collapse. "Starfleet has the authority to upload to Memory Alpha. If we can contact Faith on the *Cork*, she might be able to do it for you!" Drishtagoth did not know why he was excited, but the thought gave him hope that there might be a peaceful outcome to this whole mess after all.

"That sounds great," Krestapan said enthusiastically. Then he paused. "Who's Faith?"

Chapter Sixteen

The world was too loud and the sun too bright. As hard as Krashtallah tried to shut them out, he failed. A stray thought came to him that this was what humans must feel like when they have a hangover.

His arms hurt, too, and he found the cause to be that they were being held by two *very* large Caits. His wrists were tied together somehow behind his back, so the act of holding Crash up was putting undue strain on his shoulders. Now conscious, he got his feet under himself and lightened the load. While the males holding him seemed to appreciate the fact they were no longer carrying deadweight, they did not lessen their grip on his arms. He quickly came to the conclusion that he was going nowhere without them.

The next problem Crash faced was working out where he was and what was going on. He found himself standing on a raised platform overlooking a stage that contained something large and cylindrical. It seemed about a metre wide and two metres tall, but that was only a guess at this range. He thought he was about fifty metres from the stage.

While there didn't appear to be many in the audience, except the news media and a few unruly Caits shouting abuse, there was plenty on the stage to capture his

attention. Firstly, Zif stood, proud and regal, the essence of the temporal ruler he aspired to be. After meeting him and hearing about him from others, Crash had come to the conclusion long ago that Zif was more the antithesis of the spiritual leader he was *supposed* to be.

Curiously, at his side was the Queen, dazzling in her regal attire of gold and royal purples. The lady would have just as easily caught the eye of the males if she was standing there naked. Her pure white fur and golden eyes made her a clear stand-out in any crowd.

The only question that came to Crash's mind was: Where's Susanna? His missing wife was never far from his mind, and trying to function properly as a Starfleet Commander was becoming increasingly difficult as his fears for his wife's safety rose.

Unseen until now, Huttajink's voice came from behind him to the right. It carried a sinister tone that Crash had been unaware he possessed. "Now, Blackie, see what's in store for you and that half-breed mate of yours."

Krashtallah's eyes went wide in fear as he began to understand what he was seeing. Voices floated up from below, amplified by unseen speakers, lending them a quality far beyond the natural, designed to make one shiver.

"Citizens of Cait," Zif said with a flourish in one of his more grandiose attempts at flair. "For many years we have been at the mercy of a breed that has insidiously worked to undermine our very morals and society. Starting

with their murder of the Teacher, they have continued to be a thorn in the side of our people for millennia. They have been linked to the murders of many a good Cait," Crash wondered where he got *that* from, "and have robbed many good families of their rightful place of honour in our society." He held up a finger at the closest camera as he looked straight into the lens, eyes full of malice. "Well, I say, NO MORE!"

At this point, in a move that was obviously rehearsed, the Queen took Zif's place and held out her hands in a fashion that appeared imploring. "My people, we stand at a crossway. At this juncture in time we have the unique opportunity to rid ourselves of our subversive elements. Even the King allowed himself to become swayed by their lies, and now has faced the consequences by being removed from office. He is now being taken care of by doctors who will help him see the errors of his ways. With time, he may be able to return to lead a useful life of service to his people.

"For those who are familiar with the stain of shame harbouring a black Cait in one's clan can bring, you will be glad to know we have come up with a final solution." At this point, the Queen stepped back and indicated the cylindrical object behind her. "We have constructed a device that will humanely return them to the elements that gave us all life."

On the balcony, Crash's blood ran cold. The device was a disintegrator, of that he was certain. And the Queen

and Zif were going to put people into it to “purge” their genome once and for all. “When will this madness end?!” he cried, loudly enough for the Queen to hear him.

At the sound of his voice, her eyes narrowed and the sheer hatred he saw in them was breathtaking. She pointed up at him and responded with a voice devoid of humanity. It was dead, lifeless, uncaring. “You and your kind started it by killing our Teacher. Since then, you've continued your villainy with your traitorous support of the King with his failed coup. You have no-one to blame but yourself.”

At this point, she turned and gestured towards the far end of the podium. “And speaking of traitors, we have someone special to demonstrate our new device with.”

Two Homeworld Security guards stepped onto the stage hauling a bedraggled Vultanik between them. The aging Opposition Leader had clearly been beaten, however, he walked with dignity in every step and refused to give the Queen the satisfaction of seeing his pain. Before the Queen could utter a word, he scowled at her and gave her both barrels. “You are a poor excuse for a regent if you think this “machine” can subdue the people, my *Queen*. They will remember their courage and on the day you think you have victory, your defeat will come swiftly.”

“Brave words,” the Queen stated with disdain. “However the end will be the same. You will be dead and your memory lost.” She turned towards the camera once more and addressed the people of Cait, the vast majority of

which were glued to their vids. “My people, under my rule you will find me fair and just. And justice will come swiftly for those who oppose me.” She turned on her heel and moved over to the side of the machine. With a deft hand, she pressed the controls and the door slid around and into itself – a semi-cylinder door that moved into the back of the device, revealing the interior of it to be metallic, shiny and perfectly smooth. It had no roof, but it didn’t need one as the sides were sheer and eight feet high. With nothing to hold on to, there was no way the average Cait could climb out of it.

“Put him in it,” the Queen said, with all the emotion of an android.

Vultanik did not resist as the guards led him to the chamber. They let him go momentarily as the Queen hit the control to close the booth. With one last, defiant glare, he spat: “Your time will come, and you will find yourself wishing your death was this easy.”

The Queen simply shrugged. As the booth clanged shut, she deftly touched the activate control.

From his vantage point above, Crash watched in horror as the booth started a low hum that slowly increased in volume. For a second, he thought he heard a cry from within the death machine, but any sound would have been muffled by the heavy drapes that obscured his view of the top of it. He wondered for a moment if Vultanik was on fire in there, whether he was being cooked by microwaves, whatever. He just prayed that his demise was painless.

After a period of thirty seconds, the sound ceased and the booth slid open. Inside it was only a small heap of light grey dust, all that remained of a once great statesman. The Queen, curiously, stooped down and picked up some of the dust and let it drain between her fingers. She watched as it fell to the floor, fascinated. Then she showed it to the cameras for all to see. "This is what those who oppose your government or myself can expect. I know that the majority of Caits are law-abiding citizens and, as such, you have nothing to fear. The only ones who have anything to worry about know who they are, and I can assure you of this – we will find you."

At this point, the Queen gave a slight wave of her hand at the newspeople. The spectacle was over. Each cameraman started shutting down his equipment and, with the assistance of the reporters, they packed up and sauntered out. Most knew that something terrible had just happened, and that they were witnesses to something that would change the very fabric of their society. They just didn't know if, or what, they could do about it. Most thought the die was cast, and there was nothing they could do about it. After all, they were just people, and the Queen represented the government. What could they do to stop them?

The ship Sarda had chosen to be their Trojan Horse was probably one of the newest to join the ghost fleet. It was a former star liner, although it was relatively small for

its type. It had a shuttle bay that opened up beneath it, with doors that swung downwards and outwards. Fortunately for the crew of the *Cork*, they had been left open, possibly by those who had left it behind leaving in a shuttle much like theirs.

Once beneath the “*Troy*”, as Jason had dubbed it, he carefully guided the *Cork* into the black shuttle bay using sensors only. Once he had parked the shuttle square inside the bay, Carman lit up the interior with the shuttle's landing lights. To their surprise, it looked pristine.

Using the *Cork*'s small tractor beam, they held the two craft together while they went about their individual tasks to prepare their elaborate illusion. Firstly, Sarda, Brankovian and Carman donned their space suits, put on thruster packs and stepped into the vessel's small airlock. Carman gave the others the “thumbs up”, then the three of them took a rare spacewalk.

The plan was simple, hook the external power coupling to the *Troy*'s shuttle bay umbilical and feed the larger ship enough power to make the things they needed to work. All they needed were the running lights, life support systems, docking clamps and the shuttle bay doors. Everything else was superfluous.

“How's it going out there?” Jason called after about five minutes of silence.

Sarda replied, his voice muffled by his helmet. “Things are “going” as expected, Lieutenant. We will be able to transfer power to the *Troy* momentarily. Stand by.”

Inside the *Cork*, Jason gave Faith a smile. "We'll have this lot flying in no time," he said confidently.

"I hope so," Faith replied. She stole a glance at their life support systems. They were getting closer to the red line by the minute. "I have no intention of meeting my maker by suffocating out in space." She tried to make it sound humorous, but her attempt fell flat.

Taking a liberty, Jason placed his hand on Faith's paw and gave it a gentle squeeze. "Don't worry. You're in the best of hands. I'd trust Commander Sarda to pull us out of the fire any day."

As if in response to his statement, the lights dimmed as power was diverted. Outside, the lights came on and Jason could see Carman in a booth opposite. The Alpha Centauran could be seen operating the controls, then Jason noticed on his scanners that the doors beneath their shuttle were beginning to close. Also, the docking clamps above the *Cork* started descending, and with a clang that could be heard throughout the shuttle, they held on fast.

Through the window, Jason gave his friend a wave, and smiled when he waved back.

In the engine room, Brankovian looked over the controls, and wondered how anyone could fly it. The controls were all made for people with paws, he concluded, and he tried to adjust for the conditions. Using his universal translator, he was able to decipher which controls were for the life support systems, and he brought them online. He smiled as he felt the artificial gravity come on.

under his feet. Magnetic boots were handy, but there was no substitute for gravity that effected every part of the body, not just the feet.

Curious, he stepped over to the warp engines and examined them. He opened the dilithium chamber and was surprised to find the crystals still intact. Amazed, he walked back to the engineering console and ran a quick diagnostic. To all intents and purposes, the ship should still be spaceworthy. He clapped his hands together in delight, then his face fell when he saw the problem. The ship had absolutely no fuel in it whatsoever. Not only no antimatter, but no matter, either. He was hoping to make the ship fly under its own power. Now he knew why Commander Sarda had originally ignored this ship. It would take too much to bring her back online.

He took a moment to consider what it would take, and smiled. It wasn't outside the realm of possibility after all. It would take a little doing, however, and he had other priorities. Regardless of the fact that the *Cork* would be providing the propulsion, the problem remained that the *Troy* would still have to provide its own inertial dampening field, otherwise the ship would tear itself to pieces the moment they tried to go to warp. Finding the *Troy*'s computer coming back online, he instructed it to do just that, then warmed up its Bussard Collectors. If the ship was starved of fuel, he could always pick some up along the way.

Once the reporters had left the venue, the Queen looked up at the mezzanine and gave Huttajink a nod. In turn he backhanded Krashtallah so hard his head spun. It took him a moment to focus once more through the haze of pain in his skull.

“Now, traitor,” Huttajink growled, “You will tell us what your friends in the shuttle are doing. We know that the *Millennium* has engaged our destroyer, and we have heard nothing from them for the last quarter hour. What are your Captain's plans? What is the shuttle doing? What can we expect Captain Piper to do next?”

The fact that Huttajink had essentially asked the same question twice occurred to Crash, but he was in no mood to point out this error to his captor. Instead of answering, he kept his silence and gave the Information Minister nothing more than a savage look.

Huttajink snorted. “I would have assumed as much from a backwards black like you. When it comes down to it, you're too stupid to know what's best for you. Still, I bet I know how to loosen your tongue.” He stepped over to the railing and called down: “Bring her out.”

At that moment, something within Crash died as he saw his beloved wife, Susanna, dragged out onto the stage from the same place Vultanik had appeared from. Like himself, two guards escorted her, and Crash could see they had not been kind to her. In places on her supple form, her tortoise-shell coloured fur had been matted by blood from multiple scrapes and cuts. She did not allow herself to be

led easily, and the two guards practically carried her onto the stage.

The Queen walked over to her and slapped her, hard, across the face. "Be silent, offworlder! You should consider yourself lucky I haven't killed you yet."

Susanna relaxed herself then, giving the appearance she had been knocked out. One of her guards, the one on her right, became complacent and relaxed his grip on her arm. Taking full advantage of the opportunity, Susanna unsheathed her formidable claws and took a savage swipe at the Queen's head. While she managed only a glancing blow, her razor sharp claws found flesh underneath the snowy fur and drew blood.

The Queen, stunned, recoiled in horror and held her paws to her cheek. She checked them for blood and found them crimson.

The Priest, Zif, came to her rescue and took her aside as the guards brutally brought Susanna under control.

"How dare you touch the Queen!" Zif shouted, not only in anger, but total surprise. In his wildest dreams, he never imagined someone actually landing a blow on his Queen, not less even wanting to.

The Ambassador gave him a weak grin. "How dare you lay a hand on the Federation's Ambassador," she said, tired, but defiant. "You have thrown the rule book out the window, then wonder when someone breaks one." She turned her gaze up at the mezzanine where she could see

her husband. "Tell them nothing, my love. Make sure Piper makes them pay."

Crash fought to speak past the lump in his throat as he knew what was coming next. "I love you, Susanna," he cried, then fell silent.

"As I do you, Krashtallahash," Susanna said.

Beside Crash, Huttajink tried once more to coerce him. "Tell us what we want to know or your half-breed offworlder female dies," he said matter-of-factly.

In answer, Crash gave him a look of total conviction. "If she dies," he said, "so do you."

Huttajink gave a small laugh. "I don't think you know who's in charge here, Blackie. It's certainly not you." Turning his back on Crash, Huttajink indicated to the guards to put Susanna in the device.

Without struggle, Susanna allowed herself to be led forward. As Zif operated the controls, the door began to close. Crash's last look of his wife was of her blowing him a kiss before the door shut with a clang.

Zif waited a moment as he waited for the final confirmation to continue.

Above, Huttajink tried once more. "You can still save her, even now. Give us what we want."

In answer, Krashtallahash took a deep breath, then closed his eyes and said no more. Huttajink shook his head in amazement, then nodded at Zif, who hit the control to activate the machine. Thirty seconds later, the door opened

and the only thing to be found was grey powder on the floor.

In Krestapan's underground chapel, the whole congregation watched in open-mouthed awe as the travesty of justice played out on their vid screen. The older members of the congregation mourned for their lost former Prime Minister, a male who had led them through many terms in office. Most joined in a prayer for their lost friend. Unlike the current Prime Minister, Vultanik had been open to the tenets of religious freedom.

From his place where he was sitting at the back of the room, Drishtagoth struggled to hold back a tear for his lost friend and mentor. For all the time he had served in the Conservative Party, he had looked up to the elder statesman as a being of impeccable honesty and integrity. He had displayed uncommon charity and manners towards beings who deserved none, and helped preside over a world that was peaceful and free from fear. It was after the last election, when the people had voted for a change as the conservatives had been in power for twenty years, that things had begun to degenerate. He remembered how Vultanik had railed against the constitutional changes that had led to the formation of the Ministries of Information and Homeworld Security, but the ruling party's overwhelming majority squelched his voice.

And now a male who had spent his entire life in service to his people was rewarded with a summary

execution. The thought so turned his stomach that Drishtagoth was forced to run to the kitchen sink so he could vomit without making a mess. He stood there for a few moments, feeling the waves of nausea running through him as he brought up the entire contents of his stomach, and threatened to try for even more than that.

He became aware of a presence at his side, and he knew without looking that it was Krestapan. He felt the pastor's paw on his shoulder as he tried to lend him some comfort. Even though he did not quite agree with him, Drishtagoth had developed a fondness for the compassionate believer. If there were more beings like him on the planet, they would never have found themselves in this mess.

As he stood there, he remembered his leader's last words, and found within himself a new reservoir of courage. There was no way this atrocity was going to go unchallenged. They needed to form a plan of action. The first step of which was to find some support.

He turned on the tap, cleaned the sink, then lapped at the water as it fell. Feeling refreshed, he stood up and looked the pastor in the eye. "Has Earhaht been able to contact her people yet?" he asked.

Krestapan welcomed the new-found strength in his friend's soul. He was worried he was going to sink into a pit of depression and never come out. The death of his friend had galvanised him. Krestapan found himself wondering if the Queen had gone too far with her display. Instead of spreading fear, she simply awakened a monster.

“No, she hasn't. She doesn't have any idea where they've gone, but she assumes they were chased out of orbit. They may be waiting for the *Millennium's* return, but she doesn't think so.”

“Why not?”

The pastor smiled at that. “She said: It's not Sarda's style.”

The new Opposition Leader grinned. It was good to have people like that on his side. “Is there any way of boosting the signal?”

At that, Krestapan gave a reluctant shrug. “Sorry, we don't have the equipment.”

“Then we wait.” Drishtagoth found the notion grated, but there really was no alternative. While he had the drive to make things happen, he didn't have the resources. “Can I at least call my people in the other chapels?”

Glad to give something positive to report, the pastor said: “They've arrived in one of them, but not the other yet.”

“Now, *that's* good news,” Drishtagoth said.

Surprised, Krestapan said: “What do you mean? It could mean that Commander Sarda's ship has been destroyed.”

The politician thought of the memories still fresh in his mind. “You didn't see their ship. It's powerful, fast, and crewed by a very competent group of people. No,

they're still out there, and we've just got to be ready when they return." His confidence fairly radiated.

As the pastor led him back into the common room, he said: "I thought I was the one for living in faith."

Drishtagoth laughed at that. "My friend, you have a talent for believing in the unseen. I have the benefit of believing in what I *have* seen."

Lieutenant Manny Sandage led her still intact and unhurt team to the bridge doors. They had had a couple of close shaves as they made their way forward, but it was nothing they could not handle. As Manny looked at the locked door, she considered the different ways she could enter. Blow, storm and blast seemed to be effective, but this time she decided on something a little more subtle. She knocked.

"Who's there?" came a voice, muffled by the metal door.

Manny slit her eyes in annoyance. Of all the stupid questions. She gave her full name, then demanded to enter in the authority of Starfleet.

"As long as you promise not to kill anyone." The voice was full of fear.

The Lieutenant's patience was running out. "We haven't killed anyone – yet," she said.

"That's not true. We've been watching on the monitors. Your people have been shooting everybody they meet."

Manny sighed. "We've been stunning them, not killing them. You should know it's not Starfleet's way to go around shooting to kill. As a rule, we like to give everyone a chance to do the right thing."

Her argument carried weight. Although this group had gone rogue, they were aware of Starfleet's reputation for promoting peace. The doors slid aside to reveal a group of six clustered in the middle of the bridge. A quick glance at them with her mini-mirror showed them to be unarmed. Manny gave the nod and her people swarmed onto the bridge and fanned out. As Manny took stock of the ship's status, her security forces made sure those with her were unarmed. They were quickly herded into a corner and held there at gunpoint.

Satisfied there were no surprises from the ship itself, like nasty self-destruct mechanisms, Manny turned her attention to the bridge crew. One anomaly became clear fast.

"Where's the Captain?" she asked forcefully.

There were number of shrugs, but none of them spoke a word. Manny took out her tricorder and ran a scan, and curiously found a dampening field in effect. Someone was hiding something, that was obvious. She considered where the Captain may have gone, and looked about for a way out. Aside from the door she had entered through, there were none. There were no life pods to abandon ship in, so where was he?

The only other option she had to find him gave her pause. It might not work, she thought, but then....

She hung her phaser rifle over her shoulders, then sat back on the floor on her haunches. She closed her eyes and cleared her mind, then used her sixth sense to "feel" for those on the bridge. She quickly found the pirate crew, her people, and then three others. Once their position was certain in her mind, she opened her eyes and looked in that direction. It was a bulkhead wall with no apparent handle or mode of entry, but she knew there was one and where to find it.

Certain where she would find the Captain, she pointed to two of her people and ushered them over silently. They joined her and levelled their phasers at the bulkhead as she reached out and brushed the tiny part of the wall she knew would open it. It slipped in, then slid off to the side. Startled, those inside blinked in the sudden light and grappled for their phasers. The two at the Captain's side fell to quick shots from Manny's assistants.

The Captain himself was smart enough not to go for his. He simply glared defiantly at the Lieutenant.

Manny gave him a smile that was closer to a snarl and entirely devoid of mirth. "Hello, Captain," she said, then she knocked him out the old fashioned way – with a vicious blow to the head with her balled fist.

Once he'd dropped, she turned her gaze to his companions. They were dressed in peculiar fashion, not as the others on this ship. The black garb reminded her of the

being she had shot at in the forest after he had shot her husband. The *really* interesting part was that they were white, not tawny like the rest of the crew. Were they also a part of the assassin's guild? she wondered. If so, why were they white? Was there something she was missing?

At that point, her communicator chirped. She flipped it open. "Lieutenant," the leader of two squad said: "we've secured the cargo deck. Like you guessed, it was full of blacks. We've liberated them, but I recommend we beam them over to the *Millennium*. Most of them are in a bad way."

"Well done," she said. "Go ahead. Once they're out, let me know. We'll move the crew into the cargo hold and keep them there. Let them see what it's like."

"Understood. Out."

Manny snapped shut her communicator, then looked down at her most recent captives. They were an enigma, that was to say the least. She turned to the others and indicated the surrendered crew. "Put them in the cargo hold with the rest."

As they were ushered out the door, Manny flipped open her communicator once again. "Sandage to *Millennium*. I have three unconscious Caits at this location, can you scan them?"

Manny recognised the Science Officer's voice as he replied. "Negative, Lieutenant. We have no reading at your location."

Opening her mind once more, Manny quickly found the dampening device and shot it. Once it was nothing more than a sparking remnant, she said: "How about now?"

"Got them, Sandage. What do you want with them?"

Manny gave a victorious grin. "Beam them directly to the brig. Take extra care of the whites. I think they're assassins and they are not to be underestimated. I recommend complete scans and removing their clothes. They don't need them."

"That's a little paranoid, don't you think?" the Science Officer stated.

She shook her head. "That's what they pay me for," she said. In matters of security, she had the last say. "Just make sure it's done."

"Got that, Lieutenant. Beaming now."

The three forms disappeared from the floor and Manny considered the rude awakening they would find then they regained consciousness. At that, she felt no pity for them.

With that done, Manny touched a button on her communicator that put her directly through to the Captain's chair. "Captain?" she asked respectfully.

"Got you, Lieutenant." Piper was all business. "What's your status?"

There was always a sense of joy at a job well done. "The ship is secure, Captain."

“Excellent. I’m beaming over a skeleton crew to run her.” As soon as she uttered the words, six forms appeared near the viewscreens. They quickly fanned out and took station at the various posts. Manny knew without looking that it was the same case throughout the ship.

“Lieutenant Sandage,” Piper continued. “Assign a security detail to watch over the prisoners, then get your people back here ASAP. We’ve got a comet to stop.”

Manny nodded to herself, then have her acknowledgement. She quickly dispatched the appropriate instructions those she wanted to remain, then ordered the rest back to the shuttle, double time. As she ran with the others, she took a moment to think of her husband and the love he entailed. As she revelled in their mutual affection, which she knew Scanner was unconsciously returning, she felt something dark and disturbing. It wasn’t about Scanner, that was certain, but she knew that someone she cared for was in pain – a world of it.

With the *Troy*’s final preparations made, including a fake ID signal, the crew of the *Cork* powered up the two vessels. For the first time in many years, the *Troy*’s navigation lights started blinking as the whale-shaped vessel once more became useful. The Bussard Collectors on the vessel’s tight-fitting warp nacelles glowed as a small amount of power was diverted so the antique vessel could draw Hydrogen from space. By the time the ship made

orbit, it would have gathered enough Deuterium to power itself, Brankovian thought, or at least hoped.

On the liner's bridge, he tapped out the appropriate commands for the vessel to power up its inertial dampening systems. Without them, anything loose within the vessel would be liquified by the sudden acceleration to warp, including people. As this was not a desirable outcome, the appropriate adjustments were made.

At his side, Faith helped out with the translations. The glyphs her people used for a written language were beyond the Andorian, so he was relying heavily on her assistance.

With the comms systems linked, the occupants of the two vessels kept a constant link open. "Is all prepared?" Sarda asked on board the *Cork*.

"*Cork* ready," Jason acknowledged.

Brankovian nodded for her to speak for them. "*Troy* ready," Faith stated. She was enjoying herself so much her tail was curling and uncurling continuously.

"Warp speed," Sarda ordered.

Jason extended the *Cork*'s warp field around the larger ship and took them to warp. With the extra bulk, the best he could manage was warp two, but, as they had only a short distance to go, they were nearing Cait within seconds.

So as to not appear suspicious, Jason dropped them out of warp two light seconds from the atmosphere.

Once in normal space, Faith opened a channel and said in Standard, the interstellar language for navigation: “This is the star liner *Trojan Horse*, en route from Vulcan, requesting landing instructions.”

On Carman’s panel, he noted from his scans that the fighters had already come along side to escort them. He kept an eye on them for any suspicious activity.

“Five seconds to beam point,” Jason reported.

Sarda ushered the first couple into the transporter booth as he brought the equipment online.

Outside, the fighter pilots looked over the older vessel and noted it was a little banged up, but that was nothing new for the budget liners.

Faith frowned when the planetary controller answered. “*Trojan Horse*, we don’t have anything on our schedules regarding you coming our way.”

She rolled her eyes as she stated: “This is our maiden voyage since our relaunch.” She switched to her native tongue. “We thought we’d bring her home for her first run as it’s a dry one. We’ve only got a skeleton crew aboard.”

Recognising he was talking to a local, the controller relaxed and continued in Standard. “Assume standard orbit. Stand by for landing instructions.”

Faith gave a tight smile. She didn’t like using deception, but the stakes were too high not to. She took solace in the fact that she had not – technically – lied.

“Understood Control,” she replied, as Sarda had instructed her.

Below decks, in the *Cork*, Jason made the necessary adjustments to assume the appropriate orbit. Behind him, Sarda was working at a feverish pace to beam down the last few couples of politicians. There was no telling if, at any time, their ruse would be discovered.

There was one person who *did* recognise their arrival. And he was waiting with bated breath. As soon as the third chapel called to report they were finally receiving their visitors, Earhaht opened a secure channel to the *Cork*.

Sarda almost started when the computer automatically put through her request. “Earhaht to *Cork*, respond please.” The Vulcan glanced at Carman and nodded for him to take the call.

Carman tapped the communications panel. “Come in Earhaht. It’s good to hear from you.”

“And you, Lieutenant,” Earhaht grated. “I have a request from our distinguished guest,” even over an encrypted connection she was taking no chances, “that you, as soon as possible, upload Faith’s favourite book to Memory Alpha for all to read. Am I understood?”

Now he had finished beaming down their refugees, Sarda took the call. “Understood, Ensign. We will do so with all dispatch. Are you in need of assistance?”

“Not at this stage, Commander. All is well. Earhaht out.”

Sarda raised a curious brow. He had a fair idea of *why* the request had been made. He just wondered about its effectiveness.

Alongside the *Troy*, one of the fighter pilots decided to have a better look at the vessel. He had overheard the conversation with the ground as it was an open, navigational, channel. What he found curious was that, given this ship was supposed to have been rebuilt, it still looked like junker. He brought his craft up, over, and behind the larger vessel, and wondered why the impulse engines weren't glowing their customary red. He could tell the Bussard Collectors were functioning, but the warp nacelles seemed inactive. Stranger and stranger.

Inside the *Cork*, the fighter pilot's move had not gone unnoticed. Carman sweated over the console as he watched what he was doing, and he tried to see in his mind's eye what the pilot must be seeing. The reality of the situation came over him like a flood. "Commander, I think we're about to be found out! The *Troy*'s impulse engines aren't running and this pilot can see it."

With their primary mission successful, Sarda reconsidered staying any longer than they had to. "Lay in a course back to the far side of the moon," he said. "Engage when ready."

Outside, a very suspicious fighter pilot radioed the ground. "Control, my scans are registering a power output from the *Trojan Horse*, but I'm not seeing anything from her impulse engines. Also, there only appear to be five people on board the entire ship. That's too few, even for a skeleton crew."

The authorisation came immediately. "Board the vessel immediately. If they don't permit it, disable it."

"Understood," he replied. He called his associates. "Form up on my wing, we're taking this ship."

On the *Troy*'s bridge, Faith listened to the interplay between the pilots. Before they could utter a word, she said: "Cait Control, we're encountering power fluctuations in our engines. We're going to leave orbit and get away from the planet, in case the engines go critical. Bye!"

No sooner had she said it, and before the pilots could react, Jason took them to warp and the *Troy* disappeared from sight.

Chapter Seventeen

Although the dungeon was dark and dank, and the light shining through the windows was meagre, none of this was noticed by its occupant. Krashtallah of the Llash clan was elsewhere in his mind. As he sat on the stone floor, his mind replayed his wife's last moments over and over. Emotions raged within him, each one fighting for domination. Denial had come and gone. It was replaced with misery warring with bald fury. The image of the female he had loved, married and lost in such a short space of time would not leave his thoughts. Whether his eyes were closed or open, all he could see was her face as she blew him a final kiss. Her lovely, long fur, her whiskers, her sparkling eyes, her gorgeous smile, these stayed with him as he sat there, caring little for anything.

His wife was dead. The door that had finally opened in his life, the one that would lead to happiness and perhaps even children, it was irrevocably shut. In his mind, it slammed with a resounding clang. His thoughts towards the people who had made it happen, those he held responsible for his wife's death, were simple: they would pay. Pure and simple. Blood for blood.

As a plan started formulating in his mind, he finally noticed the light filtering in through the window. It would not do. He considered ways of blocking it. He looked around him and found nothing loose. He peered once more

at the small, windowless opening and noticed a small vine growing through it from the outside. He considered the notion that, if he pulled hard enough, it might drag a larger section of the plant over the hole.

It could work, he thought. Anything was better than inaction, anyhow. Taking a bead on the vine, he stepped as far away from the window as he could, then ran the three steps and leaped as high as he could, fingers extended – and just fell short.

Not to quit on the first failure, he tried again, and fell just short once more. He then tried again, and failed again.

After the third attempt, he reconsidered his options, and found there were no others. This was the only way. He just wished he could jump as high as Susanna. As he thought of her, a fresh wave of emotion flooded over him and he barely managed to regain control again after a few minutes of fresh weeping. His mind went back to the day on the *Millennium* when Susanna had jumped up past the branch he had been sitting on. She was able to jump higher than any Cait he had ever seen. He was proud of his lady and her many achievements. It was then he decided to give it one last try, for her. This time, he coiled himself up as much as he could, sprung forward and literally ran up the wall until he gripped the vine. Once he had it, he fell backwards into the room, dragging it behind him.

As he had suspected, the vine was connected to a larger bush that was dragged back over the window,

blocking ninety percent of the light that used to pass through it.

With the small success came an unexpected bonus. The vine broke off from the remainder of the plant, leaving him with a length of about two metres. Delighted, he quickly coiled it around himself, then prepared for the next stage of his escape plan.

Once the *Millennium*'s skeleton crew got the Caitian destroyer functioning again, they moved it out of the comet's tail and formed up on the Starfleet vessel's port side. Piper was surprised to find that the ship that had no name as far as the Cait populace were concerned – mainly because they were unaware of its very existence – literally had *no name*. In a fit of annoyance, she dubbed the vessel the *Jolly Roger* so she had something to call it other than “the Caitian ship”.

A scan of the archives found some interesting details regarding the *Jolly Roger*. Its design was modelled after a recent type of Star Liner that resembled a large, space going whale. Little did the Captain know, but the *Jolly Roger* and the *Troy* were practically identical from the outside. However, the *Jolly Roger* had been completely reworked internally, altering large, common recreation areas into cargo holds, and cabins into weapons bays.

Even though Piper had ordered the destruction to the *Jolly Roger's* weaponry, she sent a group of engineers

over to her to repair what weapons they could. Being this close to a comet, one never could tell when a nasty piece of detritus could be blasted off it and into your path. While the *Jolly Roger*'s shields had been restored, a large enough piece could do an awful lot of damage.

The Captain laid in a course taking the two ships to the head of the comet where they could examine it more closely.

Within moments, they had passed the highly reflective "tail" of the comet and came to its head. From the outside, it appeared like a dirty chunk of ice. It was highly irregular in shape, more like a shard of glass than a snowball.

Piper stepped past the forward consoles and gazed at the scans of the comet. It was peculiar, to say the very least. There was something about the mine that bothered her, something familiar. As if there was a thought in the back of her mind that was remaining just out of reach. It had been bugging her all day, but she just couldn't coax it to the surface. Now I know how Tantalus felt, she thought.

Without looking, she said: "Computer: rescan for lifesigns."

Immediately, a number of red dots appeared, most of them moving, slowly, about the interior of the comet. Most of them appeared somewhat lethargic, and Piper assumed it was because they were wearing space suits. With the virtually zero gravity and harsh conditions, it would be nigh on impossible to function otherwise.

A thought came to her. "Computer: scan for hand weapons." Curiously, everyone showed up as having a weapon. "What the..? Scanner, come look at this."

The ever rumpled engineer sauntered over and perused the screen. He suppressed a smile as he understood what they were looking at. "Piper, the computer can't tell the difference between mining tools and phasers."

"Ah." She sighed. "We're going to have to do this the old fashioned way," she said.

Scanner agreed. "You're right about that, Cap'," he said. "With the way that thing's spinning, *and* it's high volume of dilithium, we could easily lose people if we try beaming them. A shuttle's the only way to do it safely." He traced his finger along the screen. "We'll have to board it from here." He pointed at what appeared to be an airlock. "Once we're inside, we'll have to work fast. If they get wind we've arrived, it'll get very messy."

Piper nodded. "Agreed." Her gaze turned inward. "Manny's going to need every hand she can get," she said quietly.

At the mention of his wife's name, Scanner smiled. "She can take care of herself," he said with all the confidence in the world.

The Captain gave her old friend a grin. "You're right about that, Scanner," she said. "Still, I'm going to go with her."

For a moment, Judd wondered if Piper was doubting Manny's competence, then he realised she just wanted to help. As well, most Captains itched for the chance to see a little action. They had once been junior officers who had been in the thick of it, and, now they had climbed the ranks, they were the ones who ordered people into dangerous situations whilst sitting on the sides, watching. Action was addictive. Most Starfleet Captains were daredevils who had attained their rank through talent, intelligence, and a good amount of luck.

"Be careful, Piper," Scanner said in a low voice. "I don't want to have to break in a new Captain."

In reply, his old friend gave him a wink. "Don't worry, Judd. I'm charmed, didn't you know?" She started towards the turbolift doors and gave him her parting orders. "You're in charge while I'm gone. Work with the others to find a way of changing this comet's course."

"Don't you worry, Pipe," Judd said with a grin. "We'll figure it out."

The Captain stepped into the lift and quickly disappeared below decks. Scanner, turned back to the viewscreen and the scans of the comet. The rock was enormous. He wondered whether his confidence was unrealistic, given its huge mass. One way or the other, the mountain would have to be moved.

If there was one fault with the guards in this antique building, it was that they were punctual. Crash

watched as the light faded through what remained of the window. As the world got darker, the exterior lights around the King's Palace came on automatically, shedding their blue hue on the lawns and gardens surrounding it. Once night had fully fallen, he knew it was only a matter of minutes until his guards arrived. With his plan in mind, he got ready. He just hoped the guards didn't keep him waiting.

With the rusty sound of a key in an antique lock, the door opened and one of the guards tentatively stepped into the room. In one hand he held a bowl of "food". In the other he held a phaser. He looked around for his prisoner and noted with alarm that he was nowhere to be seen! In the dim light filtering in from the corridor and the virtually no light from outside, even a feline would have been hard pressed to see anything in the gloom. Given that the prisoner was black did nothing more than complicate things.

"Hey!" he shouted when it became clear the room was empty. "Where'd he go?"

His partner, waiting outside, put his head, then his shoulders into the room. "What?" he asked.

The first guard, a tall, tawny fellow, not unlike the other, looked about in amazement. He repeated himself. "Where'd he go?"

Fascinated, the second guard ventured into the room. It was his undoing.

From his vantage point overhead, Crash let go of the wall he was barely clinging to and dropped like a stone on the second guard. The force alone knocked him to the floor, unconscious.

Stunned by the sudden commotion, the first guard reacted too slowly. Crash lashed out with both feet and swept the guard's paws out from under him. Dropping into a heap and trying in vain to right himself, he flailed about, trying to aim his phaser, but failed to do so before Crash aimed the one he took off the second guard and fired.

To Crash's surprise, the first guard disappeared in a blaze of light. Too late, he discovered the guard's phasers had been set to kill – not stun.

Yet the Starfleet Commander felt no pity for the guard. He had been part of the system that had killed his wife. He was the enemy, and, in his state of mind, the enemy deserved no mercy.

The compassionate part of his brain still functioned, however, and he reset the phaser to heavy stun, then shot the second guard to make sure he stayed down. Stepping silently into the corridor, he closed the door and locked it behind him. He took the key with him, not knowing if it would open anything else he might find.

He moved down the hallway, being careful to hug the shadows. Although he could not see cameras, he operated as if they were there. Now he was out, he had a few appointments to keep.

On the far side of Cait's moon, the crew of the *Cork* worked feverishly to open the docking bay doors of the *Troy* to take aboard the fighters who had been waiting there for them. At this point in time, they were short on oxygen and fuel, and each pilot had been sitting in his craft for hours. Each needed to stretch their legs.

The *Troy*'s docking bay was literally packed by the time they closed the outer doors and repressurised the bay. The pilots had to climb over each other's ships to make their way to the *Cork* and inside for a much needed feed and visit to the head.

Afterward, they collected in the rear compartment of the vessel to discuss their options.

Sarda started things off. "Captain Piper ordered us to remain as support to those on the ground. At the moment, that includes Commander Krashtallah, the Ambassador, and the Opposition Party members, not to mention the Believer's Sect. However, we have not heard from the Commander or the Ambassador for some time. I believe they have been taken into custody."

One of the pilots, a young female from Terra's New Zealand islands, put her hand up. "Are you planning on launching a rescue mission, sir?"

He shook his head. "No. We have far too little intelligence regarding their present status. I have requested the Sect members monitor the news channels for any word as to their location. All they have been able to tell me so far is that the Opposition Leader has been publicly

executed, and that the Commander may have been an unwilling spectator.”

Jason rubbed the stubble that had formed on his chin. It had been some time since he had time to shave. “I take it the Commander and Ambassador aren’t carrying subcutaneous transponders,” he said, expecting a negative answer.

“You are correct, they are not.” Sarda looked about him at the crew. “Without any other means of locating the Commander and Ambassador, all we can do is wait and hope for useful intelligence.”

Carman sat back in his chair and stretched his legs. “Why don’t we just call the Prime Minister and ask him? After all, what’s the worst that can happen?”

Sarda looked at him in surprise. The obvious thought had not occurred to him. “Indeed. We should do so.”

The New Zealander put up her hand once more. “Why don’t we contact the *Millennium*, Sir?”

Sarda narrowed his eyes slightly, the only sign that he was at all annoyed. “I have tried. There seems to be something local to the Captain that is preventing long range communications.”

“Er, Commander,” Brankovian said, a little reluctantly.

Noting the Lieutenant’s discomfort, Sarda asked curiously: “Yes, Lieutenant?”

The Andorian was practically squirming in his seat.

“Without orders, I activated the *Troy*’s Bussard Collectors when we left the asteroid belt. With our flights to and from Cait, we’ve managed to collect enough fuel to sustain her to fly and collect some more as she goes. Simply put, we can fly her on her own, now. She’s not perfect, but I thought it might be useful to use her to follow the Captain’s path and make contact with her. Then we may be able to co-ordinate our resources.”

There were few times in his career when Sarda was genuinely surprised by another’s initiative. This was one of them. “The *Troy* can power herself?” he asked in quiet awe.

Brankovian looked embarrassed. His usual middle blue deepened in colour. Reluctantly, he said: “Before I entered Starfleet, I was doing a course in engineering, sir. My father wanted me to carry on our family tradition.” Opening up a little more, he added: “You could say I was raised working on Starships. I’m good at it, sir, but it’s not where I want to spend the rest of my life.

“Anyhow, when I was in engineering, I found that enough systems functioned to get the Bussard Collectors working, and, with a little work, I can have the *Troy* back to full warp capacity in an hour.”

The silence was so profound people could hear themselves breathing. Sarda’s voice sounded unusually loud when he asked: “Do you need any assistance?”

Pleased with the show of confidence, Brankovian brightened up. "Yes, sir. With your help, and that of Lieutenant Valastro, I believe I can cut that time in half."

Sarda wanted to smile, but would not indulge in it. Instead, he said: "Very good, Lieutenant." He turned back to the pilots. "If you have any maintenance to do on your ships, now is the time to do it. Otherwise, I would suggest you rest until it is time to move. I am aware that a few of the *Troy's* recreational systems are still functional. Otherwise, get some sleep if you can in one of the cabins." With that, he stood, the others taking the cue and coming to attention. "Dismissed."

As the pilots left the *Cork* to attend to their next tasks, Sarda left orders for Jason and Faith to monitor the scanners, while he, Carman and Brankovian left to attend to engineering.

With all the goings on in the world, if there was one thing people did consistently, it was socialise. Whether to discuss the goings on around the world, or simply to gossip about theirs and other's fortunes, people came together to talk. And one place you can find on any civilized world in the galaxy is a cafe.

So, even though the government was in turmoil, the Starshine Cafe was still doing excellent business. Although, Tish noted that she never saw black Caits anymore. It was as if they had all vanished.

She wondered about that sometimes. Ever since the hostage situation only days before, she had seen none. She considered the possibility that they were afraid to after Red's actions. Yes, maybe that was it.

As she made her rounds taking care of her customer's needs, she came to the booth that Merete and Jennifer had occupied only days before. In it sat a person, small in size for your average Cait, and trying very hard not to be recognised. The hooded cloak hid most of their features, and what little she could see didn't help much.

"Can I serve you?" she asked. "My name's Tish, and I'll be your waitress for today."

Keeping the hood in place, the stranger, a female from the sound of her voice, asked for water.

"Can I get anything else for you?" Tish asked. "Something to eat, perhaps?"

The sigh that came from the stranger was deep and soulful. "I wish that could fill the hole in me," she said cryptically.

The depth of pain in her voice touched Tish in a way that would have been impossible only days before. But her recent experiences had taught her the importance of caring for one another as the opportunity may not present itself again. She slid into the seat on the other side of the booth and reached out for the stranger's paws. For all her secrecy, she did not resist as Tish gently squeezed them. "Whatever it is, I'm sure it's not *that* bad," she said putting all the compassion she could into her voice.

Tears flowing freely, the newcomer looked up at Tish from under her hood. At the sight of her, Tish caught her breath. She *knew* this female. She had been on the news.

“Yes, it is,” the stranger said. “I am cut off from my people and on the run.”

The truth in her words cut at Tish's heart. She knew the stranger was right. If she was found by the government forces she would be killed on sight. Of that she was certain. “What can we do to help you?”

The stranger shook her head. “I can't get you involved. You'd be killed, too.”

Tish gave her a heartfelt smile. “You've come to the right place. I know you're a friend of Merete AndrusTaurustaBrisk, the doctor who saved us. And any friend of hers is family of ours.”

The stranger squeezed her paws gently. “I can't ask you to get involved, dear. There's been enough killing.”

The waitress would not be swayed. “You're right about that. And we're going to make sure you're not one of them.” She sat back and thought. “The best way out is for you to contact your people, and I have a way you can do that.”

Stunned at her good fortune, the stranger almost lost her hood. “How?”

Tish squeezed her paws once more. “I'll show you. I'll be back in a minute.” She got up and made her way quickly over to the counter, then returned a moment later

with a small, black item in her hand and with Tisktabrisk in tow. She surreptitiously placed the unit in the stranger's hands, which she looked at in awe.

Tish was beaming with pride. "I found it this morning when I was cleaning. It was stuck to the bottom of the table. I think Merete put it there during the trouble and forgot it was there. I've been meaning to give it back to her, but I haven't had a chance."

At her side, Tisktabrisk nodded at their new friend. "When Tish told me who it was, I almost had kittens. Now I know it's you, we'll do whatever we can to help you. We can hide you until your people come for you. That's the least we can do."

Touched by their generosity, the stranger gave them a wan smile. It was the first bit of good news she'd had all day. At least now there was hope.

Amazed at his good fortune, Krashtallah had managed to get out of the Palace without being seen. The corridor led in two directions. One led further into the Palace, and Crash was tempted to try and find the King and somehow rescue him, but he discounted the notion as being totally fanciful. He had no idea where to find him, and didn't even know whether he was even in the building.

No, the first thing he had to do was get out of there and join the general population once more. Although his first problem was that he was conspicuous, to say the least.

To his knowledge, it was possible he was the only black Cait left on the planet.

So, Crash had taken the other exit from the dungeon and found himself behind some bushes on the outer wall, towards the rear of the building. He knew the area well enough from his studies as a youth to know that to the south of the King's Palace was a small forest. On the other side of it was an industrial area where a lot of Cait's foodstuffs were made. It was the reason he headed in that direction. For people to work, there had to be transportation, and where there was transportation, there were transporters. With one, he could go anywhere on the planet. He knew it was a risk using one, but it was a chance he had to take.

Edging his way around the building, he found to his delight that most of the wall was surrounded by bushes. As long as he kept between the wall and the bushes, he remained unseen. He had just about reached the point where he was going to make a break for the forest. It was all of one hundred metres from the bushes. One quick dash, and he would virtually disappear into the trees.

The soft padding of feet on grass alerted him to danger. Crash dropped back into the bushes, careful not to even rustle a leaf. He sat there for a moment, fingering his phaser, having it ready just in case push came to shove.

Two tawny Caits dressed in the uniform of the Palace Guard walked by him. From their relaxed posture, he guessed the word had not gotten out about his escape.

yet. For a moment, they seemed to pause right in front of him as they looked off into the distance, checking for invaders. Finding none they decided to chat for a moment about the Queen's coup. From his vantage point, Crash could do nothing but listen. He kept his eyes slitted to keep his retinas from reflecting the light.

"Can you believe that psycho did it?" one asked.

The other laughed at that. "Which psycho? The King or the Queen?"

The first joined the laughter. "You're right about that. The King was mad to try to dissolve parliament, and the Queen was totally insane to overthrow him for it."

The second stopped laughing suddenly. "You know, I think she's mad. She's trying to kill all the black Caits, you know." He looked about fearfully, as if someone might have been listening.

The first shrugged. "She's no worse than most of the Kings and Queens we've had. They're all just in the game to serve themselves."

"You're probably right about that." The second sniffed the air. "Do you smell something?"

The first laughed at his own joke. "Only the excrement you keep talking."

"Ha, ha." He sniffed again. "Nah. I must be going crazy, too. This whole thing's gotten everyone's tail tied in knots. You know, the Queen wants us out of the Federation. Thinks we can get along fine on our own."

The first snorted. "Now, that is excrement! Doesn't she know our world's got nothing much more to offer than tourism? If we cut off our major clients, who have we got left?"

"Yeah, I know what you mean." Second stretched, then started walking again. "You know," he said as first joined him. "It's only a matter of time before Starfleet shows up."

"And then what?"

"And then...." The rest of the sentence was lost to Crash as the pair of guards turned a corner.

With the guards gone, Crash took a quick look around him, then sprinted for the treeline. Within seven seconds, he was out of danger and lost among the bushes. He just wished he was right about those transporters.

"What do you mean, he's disappeared?" the Queen snarled. "I put that traitorous vermin in that cell to rot! How could you be so *stupid* to let him get away?"

The Minister for Homeworld Security was not used to being yelled at, and he took great umbrage at the Queen's tone. His tawny fur bristled, his tail curled, and he almost growled: "Madam, I can assure you he will be caught."

Even though the conversation was over a video link, the Queen raised herself up on her hind legs and stared down the errant minister through the camera lens. "Madam? Madam?!" she shrieked. "I am your Queen,

you pompous little worm, and you will address me as "Your Majesty", or Krashtallah will not be the only one who will have vanished. Do I make myself clear?"

The minister's eyes widened at that notion. He knew she was quite capable of making it happen. His mind went back to the execution of Vultanik and the Federation Ambassador. If she was ruthless enough to kill them, there was little to stop her from adding him to the list. With as much humility as he could muster, he said: "Yes, Your *Majesty*. My apologies. I have every last man out doing their best to find him. At least it may be possible that Krashtallah is dead. One of the guards is missing, presumed dead, and he may have killed him before he, too, died."

The Queen found herself wondering how such a moron could have risen to such a high rank in the government. "No," she stated categorically. "He's alive. He's a Commander in Starfleet, and their training is excellent. Never mind his teachers reported he had a genius IQ. No, he's out there, somewhere." Her mind had drifted a little, then, and she worked to focus her mind on the problem at hand. "You must be prepared for exceptional cunning. He is not a foe to be underestimated. Do you understand?"

As she spoke, Smeetablink considered her manner and choice of words. She was worried, that was sure. It took him a moment to realise what it was. Then it all became completely clear to him. She was scared. Perhaps

terrified. The Queen had personally executed Krashtallah's wife. Such an action could not go unchallenged to a Cait. He would be out for blood, and her name would be on the top of his list. Then again, he had stood by and watched it happen as well. There was every possibility that Krashtallah would be after his blood as well. He decided to double his personal bodyguard until he was found.

“Do you understand?” The Queen had repeated herself, and she was not happy about it. “What are you thinking about that is so important?” she said, dripping sarcasm.

“M...” he caught himself. “Your Majesty, I was thinking that the fugitive will probably have vengeance on his mind. I would recommend a temporary increase in the Palace Guard.”

The thought hadn't occurred to her, but she was not about to let the minister one-up her. “I had already considered that, you retarded mouse. There is no way he can get to me here.”

Smeetablink was getting very tired of the insults. Their new monarch was letting her station go to her head, that was certain. He would have to consult Huttajink regarding the matter. Feentathat was fast turning into a despot. They had to reign her in before she went too far and started targeting those who had supported her – and their families. His mind turned to his wife and two kits

whom he loved dearly. The thought of them being threatened made his blood run cold.

He refocussed on the terminal at his end. Yes, he thought, something had to be done about the Queen.

“Very well, Your Majesty,” he said carefully. “I will update you as soon as I know anything.”

Without uttering another word, the Queen snapped off the connection. There was something in that one's eyes, she thought. She knew rebellion when she saw it. She made a mental note to have Smeetablink replaced with someone with a better attitude. She got up from her cushion, considering turning in for the night, then thought the better of it. She sat down once more and put in a call to Zif. There was no time like the present for taking care of business.

The shuttle met the airlock with a slight bump. The pilot looked back at the Captain with an apologetic smile, then put her helmet on.

Piper ignored the minor inconvenience. Some of her fellow Captains liked pulling down the lower ranks for minor mistakes, but it wasn't her style. Major mistakes, well that was a different kettle of fish. She put her helmet on, then let Manny check her fittings on her collar. You could never be too careful in a vacuum suit. Manny gave her a nod that her seal was good, then moved so Piper could check hers.

Manny had suggested that she go first. She had purloined a suit from the *Jolly Roger* the Caitian guards wore, and with her white fur, they would not be able to tell her from any other guard. That was assuming they were white, like her. But, given what she had learned so far, that was a real possibility.

She also had an ulterior motive for wearing it. It was a *very* comfortable suit and even had a section for her tail.

“Is everyone ready?” she said into her helmet mike. The thing she hated about helmets was they had a bad habit of annoying her whiskers.

A collection of “Ayes” sounded in her ears, and no “nays”. She gave the Captain the nod, then stepped over to the door. They dimmed the lights to a bare minimum, then she checked the panel for air in the lock. There was some, so she palmed the door open. It slid aside with a slight hiss, then Manny stepped alone into the lock. Before looking through the glass, she put her hand on the door and tried to see in her mind if there was anyone around on the other side.

There was, but she sensed no hostility in him. He was, however, a guard.

She waved at those behind her to step away from the door, then closed the shuttle door. She was alone. She switched on her magnetic boots and felt their familiar tug on the flooring. Then, she toggled the airlock to remove the air and, when that was done, she opened the inner door.

The guard looked up at her in mild surprise. The suit was right, her colouring was right, but he did not recognise her. Still, he did not raise his weapon. He was certain no-one knew where their secret mine was located. "You're early," he said.

Of all the things to say, she thought. "Actually, I'm very late." She snapped up her phaser and shot him point blank on heavy stun.

A funny thing happens when a person is stunned in zero gravity while they're wearing magnetic boots. With no gravity to pull them down when rendered unconscious, their body simply remains floating ungainly. To give him some semblance of still being awake, Manny tore off a strip of double sided tape in her waist pouch and taped his arms to his sides.

With that done, she touched a button on her helmet and changed frequencies to that used by the *Millennium* crew. "We're in."

A moment later, the rest of her squad, and the Captain, had formed up behind her. Now she was finally inside, Piper had a chance to look around her. The mine *did* look familiar. And it wasn't because of her recent exposure to things Caitian. It was alien, even to them.

Silently, Manny gave the orders. Her people were to separate into two groups. One led by the Captain, the other by herself. The tunnel branched off into two different directions at this point, but it was clear that this section of the mine had already been stripped of dilithium.

Piper gave Manny the thumbs up, then started moving down the metal walkway, making sure she kept at least one foot on the floor at all times. She had no intention of floating off the deck. She would be a floating version of a sitting duck. There a lot of stupid ways to die, and that was high on the list. And that was not the way the Captain was planning on going out.

With paranoia being the name of the game these days, the landing pad at the Blink's house was virtually floodlit. It made landing on it that much easier, but it also gave the Homeworld Security minister's bodyguards reason to worry. With it that well lit and out in the open it made anyone exiting the vehicle an easy target.

And Krashtallah was counting on it. From his place, high in the trees on the roof of a neighbour's dwelling, only one thing burned in his mind. The need to avenge his wife. His only weapon was the hand phaser he had taken from the guard, but that was all he needed. He had multiple choices. He could shoot Smeetablink in the head, at this distance he was confident of the shot. He could also fire at the flitter's power cells, and the vessel would leave only a smoking crater in the deck.

He didn't have long to wait. The sound of a flitter in the distance quickly grew louder, and the Minister's craft came into view above the treetops. It described a graceful arc, then alighted on the landing pad. The door opened, and a guard looked out tentatively. He stood with his back

to the door, his nose and ears twitching, looking for anything out of the ordinary. Confident that all was secure, he ushered out his fellow guard, and the two of them stood together, their bodies shielding the Minister as he exited the craft.

From his position, Crash was uncertain that he could make the shot to the Minister's body, so he trained his weapon on the flitter. Before he could do so, something unexpected happened.

The door to Smeetablink's home opened and a small, female kit came bounding out. She ran straight up to her father and into his outstretched arms. As she licked his cheek, he scratched behind her ear. It was clear the child was his.

This was something he was not prepared for. The Minister was a fair target, even the guards. But there was no way Crash was going to have the death of the kit on his conscience. He lowered his phaser, and began doubting if this was the right way to get justice.

A movement out of the corner of his eye caught his attention. To his right, a shadow had moved once, then again. He wanted to cry out a warning, but it was already too late.

A crossbow bolt hit Smeetablink in the right leg, severing a tendon and making him drop the child. She rolled across the deck, caught herself, sat up in confusion, then watched as the poison went to work in her father. She saw one guard position himself between her father and the

direction the bolt came from, and the other drag her father out of the way. She sat next to him, touched his face, and watched, frightened and confused, as he found each breath harder and harder to take.

“I'm sorry...” was all he could utter before the poison did its deadly work and his heart stopped. His body went limp, his tongue lolled out of his mouth, and his head dropped into his daughter's hands.

“Daddy,” she said, shaking him, begging him to wake up. “Daddy!” she cried. “What's the matter with my Daddy!”

The cry tore at Crash's heart. He had seen too much tragedy in one day not to be affected by what he had just seen. He looked over again in the direction of the killer and saw him slink into the shadows. It was clear to him the guards had no idea where he was. So it was up to him.

Using the shadows for cover, Crash leapt from the rooftop onto the next one. He did his utmost to keep silent as he pursued the killer. Whoever it was, they were fast, but Crash was running on pure adrenaline. There was no way the killer was going to get away.

From rooftop to rooftop, Crash managed to keep the killer in view. It was hard to do in the gloom, and the sheer fact the killer was wearing a body-hugging black suit. The crossbow slung over his back helped a little, but whoever he was, he was fast.

Looking ahead, Crash had to consider. Was he simply going to follow him? Or was he going to catch him? And what would he do with him then?

The problem with following him was the real possibility he could give Crash the slip. No, intercept and interrogate.

With that decided, Crash worked on getting closer to his adversary. That was proving no small problem.

Fate intervened. The killer came to a small gully he had to cross. As he considered his options, unaware he was being followed, he was taken completely by surprise as a huge weight suddenly crashed into him, sending both of them rolling into the gully.

Disoriented, the assassin flailed about as he rolled. The crossbow dug into his back and splintered as he fell. He felt a sharp pain, and wondered whether the weapon's sharp edges had cut him, or maybe one of the small trees he was breaking.

Unlike him, Crash had the advantage of knowing what to expect. He remained on his paws and followed the killer down. He kept punching the killer's head as he fell, making sure he stayed down.

At the bottom of the gully, the killer finally got his bearings and got his feet under him. He tried to focus, but found he was totally disoriented. As he did so, something slammed into his head once more. Stunned, he fell to the floor, and finally saw the feet of his attacker. They were black.

“Who...?” he said with a slight slur.

Smack! His assailant hit him again. His ears ringing, he shook his head to try to think through the haze of pain. But it was getting harder by the second.

“Shut up!” Crash snapped. “I ask the questions, not you!”

The killer noticed the Blackie held a phaser at him. But that was the least of his problems. He knew he the effects of his own poison, and it was acting fast. He gave his attacker one, last vicious look, then said: “Go to hell,” before he chomped down on his suicide tooth.

Already doomed, he did so because of the need to dispose of any evidence. He swallowed the lethal cocktail and immediately felt its effects. The monstrous chemical began eating his flesh from the inside out, causing him to cry out in pain, his last act before his heart flatlined.

Smelling the burning within the killer before realising what was going on, Crash reacted on instinct. He tore a few hairs protruding from the assassin's torn outfit from his flesh before the body erupted in flames. The fierce heat pushed Crash away from the conflagration and he stepped away in amazed wonder. He had never seen someone spontaneously combust before.

Whatever the chemical had been, it only seemed to have a taste for flesh, as no sooner had the body been completely consumed by blue flame than the fire extinguished itself. Nothing remained of the assassin, and

Crash now had a clue why very little real evidence of the Assassin's Guild had ever been found.

He held up the hairs to the light coming from a nearby domicile. They were white.

“Now, isn't that interesting?” he said quietly to himself. He looked about him, concerned someone had seen the fire. He decided he had stayed in one place long enough. He tucked the hairs into his phaser's handle, then attached it to his vine belt before taking off in the direction of a distant public transporter. He didn't know where he was heading at this point, but he knew something would come to him.

Chapter Eighteen

Their job done in the engineering room, Brankovian sat in the centre seat of the *Troy*. As he and Faith knew the ship better than anyone else, they were chosen to run it. As the ship was largely automated, it required few people to man it for basic operations.

Sarda had decided to keep the *Cork* just out of sight of Cait on the far side of the moon. They could still receive messages from Earhaht, although there was little to tell. There was still no sign of their people. Jason and Carman would be staying with him.

The pilots, with their nearly depleted craft, stayed with the *Troy*. Although they were now fed and rested, Sarda made the decision to send them back to the *Millennium*, the idea was that the other half of their squadron could come back when the *Troy* returned.

Once the bay doors opened, the *Cork* popped out the bottom of the larger vessel and went on station.

"We'll see you when you get back," Jason said with a wistful smile.

Faith smiled back at Jason's visage on the viewscreen. "We'll try not to keep you waiting," she said in all honesty, but with good cheer. She gave him a jovial wave.

Brankovian spoke up for the fighter pilot manning the flight controls. "Set course for the far side of the sun, Warp three."

From his chair in the cockpit of the *Cork*, Jason watched as the *Troy* vanished in a rainbow of light.

"That pair gets all the fun," Jason mused.

At their speed, it took only minutes for the *Troy* to pass by the sun. The ship came around it in a wide arc, then Brankovian ordered their velocity lowered to sublight so they could scan for the *Millennium*. Faith had learned enough about starships to know how to run the scanner. The first thing she noticed was the equipment had seen better days.

"I *think* I've found a comet," she said, trying to be helpful. "It could be the source of the interference you've had every time you've tried to contact the Captain."

Brankovian frowned as he considered her thoughts. "Why do you think that?"

Faith ushered him over. "I'm having some trouble scanning it. These scanners weren't made for much more than navigation, so they're pretty low resolution, but every time I try to look at the comet it looks fuzzy."

He could see what she meant. It *was* peculiar. "Let's have a look at that," he said. "I could guarantee you the *Millennium's* near it. Full impulse!"

Their pilot, the fiesty New Zealander named Rebecca "Emu" Armytage, relished the chance to fly

something different. Having marked the appropriate controls with a permanent marker pen, thanks to Faith translating the labels, Emu was finding the change as good as a holiday. "Full impulse, aye," she responded, then tapped in the order.

The *Troy* surged forward and rapidly closed the distance to the comet. All the while, Brankovian and Faith hovered over the scanners. At the first sign of actually finding the *Millennium*, he raised his hand and ordered: "Full stop!"

Emu brought them to a complete stop a thousand kilometres short of the comet. She toggled the viewer to zoom in and they could clearly see the *Millennium*, being shadowed by a ship much like their own.

"Now, that's weird," Faith said quietly.

Brankovian's antennae twitched. If this day got any weirder, they would have to slap themselves to see if they were awake and not dreaming. "Open hailing frequencies," he asked without thinking.

Faith leaned across the panel, in front of the Lieutenant, and activated the comms panel, giving him a cheeky look as she did so. "They're open, my friend," she said with a purr.

The Andorian gave her an embarrassed smile. He had forgotten where he was. "This is Lieutenant Brankovian of the *starship Troy*, calling the *USS Millennium*."

The viewscreen changed from its image of the comet to that of the friendly face of Scanner, albeit with a slight distortion. "Brankovian, when did you get promoted to Captain?" he said with a grin. He turned his head slightly and addressed his companion. "Hiya, Faith!"

Faith nodded at the engineer as Brankovian said: "Commander, we've been unable to raise you on subspace for some time. I believe the comet is interfering with our transmissions. I'd like to use the *Troy* as a relay station so Commander Sarda can check in.

"Also, I've got a shuttle bay full of fighters needing refueling. Permission for them to transfer to the *Millennium*?"

"By all means, *Captain* Brankovian. Send them over."

Scanner was about to continue when Emu put up her hand. He turned his gaze to her. "Ensign, do you have something to add?"

The fighter pilot inclined her head on her unusually long neck, and asked: "Permission to remain with the *Troy*, Commander? She needs a pilot, and I've gotten used to flying her."

The temporary Captain of the *Millennium* saw the logic in the request, although he'd never admit it to Sarda. "Granted," he said. "Now, Brankovian, you said something about Sarda wanting a word with me?"

Aboard the *Cork*, the comms panel chirped, alerting Sarda to an incoming call. It was a little sooner than expected, but then he hadn't thought it would take the *Troy* too long to find the *Millennium* once they had passed the star. He tapped the panel. "This is Commander Sarda of the *USS Cork*."

Instead of the Captain's familiar voice, another spoke. It was one he hadn't heard in days, and it was *very* welcome. "It's good to hear your voice, Commander. I trust you know who I am. I can't take the chance of this communication being overheard, so I won't identify myself. Suffice to say, I am at large and I need extraction. Can you assist me?"

The Commander was sorely tempted to fly in and beam her out immediately, but common sense told him it was a bad idea. The fighters were still lying in wait for them. "Not at this time." His mind scrambled for a way of telling her what she needed to know. "I do believe it is your destiny to be with those who are in opposition. Do you believe this?"

The caller was quiet for a moment, as if she was mulling it over. "Understood, Commander. God speed." The channel closed with a click, and Sarda once more had to suppress the desire to sigh. Instead, he drew a steady breath and looked at the others. They knew who it was as well.

Carman scowled, but not at Sarda. He knew the risks. "I hate having to leave her there," he said with a grimace. The thought left a bad taste in his mouth.

Jason said: "What if we...." then discounted the notion. "Damn." His voice was full of regret.

Their leader stood, and took a brief walk through the ship. Even Vulcans needed to stretch their legs from time to time. Also, he needed to clear his mind of their current dilemma. They were supposed to be on station to assist those on the ground, but the best they could do at the moment was simply exchange messages. The notion grated.

When he returned to the cockpit, he heard the comms panel chirp once more. Once more, he took the call. Before he could say a word, he heard Scanner's voice. "Hey, Points! Long time no hear!"

The ever pleasant human was a muse to teach Sarda patience, of that he was sure. "Greetings, Scanner."

The screen above the comms panel lit up and the slightly distorted image of his old friend materialised. "Am I glad I found you!" Scanner said. "I've got a major headache here, and I need your help!"

Sarda's eyebrows shot up. For the engineer to request help so baldly meant the situation was grave. "What can I do for you?" he asked.

The first people Manny laid eyes on were prisoners. The looks they gave her were hostile to say the least, but

when they saw the Starfleet personnel following her, their faces changed to sheer joy. Each individual was given the universal language to stay quiet. A finger held up to pursed lips. Eager not to mess up their sudden rescue, each kept quiet.

Once they were secured, they relieved them of their tools, then ushered them back down the tunnel to the shuttle. They noted that some of the black Caits were barely standing, and that not all of them were adults. Some of them were little kits.

They were children who should have been bigger, but the sight of their sunken, undernourished eyes made Manny and her people see red. It wasn't just Manny who was taking this personally, it was all of them. Each held his, or her, phaser just that little bit tighter, and they were keen to use them.

It came sooner than they thought. Manny had point, and she soon came to a turn in the passage. That was when she saw a guard using an electric lance to spur on one of the workers. He had accidentally lost his grip on the chunk of dilithium he had just cracked off and now it was floating up and away from him. The guard decided a little discipline was in order, so he took his lance and gave the offending Cait a ten thousand volt reminder not to do it again.

Manny wasted no time on the offender. She blasted him into next week. The force of the shot blew the guard

off the floor and left him floating grotesquely, his limbs pointing in awkward directions.

The slaves, realising Manny was liberating them, lost all semblance of good sense and started cheering. Some even came over and embraced her and her compatriots.

Knowing the word was now out, Manny asked: "Are there more of them?"

A young Cait looked up at her and smiled at her. He gestured further up the hall and said in a sad, week, yet happy voice: "There are four more further up."

She stooped down and picked up the little fellow. He could not have been more than a two-year-old, she thought. "You've been very helpful," she said with a voice that would have made a kindergarten teacher proud. "Now, I need you and the others to move as fast as you can back towards the airlock. Can you do that for me?"

The boy nodded, then started back down the mine. The others followed, trying to keep quiet.

Trouble came sooner than they'd hoped. Phaser bolts lit the air as two guards came stomping down the walkway as fast as they could. Manny dropped to a crouch and returned fire, catching one in the chest and knocking him out cold, and just missing the other as he hid behind his fellow.

"Get some cover!" Manny yelled. Her people didn't need encouragement, they scurried as fast as they could around the last corner, with their fearless leader coming up

last behind her as another phaser blast sizzled over her shoulder. More blasts chipped rock off the wall next to Manny's head. She noted they were coming more frequently than one phaser could deliver, so she spied around the corner with her mini-mirror. The other two had joined their fellow, and they had taken refuge behind some large rocks next to the wall.

There was no way any of them would survive if they tried to storm them, and they could not use concussion devices without the possibility of killing some of the hostages. Their options were extremely limited.

A thought came to her. It was something she had never tried before, and there wasn't any reason why she shouldn't give it a go. As she had practiced with Sarda, she cleared her mind and thought only about the guards around the corner. As she focussed, their forms took shape in her mind. Even their thoughts could be heard, as if from someone whispering quietly in her ear. They were just beyond her ability to understand.

Nevertheless, it was all she needed. She reached around the corner, phaser ready, and pulled the trigger. Once, twice, three times.

She checked again with her mirror. They were all out cold. With a slight grin, she looked at her people and said: "Let's go free some slaves."

Captain Piper was not having as much luck. The guards at her end of the mine heard the same commotion

from Manny's group and had come to investigate. It wasn't long before a shooting match started, and people on both sides were hurt.

At her end of the mine, they had so far taken down two guards, but six more remained. At least twenty slaves were still caught behind the guards, and they were not above using them for cover.

The Captain and her group could not advance, as, like Manny, they were pinned behind a corner in the corridor. As phaser beams were not an option, she decided to try diplomacy.

"You may as well lay down your weapons, there's nowhere to go!" she said into her helmet mic. "Our shuttle is docked to your airlock, and we've taken your support ship. No-one is coming to get you!"

That got their attention. Each guard checked their air gauge. They only had an hour's supply left.

One of them ventured: "How do we know you won't kill us anyway?"

Piper rolled her eyes. "If I wanted you all dead, I would have just waited until your air ran out." She paused and let that sink in, then continued. "The way I see it you have two choices. You can either come back to my nice, safe, warm starship, or you can die of oxygen deprivation. I suppose you won't be around to burn up when this comet hits the sun anyway."

Out of sight of the Captain, the guards all shared a look. She was right. There was no other way. One by

one, they lay down their arms. Each of their phasers was magnetised, so they stuck them to the floor. Once they had all done so, their leader said: "Okay, you win. We've laid down our weapons and we're coming out peacefully."

Piper ventured a look around the corner and smiled when she saw they were true to their word. Hands held high, they walked towards her, looking sullen and defeated. "Score one for diplomacy," she said to herself.

As her people gathered the guards and put bonders on their wrists, Piper had a brief opportunity to look around her. It was clear the mine was not entirely the Cait's. There were a number of braces put in place to keep the comet from crumbling in on itself. They were clearly manufactured by the Cait. But there were other braces, each one on a different angle to those put in place by the Cait, that were obviously alien. They were almost all badly damaged, yet their basic form was still there. And it was a design form that Piper was familiar with.

With a flash of recognition, she realised where this comet had come from. Her eyes widened with amazement, and, to be sure, she stepped over as close as she could to one of the structures. It was a doorframe. Who knew where its door was now, but the metal was painted with a typically Klingon shade. She ran her glove over the frame and came to the typical red Klingon Sword of Destiny design they proudly imprinted on everything. She took out her tricorder and scanned the metal, to confirm her suspicions. Sure enough, it was Klingon in origin.

"Wow," she said in amazement. "Aren't you a long way from home?"

Within fifteen minutes, the entire population of the mine had been transferred to the *Millennium*. The guards were escorted to the brig, and the slaves were taken to sickbay for a checkup.

Leading the way was Manny, who had picked up a fan. The young Cait who had helped her in the mine insisted on holding her hand. She was touched, especially as she knew that at least two white Caits had been assigned to their prison.

The others followed, twenty-nine in all. Every one black. They ranged in age from seventy years to Manny's young companion's two. They were all grateful to be alive, and overjoyed to be aboard a Federation Starship, but most were still suspicious of their guardian angel.

As they stepped through the door into Sickbay, Manny finally remembered her manners. "By the way, I never got your name. Mine's Lieutenant Manny Sandage. I'm Chief of Security aboard the *Millennium*. What's your name?"

The trusting young lad said: "Drallah." He frowned. "That's a funny name for a Cait!" he said, astonished.

He wasn't the only one to be surprised. At the sound of his name, she stopped and stooped down so she could look him in the eye. "So, you're the one we have to

thank for us getting involved!" she said with a huge grin. She stood up and addressed the crowd. "You all have this young fellow to thank for your freedom. If it wasn't for his letter to the Federation Council, we would never have known of your plight."

The rest of the crowd rallied around the youngster, and a couple of the males lifted him onto their shoulders and gave him a hero's reward.

At the sight of them, Manny felt a delight unlike any she had previously felt. Here was a room full of people who had spent their lives shunned, the last weeks imprisoned and forced into hard labour in the harshest of conditions, and now the joy of their sudden rescue and freedom was infectious.

Yet, she noticed she was standing at the edge of the crowd, and most seemed to avoid her. Determined to break down some barriers, she stepped into the group, walked up to those carrying Drallah, reached up and gave the little guy a scratch behind the ear. "Well done, Drallah, well done," she said.

A number of the others shunned her closeness, without actually touching her. Drallah simply climbed down from his carrier's shoulders and onto hers. "Thank you so much for rescuing us, Manny!" he said jubilantly. "You're my new bestest friend in the whole world!"

His voice was young and sweet, and to Manny's ears, it was music. "Thank you," Manny said with a catch in her voice. "That means a lot to me."

At the sight of the youngster being so cozy with the "White", some were repulsed, yet most realised there was something different about her. She embraced their kind, even fought for them. One by one, they started gathering around her and embraced her. The love and gratitude in the room was virtually palpable, and Manny lapped it up. She glanced over at the door and noticed her husband leaning against it, grinning proudly. He gave her a wink, then turned and left her to her work.

From the other side of the room, Doctor Merete AndrusTaurus, fresh from finishing surgery on her last patient, gazed at the sorry looking group and said with more than a touch of irony: "I guess my work is never done."

His quick break over to go and check on his wife, Scanner returned to engineering to work on his latest project. During his discussion with Sarda, they had quickly come to the conclusion that there was no way they could divert the comet with the resources at their command. Even if the *Millennium* dragged on it with its tractor beam with all its might, it was now far too late to divert its course. It would have to be stopped, permanently.

In the centre of their workshop, next to the laser lathes and their industrial sized replicator, was a two metre long metal frame containing a number of the components that, when finished, would be a one hundred megaton

atomic bomb. The comet was so big that a certain amount of overkill was called for.

Judd glanced up at the wall chronometer and grimaced. Time was rapidly running out. Still, with the majority of his staff working on the project, it should only take them another hour to piece it together. He smiled at the thought. He was proud of his crew.

His chief assistant sidled over to him. "This thing had better work the first time. It's not like we can test it before we use it."

"I'm not sure we'd get a bang out it, that's for sure," Judd said, his attempt at humour falling on deaf ears.

"Ha, ha," Jenny said. She looked up at the clock and glanced back at her boss. "I hope you don't mind me saying, sir, but you need some sleep. We *can* finish this job without you, you know."

Scanner knew he was not indispensable, but this whole business had become very personal to him. "I want to see this one through, Jenny," he said, determined.

Jenny sighed. She had at least tried. "I understand, sir. Shall we get back to it, then?"

Dragging his weary bones, Judd accompanied her back to the device.

Only an hour after they had left, the *Troy* returned to the far side of Cait's moon with a shuttle bay full of fighters ready for action. In the same fashion as before, the *Cork* docked with their new acquisition, and Judd, Carman

and Sarda came aboard and decided to take a stateroom each and get some rest.

Before its return, the *Troy* had taken aboard a small compliment of crew to assist with her running. Engineering got a crew, and they set about getting the vessel into proper active service. They also took on a skeleton crew to man the essential stations, including helping out on the bridge. This gave Brankovian and Faith the opportunity to do something they had had little chance to do for some time – get a good feed and a decent night's sleep.

On the surface of Cait, the Capital City was in darkness. It was late at night, and the vast majority of the 's inhabitants were asleep. Among them was a lone black Cait. Crash was tired and scared, but he had managed to find somewhere to rest. He knew the Queen's people would look for him at his parent's home, so he had kept a wide berth from it. Instead, he had decided to stay at the home of one of the blacks who had disappeared. When he had been searching for the missing, he had called upon the homes of a few who had lived alone.

Assuming that they were still uninhabited, he had made for the nearest one and gave the door to the underground dwelling a knock. Receiving no answer, he decided to enter. Finding the door unlocked, he let himself in, locked the door behind him, then checked out the home. There had been no-one home, so, after a drink and a little

food, he curled up on the mattress, keeping his phaser close to his head, and immediately fell asleep, such was his state of exhaustion.

Crash wasn't the only one who had been looking for shelter. A robed being also used the address Sarda had given her earlier, on an encrypted subchannel, to find a similar underground dwelling. She approached the door fearfully, with Tish on her elbow, and knocked, tentatively. She was startled when the door was flung open and the two of them were ushered in quickly.

They were greeted by Krestapan and Drishtagoth who were tired, but still delighted to have them there.

"It's so good to see you!" Krestapan said, delighted. He shook both their hands. "We were beginning to worry. When Commander Sarda told us you were coming, we started praying for your safe arrival."

Drishtagoth, on the other hand, was more cautious. "May I ask who your companion is?"

She introduced herself. "I'm Tish," she said unabashedly. "I work at the Sunshine Cafe, where Doctor Merete saved us. So, when she," she touched her friend on the shoulder, "came to us, it was a chance for us to repay her in some small way."

At this point, the object of their interest threw back her hood and shrugged herself out of her long coat. It left her with nothing but her multicoloured fur. She put out her paw and shook the Opposition Leader's. "Sir, I am Ambassador Susanna Llash, and I'm happy to make your

acquaintance. Now we've met, I think we should start talking about how we're going to set things right around here."

Once the Doctor had given them the all clear, the recently freed Caits were ordered, without objection, to the Mess to get a decent feed. Manny happily escorted them, as, left to their own devices, the hapless band would have gotten hopelessly lost in the mammoth vessel's corridors.

Drallah was too tired to walk, so the ship's indomitable security officer carried him on her back. Although sleep was calling to him, the sheer excitement of the day kept him going. He had a welcoming smile for everyone that passed them by, as if they had all participated in his rescue.

Finally, Manny stepped through the twin doors that led to the ship's Mess, and each Cait took a seat. Manny stepped over to the food replicator, and began ordering, and distributing, the biggest, juiciest t-bones it could create, with two to each plate. Eyes widened in amazement as Manny placed each plate before their guests. All the while, Drallah still clung to Manny's back, but she didn't mind. She loved having him there, even though his lack of weight disturbed her.

While some persisted in their suspicious glances, most had come to accept her for what she was. They gave her grateful looks and ate their steaks ravenously.

Unseen by her, Pashtallah had remained in the recreation area, sitting in the Oak in what she knew to be her son's favourite spot. She recognised his scent on the branch. Her husband had gone off to sleep in the cabin supplied by the Starfleet officers, and she could care less. The next chance she got, she was going to inform him she was leaving him. She had grown tired of the abuse, and the fact he would choose his pride over common sense any day. It had cost her the opportunity to partake in their children's lives, as they had chosen to leave the two of them behind. The only child that still wanted to visit was mooching off them, and, of the three, although she loved Gruntallah, she was anything but proud of his participation in their government's horrendous agenda.

As she watched her only daughter wait on the poor, starving, black Caits, she felt a shame so deep, so profound, that she began to sob. Her daughter's humility cut deep into her soul, and laid bare the rampant favouritism she had displayed with her children. Yes, she loved Krashtallah, but she, too, had always favoured Amantallah. Just because that was the way of things. It was a way she now saw to be totally wrong.

It took a few minutes for her to get the feelings out and give them vent. When she was finished, she noticed her daughter had taken a seat of her own and was sitting next to a kit she was helping feed.

Although she was getting a little older, Pash took pride in the fact she could still climb with the best of them.

She rose on the branch on all fours, then stepped to the side and dropped to the floor below. She cushioned her landing well and made barely a sound, but it was enough to get the attention of her ever aware daughter, whose eyes and ears were now facing her direction. She saw the recognition in her eyes, and yet she stayed where she was. The offence she felt was still fresh and went deep.

Undaunted, Pash stood on her hind legs and walked over to the table. Without asking, she sat opposite Manny and waited.

"If you're expecting a rousing welcome," Manny said neutrally, "you've come to the wrong place."

Pash nodded at that. "I don't expect your forgiveness. I just hope that you will." She took a breath whilst wringing her hands. She couldn't bring herself to look her in the eye. "I wanted to let you know I'm leaving Slashtallah. I can no longer support him and the way he treats his children. The three of you came out of my womb, and I should have treated you all the same. Instead, we spoiled you and mistreated Crash terribly. And, to make matters worse, we stood by and praised Grun as he became a minister in the worst government our people have ever had." She looked to and fro, not knowing quite how to put it. In the end, it was simple. "I am so ashamed."

Next to Manny, little Drallah looked over at Pash and said simply: "I forgive you." He turned to Manny. "Is she your mother?" he asked plainly.

His words had profound effects on both women.

The child of horror had found it in his heart to forgive one of his oppressors, and made Manny examine her own prejudices.

As Pash shed grateful tears, Manny turned to her new friend. Today was a new day, and it was time to put the hurts of the past behind them. She had learned the hard way that forgiveness was a choice, not a feeling. "Yes, she is my mother," she said simply. "And I love her dearly."

Drallah paused in his meal long enough to say to Manny: "I like her. She's a lot like you."

That widened the eyes of both mother and daughter, but neither of them were going to press him for the details.

Before Manny tore off another piece of steak, she asked her mother: "Where are you going to stay?"

"Aman..." At her daughter's slightly annoyed look, she rephrased. "Manny, I thought I'd stay with my mother. She always said: "When you realise what a louse your husband is, you can always come home"."

Manny thought she did a good job of imitating her grandmother's crotchety way of speaking. "How is Nan?" she asked, getting comfortable.

The bomb was ready ahead of schedule, just. Scanner mopped his brow as he finished inserting the last screw in the mechanism. Jenny stood at the other end and ran its computer through a number of diagnostics, ensuring that when they wanted it to go off, it would.

Tired beyond his ability to gauge it, he sat down on his stool and looked through bleary eyes at their device of destruction. Although he was exhausted, he knew that it would work properly. And when it went off, it would make a *very* big bang.

On the *Millennium's* bridge, a weary Piper sat, staring at the viewscreen. The sun was now noticeably larger, so much so that they had to black out the disc so only the corona's outer edge could be seen. The nearby comet was starting to heat up from the increased density of the solar winds and the hard radiation thrown at it.

The communicator on her chair chirped. "Piper," she heard Scanner report. "Our firecracker's ready."

Finally, some good news. The sooner they blew up this monster, the sooner they could get back to Cait. "Thanks, Scanner. Move it down to the shuttle bay and put it in the *Banana Republic* so we can transfer it to the comet. Make sure you've got anti-gravs attached to it. We don't need to haul something that big around when we put it in the centre of the comet."

"Gotcha, Cap'," Scanner said, tired, but glad his work was done.

Outside, the effects of the solar winds were getting more pronounced. The comet was literally melting, its tail growing by the minute. One section of frozen water vapourized instantly, causing massive outgassing. The effect was the same as if someone had attached a rocket

motor to its side. It thrust the comet so that it was now spinning off its axis, shedding parts of itself. Rocks flew off in all directions as the sheering forces tried to tear it apart. Some of them bounced harmlessly off both the *Millennium* and the *Jolly Roger's* shields. However, the comet was still made of sterner stuff, and remained intact. However, Piper noticed she had other problems.

As the comet spun on its axis, she noticed that where the airlock had once been, there was now only an open space, the airlock having been torn off it. The interior of the former mine could be seen through it.

"Damn," she said under her breath. Now there was no way to get the bomb into the mine. She looked up at the chronometer. There were now only two hours before impact.

As if he didn't have enough work to do. Until Prime Minister Cardtasharp had decided on a successor for Smeetablink, Gruntallash had been asked to head the deceased member's department. In a way, it was a blessing, he thought. As head of Transport and Energy, he could now oversee the movement of dilithium from the comet *and* its implementation in their new antimatter reactors. Most of which were due to come online tomorrow.

He had just received some bad news, and since he was not the sort to repeat the mistakes of others, he decided

to report it to the Prime Minister even though the Queen had decreed that *she* was the one in charge.

Burning the midnight oil was something the Prime Minister was known for, and so it came as no surprise to find both he *and* his assistant still at their desks. As soon as he had stepped into the outer office he was ushered into the Prime Minister's office.

Cardtasharp looked up from his paperwork and glared. "If you're coming to me at this time of night with news, it can't be good." His tone was calculated to intimidate.

It put Gruntallash on the back foot, but he did not turn back. Even bad news needed to be reported. As neutrally as possible, he said: "The dilithium shuttle is an hour overdue."

The Prime Minister thumped his desk in irritation. "I knew ordering the shuttle to observe radio silence was a mistake. There is such a thing as too much security."

Having the luxury of having someone to blame was a rare commodity this late in a government's life cycle. So one never wasted the opportunity to use it. Gruntallash uttered a low growl of disapproval as he said: "Smeetablink was a fool to allow it."

The remark resulted in the Prime Minister slapping down his pen in anger. "And of course, as you're in a position to judge him, you are above making mistakes."

Gruntallash flinched at the comment. "Nobody's perfect," he said dismissively.

“Yes, I can see that,” his superior snapped. “I am surrounded by imperfect people.” Fuming, he sat back in his specially made chair and rocked gently. “Do we have any ships that can determine its fate?”

“Only freighters. As the destroyer's still overseeing the operation of the mine, they're stuck with a communications blackout. However,” Gruntallash looked up at the wall chronometer, “the comet's due to fall into the sun in ninety minutes. I expect they'll return shortly after. They'll be useful when the *Millennium* gets back.”

Cardtasharp scowled again. “That's assuming they haven't already found it,” he said thoughtfully. “The *Millennium* broke orbit shortly after the last shuttle left.”

“Coincidence,” Gruntallash said with a shrug.

“Only a fool believes in coincidences,” Cardtasharp snapped. “From this point on, we must operate as if the *Millennium* has destroyed our destroyer. We must be ready for her return.” He looked Gruntallash in the eyes, hard and fast. “Will our reactor be online soon?”

At least I can deliver *some* good news, he thought. “It will be in the morning.”

“And is the *Cait's Roar* ready for launch?”

Only too happy to build on his master's good mood, he said: “Yes.”

The Prime Minister relaxed a little and put his paws behind his head. “Then we'll be ready for Piper,” he said with a cruel grin.

Gruntallash nodded, understanding. "If there's nothing else, sir?" he asked, seeking leave.

Cardtasharp waved him out. "Go, get some sleep. We've all got a big day tomorrow."

The Energy Minister bowed at the waist, then turned and left, grateful to be able to do so.

The Prime Minister watched as he disappeared through the outer office, then was lost in the hall. The situation troubled him. Piper and her starship were a formidable force, but he felt sure that she would have to back down once they declared their independence.

The door behind him on his left opened and the Queen re-entered the room. She sidled up to him and looked down at him. He noted the concern on her face and enquired of it.

"I'm worried about that one," she said, pointing out the partially opened door. Noting the lack of privacy, she walked over to the door and shut it, then returned to his side.

"Why? He's one of my most loyal people. That's why I've trusted him with his portfolio."

The Queen gave him a smug look. "We'll see how loyal he is when he finds out his parents were on the last shuttle of workers out."

Cardtasharp whirled on her in amazement. "Please tell me you were joking!"

Offended, the Queen recoiled. "What do you mean?"

Knowing full well she wasn't joking, Cardtasharp jumped out of his chair and stood over her, even though they were practically the same size. "Are you completely out of your mind?" he snapped. "It was bad enough that you pulled your little stunt earlier, executing Vultanik on public vid, but to kill the parents of a person who is running the Transport, Energy, and now the *Military* ministries is one step short of totally *insane*." He grabbed her by the wrist and forced her down to her knees, all the while glaring into her golden eyes. "You *fool*! I should never have trusted you to take over the recency! Our agreement was that we would rule this planet together, but now you've jeopardised *everything*."

The Queen cried out in pain as he continued applying pressure, he relented and released her. He felt like boxing her over the ears, but let it go. "You've just made my job harder. Gruntallah is a *very* capable person, but now you've left me no choice but to remove him – permanently." He wrung his hands together. "But not now. We've had enough disruption with the Smeetablink dismissal."

"Is that the latest euphemism for assassination?" the Queen snarled.

Cardtasharp gave her a withering look. "You would know," he said darkly. "Now, for the time being, it will be business as usual. You can guarantee the *Millennium* will be back tomorrow, and while I am confident that we can fight them off if we need to, I want

you to declare our independence from the Federation. Piper will have no choice but to honour our new status and withdraw."

Her sense of superiority restored, the Queen took a seat before Cardtasharp's desk, not liking the distinction. His was the place of power, not hers.

The Prime Minister noticed her discomfort and was glad. She needed reminding that *his* was the true seat of power in their constitutional monarchy, not hers. The best she could hope for was the power of veto. He decided a change of subject was in order. "Speaking of the *Millennium*, has there been any word regarding it's third officer? Or is Krashtallah too much of a Cait for you?"

The Queen bristled at the comparison. "How dare you compare that black *filth* with me!"

"I'll compare whoever and whatever I like," Cardtasharp said carelessly. "And as you didn't gloat over his capture, I'd have to take that as a firm *no*."

The Queen curled a lip in disgust. "My incompetent guards have yet to locate him."

"Don't go killing them off, or soon you'll have no-one to watch out for you," Cardtasharp joked darkly. He rubbed a finger across his lips. "Hmmm. Having him at large could be a real problem for us. Not to mention you've given him every reason in the world to hate you. First, you kill his wife, then you add insult to injury by sending his parents to die in the comet. If I were him, you would be on top of the list of people I would want dead."

The knowledge unsettled the usually unflappable Queen. "I have taken steps to protect myself," she said, trying to bolster her own confidence.

"We both know that if someone really wants to kill you, they will find a way to make it happen. And no amount of security in the whole world will stop him from doing so." He snorted. "With his Starfleet training, well, I would wager that he would pull it off."

Rattled, the Queen stood to leave. Spending time with Cardtasharp always put her on edge, and this was no exception. "I will take my leave of you now. I will return in the morning so we can take the necessary steps." She turned to leave, wishing to be just about anywhere else but here. As long as that place wasn't anywhere near Krashtallah.

"Oh, and my Queen?" Cardtasharp said to her back.

Having to stop was more than she cared for at the moment. She scowled as she looked back at him over her shoulder. "What?" she snapped.

He gave her a callous smile. "No more political assassinations without my say so," he said firmly.

The Queen showed him her teeth in a thin smile. "I assure you, Prime Minister, if I were to order another assassination, you would be the first to know."

The veiled threat was not missed. "Good to know where we stand, my Queen. Nobody's irreplaceable."

A chill went through the sovereign's veins. As she walked out, she wondered if he had just declared an open or cold war. Only time would tell.

Chapter Nineteen

In the *Millennium*'s shuttle bay, Scanner and his people were preparing the boxy *Banana Republic* for departure. The bomb was tied down inside, and the Captain stood beside it. As she waited, she finished donning her personal space suit. It wasn't long before the person she had requested arrived.

Curious, she noted she wasn't alone. With Manny was someone who could only have been her mother. On the Lieutenant's shoulders was a small black kit who seemed to be enjoying the ride. Piper noted the little one was barely awake, but steadfastly refusing to go to sleep.

Before she could say anything, Manny said to her: "I heard. Let's go." She handed the little one to her mother, much to his disappointment, and said: "Drallah," Piper started in recognition, "I have to go with the Captain, now. I'll be back soon."

"Don't send me away!" Drallah cried, terrified. He reached out for Manny's arms, fear etched in his tiny face.

Manny ruffled his head fur and gave him a loving smile. She understood the source of his fear. "I'm not sending you anywhere, Drallah. The Captain has to do something and she needs my help. I'll come for you when I get back, I promise. Pashtallah will look after you 'til I come back. You can trust her, she's my mother."

Drallah looked up at Pashtallah a little fearfully, then back at Manny. Trying to be brave, he said timidly: "Okay. I'll wait for you."

Manny looked up at her mother and started giving her instructions. "Find a computer terminal and get it to direct you to my quarters. The two of you can get some sleep there. Don't worry if Scanner gets home. He won't mind at all." She noted even her mother was a little fearful for her. "I'll be back before you know it." She gave her a gentle push towards the doorway, then turned to the Captain. "I'm ready when you are," she said confidently.

Before Piper could reply, they both overheard Drallah saying sleepily, "I wish she was my mother."

They shared a meaningful look. They both knew that in her heart of hearts, Manny wished she *was* his mother.

Bringing them back down to earth, the Captain broke the spell and said: "I'm not going to order you, Lieutenant. This mission is far too dangerous."

The angelic Cait simply smiled. "Like I said, let's go."

Shortly after, the Captain found herself using all the skill she had dodging cometary debris. It took precious time as Piper did her best just to keep them alive. Every now and then, smaller rocks could be heard bouncing off the hull. They were not the ones she was worried about. It was the larger chunks, some as big as the *Banana Republic*, that had her worried. Slowly, surely, she crept

closer to the comet and the gaping hole left by the destruction of the airlock.

As they neared, a larger rock bounced off the hull, knocking them sideways. Manny reached for something to hold as she was thrown from her seat, and just managed to grab the back of the Captain's chair before she was slammed into the wall.

Not taking the time to look back, Piper simply muttered: "Sorry."

As she held on for dear life, Manny replied with a stammer: "Just don't do it again."

Her sense of humour hadn't completely deserted her. Piper said through gritted teeth as she fought to keep them alive: "There are *some* things I can't guarantee."

Finally, the Captain managed to bring the shuttle close to the comet. Approaching tail first, she got within inches then they fired pitons from the corners of the shuttle through the opening and into the rock. Each piton was attached to a high tensile wire, whose other end was wrapped around a powerful winch. The four of them dragged them hard and fast into the hole where there was relative safety.

Not wanting to waste a second, the two donned their helmets. Manny was wearing the suit she procured earlier, and once again they checked each other's seals. They were tight.

Without waiting for the air to be sucked out, Piper simply hit the emergency open button and the rear door

dropped open. The air whistled out a second later, and they found themselves in hard vacuum.

“Now's the fun part,” Piper said through clenched teeth. Each strapped on a high speed thruster pack, then each took a side of the bomb and untied it before turning on their magnetic boots.

“Shutting down artificial gravity, now!” Manny said, then hit the button. Instantly, they felt as if they were falling with no bottom in sight. To the uninitiated, the feeling is quite nauseating. Fortunately, both had undergone Starfleet's Zero-G combat training and were quite used to it.

Manny took out her tricorder, turned on its magnetic cover, and attached it to the bomb. “Let's go,” she said, not really wanting to go, but knowing there was no real choice.

Both jumped off the floor, the bomb held at each end in their left hands. With their right hands, they controlled the joysticks that would guide the thruster packs on their backs.

“I'll go first,” Piper said. She adjusted the angle, then hit the thrust button. A jet issued from the back of her pack and propelled her, the bomb, and Manny who was hanging on, up the shaft.

Most of the lighting in the mine was still functioning, so they could see their way. Manny acted as navigator as they flew further and further inside.

“So far, so good,” Piper said as she passed the fourth turn. They had moved over a kilometre into the mine, and

still had ten more to go. She checked the chronometer on her wrist. They had only an hour to go. "Let's get a move on! We don't have much time left!"

"Don't worry, Captain!" Manny said. "I'm behind you all the way!"

The Captain allowed herself to laugh at the little joke. It relieved some of the tension. They turned another corner and Piper accelerated. The walls whipped by as they flew down the shaft.

Manny watched the tricorder as they flew. "We're coming to a junction, Captain!" she said, trying to remain calm. "Take the right turn."

Ahead, Piper saw the tunnel Manny indicated. "Oh, great," she said, disappointed and annoyed. "It's not lit." She slowed down, so she could turn on her beam helmet lights, which illuminated the tunnel nicely, casting long shadows into the gloom. Satisfied she could do no better, she accelerated once again and the pair zoomed down the shaft, turning this way and that as Manny navigated them through the mine.

As she hung onto the bomb with both hands, Manny did her best to ignore the tunnel walls whizzing by. She noted the temperature gauge did not show absolute zero. It was twenty degrees above that, and slowly rising. She realised the comet was going to heat up fast as they neared the sun. At that moment, she realised why people like Faith prayed. It would take a higher power to save them, and knowing they were looking after you would lend some

comfort. So, in the privacy of her own thoughts, she said a prayer.

At that moment, the comet shook as a section cracked off it, causing its rotation to shift. Piper struggled to adjust for the change in momentum and came dangerously close to the wall. She slowed down momentarily for safety's sake.

Manny tried to give her some hope. "We've only got two kilometres to go!" she said, then yelled: "Stop!"

The Captain brought them to as abrupt a stop as was possible, and she put out her feet to absorb some of the shock as they encountered a collapsed section of the mine. Her shoes connected with the rock and she took the remaining momentum with her knees. Even in zero gravity, one can get killed hitting a solid object if one is travelling really fast. She felt something pop in her left knee, but she managed to stop them and the bomb from any more damage. She sucked in a painful breath through her teeth, then turned to face Manny. "We've got to go back and try another way," she said, trying to mask her pain.

Her security chief looked her in the eye. "I don't think so, Captain," she said. "I've looked at the scan and I believe we can phaser our way through. Besides, we simply don't have time to back-track."

The Captain nodded. "Go ahead," she said, then got out of the way.

Ripping her phaser off her velcro belt, Manny adjusted it for maximum output, aimed it at the wall, then fired at what she believed was the optimum place with a wide beam. She kept the beam going for three seconds, then stopped. As there was little gravity, there was no subsequent rockfall, and the path through was clear. "After you, Captain," Manny said with a flourish.

Piper gave her a winning smile. "With an offer like that, how can I refuse?" She turned once more, glad she was in zero gravity as her knee was aching terribly. "Hang on!" she shouted, then applied maximum thrust. The pair, bomb included, shot through the gap and on down the tunnel. Fortunately, they came upon a lit section, and Piper relaxed as the remainder of their journey was trouble free.

"Slow down," Manny said, then: "Right here."

Piper brought them to a stop, noting her thruster pack was nearly empty. She shrugged it off and pushed it down the tunnel away from them. Both placed their magnetic boots on the metal walkway, Piper wincing as the movement jarred her knee.

This time Manny felt the shock of pain from the Captain. "What is it?" she asked, concerned.

Trying to be brave, Piper said: "Nothing the Doctor can't fix."

Understanding her intentions, Manny said: "Okay. Let's get this bomb ticking." She checked her chronometer again. There was only a little over an hour before impact. They had only half an hour to get back to the shuttle before

would be their time ran out. Their proximity to the sun would roast them alive.

It was at this point that Scanner gave the order. The Captain had made it clear she wanted the *Millennium* to remain on station no closer to the star than they were. "All stop."

Both the *Millennium* and *Jolly Roger* came to an halt, hovering in space. As the comet continued on its path to oblivion, it was picking up the pace. It was not long before they could no longer see it.

"Keep the comet on constant scan," Scanner ordered. "I want to know as soon as they make it back to the shuttle."

The Commander seemed unusually tense, and the crew understood why. The Captain was one of Scanner's best friends, and his wife Manny was with her. The stakes were high, but even more so for him.

"Done!" Piper said as she hit the failsafe timer. The clock started counting down. If they could not remotely detonate the bomb, it would go off automatically in thirty-five minutes. "Let's get the hell out of here."

It was a little undignified, but the only way Manny could get the both of them moving was if the Captain was in front of her, holding onto her with both arms wrapped around her. This left her right hand free to guide them, and her left hand holding the tricorder.

Piper looked up at Manny and said: "I won't tell Judd if you won't."

The white Cait roared with laughter, then gave her Captain a broad smile. "Let's go home," she said, with all the confidence in the world. With that, she gunned the thruster pack and sent them hurtling back the way they had come.

The light helped, and for a while, the path was clear. Manny kept up a constant pace, and all the Captain could do was hold onto her. From her position, all she could see was a blur of rock. She tried not to think about it.

They quickly passed from day into night once more, and Manny turned on her lights without slowing down. Dodging this way and that, she found the way arduous as, time and again, not only were the walls buckling under the strain, but pockets of gas were heating up and jetting into the tunnel.

It was the rockfall that brought them undone. As they passed through the gap Manny made, a stray rock had come loose and knocked the tricorder from Manny's hand. She stopped the two of them as quickly as she could, then turned around to find their electronic map and lifeline home.

It revealed itself after a moment, a sparking wreck. Manny shook it in disgust.

The Captain gave her a look that did not judge her. "It was fun while it lasted," she said without regret.

Annoyed that fate seemed to be playing a game on them, Manny said: "If I may, Captain, I plan on getting us home yet."

Piper looked at her with a funny expression. "Are you suggesting..."

"What have we got to lose?" Manny said with a touch of fatalism.

"You're right about that," Piper said, the corners of her mouth turning up. "Give it a try."

Once more, Manny took a breath and cleared her mind. If this was going to work, she had to be focussed. The terrain around her soon filled her thoughts, and, as if on instinct, she suddenly knew exactly how to get them back to the shuttle. Without a second thought, she gunned the thruster suit and within seconds, the two were hurtling through the tunnels once more. Manny turned off her suit lights. She found they only distracted her as she kept them moving.

The further along they went, the more confident Piper became of Manny's gift. So far, they hadn't hit anything. She checked her chronometer once more. They had only fifteen minutes before they were beyond the point of no return.

For once, Piper was glad she couldn't see anything. Somehow she knew the two of them were moving a lot faster than was probably safe. She felt the twists and turns of the tunnel as their bodies shifted against each other with each change of direction.

Soon, they re-entered the lit section of the tunnel, and Piper got an idea just how fast they were moving, but also how badly the comet was heating up. It seemed gasses were leaking into the tunnel from every direction, often clouding their view of things, yet the Lieutenant kept them on course, unerringly leading them home.

Within minutes, Manny slowed them down to a crawl, then the two of them touched down on the ruined pathway. What they saw crushed their hopes.

The shuttle had dislodged itself from the wall and was now floating away from them into the debris field.

“Perhaps we could use the thruster pack to get us out to it,” Manny suggested hopefully.

With no other options, the Captain was game, but even that option was cruelly stripped from them as a huge boulder smashed into the *Banana Republic*, turning it into scrap metal. Pieces of it flew in all directions, some sparking as their energy cells gave up their charge.

As their final option was gone, Piper touched the send button on her helmet. “Piper to the *Millennium*. We’ve lost the shuttle, and we’re too close to the star for retrieval. Keep on with the mission and get Cait out of it’s mess.” With that said, she added a soulful: “Take care.”

As she turned back towards the mine she caught a reflection in Manny’s face shield that took her breath away. It was the *Millennium* dropping out of warp. Before she could say another word, she felt the familiar tingle of being

transported as the two of them were beamed away to safety.

When Piper rematerialised, she forgot the damage to her knee. As her body felt the full one gee of gravity pull her down, she shifted her feet and cried out as her knee buckled under her. Off balance, she tumbled towards the floor in sheer agony.

Stunned, the transporter technician froze for a moment. However, Manny had expected this but had not had the time to warn her. She caught her arm on the way down and broke most of her fall, then scooped the Captain into her arms. "Sorry, Captain, I should have warned you," she said apologetically.

"My own stupid fault, Lieutenant," Piper said. She turned to the transporter technician. "You'd better beam us both directly to sickbay," she said with a rueful grin.

Once more, they felt the tingle of the transporter and the two found themselves in the familiar surrounds of sickbay. That's when the lights went out.

On the bridge viewscreen, the image of the comet took centrepiece. In the upper right corner of the image ticked down the time the bomb had left before it detonated, courtesy of the remote system Judd had built into it. There were only seconds to go.

"Turn us about," Scanner ordered. "As soon as you can, take us to warp."

The pilot brought the *Millennium* around in as tight a turn as he could given their momentum and the increased gravity of the star due to their proximity to it. The comet passed them by on the starboard side as the final seconds ticked down, then as soon as he had the right vector he called for warp speed.

This close to the star, it required every ounce of energy the engines had to take them to warp. The lights all over the ship went out as emergency power was diverted to the engines. On the screen, the sun's glare was suddenly overshadowed by the light of the exploding bomb. In the first instant of detonation, impossibly bright light shone from within it before the massive radiating energy shattered the comet into billions of pieces. It was all they saw before the *Millennium* answered the call and shot into high warp, taking them safely away from the destruction that removed the comet from the sky.

With one problem out of the way, the Captain thought it was time for the crew to take a momentary breather. The majority of the senior staff had been up for twenty-four hours, and she noted that the Caitian Capital was slumbering. She thought it was time to do the same.

She gave the order to Manny as Merete tried to push her down on the examination table in sickbay. "I want those who have been on shift to get at least six hours sleep. We're going back to Cait tomorrow, and I want everyone to be rested."

“Yes, Captain,” Manny said, still wearing her space suit.

Piper looked down at her knee, still fuming that the Doctor had cut up her favourite space suit to get at it. It was swollen, that she could see, and Merete was having a trying time getting the Captain to sit still while she scanned it.

“I also want us to regroup with the *Jolly Roger*, the *Troy* and the *Cork*. Have us all form up into formation and get engineering teams working on both Cait ships. I want them ready for tomorrow.” Piper winced as Merete prodded her knee. “What was that for?” she yelled in pain.

Merete gave her a look that told her who was boss here. “To get you to shut up,” she said, not unkindly. “I need to fix this knee sooner rather than later. You've ruptured both your anterior as well as posterior cruciate ligaments. It's going to require hours in the regeneration unit and a couple of days in a splint.”

Piper looked ready to argue, then recognised the look in her eye. “All, right, Merete. Have it your way.”

The Doctor scowled. “In *my* sickbay, I usually do. Now, sit still so I can fix you up and go and take care of my babies.”

The Lieutenant nodded at the Captain, her white fur bobbing with her. “I'll pass on your orders and make sure Gamma shift takes over. Scanner will try and help with the work to the other ships, but I'll throw him over my shoulder if I have to and carry him to bed.”

“I don't know if there's a regulation about carrying off a superior officer to bed,” the Captain said, joking. She winced once more as Merete worked on her knee. She got the hint and shut up.

“Good night, Captain,” Manny said as she stepped through the doors.

“Good night, Manny,” Piper said to her retreating back. “And well done.”

The snowy Cait stopped in the doorway for a second, her ears flicking back towards the Captain as she looked her in the eye and said: “You, too, Captain. You, too.”

Then the doors closed and Piper relaxed. Her ship was in good hands.

Twenty minutes later, an exhausted Manny and her equally exhausted husband arrived at their quarters. They stumbled into their room, having fulfilled their duties, and divested themselves of their outer garments. Manny left her new suit in the corner and walked into the sonic shower with her husband. She held him up as the shower did its job, then helped him into his night clothes. She had told him beforehand they had guests.

The found the master bed had been taken by Pashtallah and Drallah, who were curled up against each other in the middle of the mattress. Neither of them wished to disturb them, so Judd took a blanket and two pillows out of a closet and dragged the couch cushions

onto the floor to create a makeshift bed. He dropped the pillows at one end, then sank onto the cushions gratefully.

Manny pulled the blanket over them as she curled up next to him, feline style. Still, she liked the comfort of laying her head on a pillow, and did so. Her husband slipped an arm over her side, and she snuggled into him.

As she slowly wound down, Manny said quietly: "You know, I've never saved an entire solar system before. It's funny, but we really changed the course of this solar system's history today. If we had left things as they were, the sun would already be dying and the billions of people on my homeworld would die with it. But because we decided to do something, we really made a *difference*. This is a day I'll always remember. It's the day we saved a star." She paused as she reflected. "What do you think, my love?"

Scanner's only answer was in the soft sounds of his breathing as he slept.

Following Piper's orders, the *Troy* made the quick hop around the sun to meet with the *Millennium*. With the *Cork*'s crew, namely Jason Nunn, Carman Valastro and Sarda, still asleep in their staterooms, one of the fighter pilots took the *Cork* for the short hop from the docking bay of the *Troy* over to the shuttle bay of the *Millennium* for refuelling and maintenance.

Before they left Cait's moon, they dropped a repeater satellite so they could keep in touch with Earhaht, even though the Horta had not made contact for some time.

Whilst the senior staff of the *U.S.S. Millennium* slept, the beta and gamma shifts got to work on the two Caitian ships, making sure each vessel's shields were operating and up to scratch. Not to mention the work to the *Jolly Roger's* phaser banks. They had been damaged when the *Millennium* had opened up on her, but not beyond repair.

And so the *Troy* would not be taken as a powder puff, the engineering crews were working double time to install three sets of phaser banks on her. As there was every possibility that all four vessels were about to go into combat, they wanted to make sure they could hold their own in a fight.

Given the time frame, Piper had decided against calling for reinforcements from Starfleet. As most of their fighting vessels were on the other side of their space, either patrolling neutral zones or fighting skirmishes, the only other ships available were science vessels, and the sad fact was she had more firepower available in the ships she had with her.

Besides, she knew her own people, and they worked well as a team. Piper did not trust easily, but when she did, that trust was firm and lasting. It was well known in the fleet that if you wanted to work with her, she had to respect you first and trust you second. If you failed the first, there was no getting the second. But if you were that rare breed

of person she took under her wing, then she not only would be happy to work with you, but she would look after you like family.

And that's what it was like to work on the *Millennium*. She made a point of knowing not only the names of every person on her ship, but where they were born, and even their birthdays.

That kind of personal attention to her people brought a strong sense of loyalty, and she was happy to work with, and sponsor, her crewmembers to help them further their careers, even if that career had them leave for other postings.

At oh-six-thirty ship's time – all four ships had been synchronised – the alarm went off in Piper's room. She had programmed the computer some time before to make the old-fashioned ringing from a mechanical alarm clock. She had found through experimentation that the sound was the best to rouse her. She had tried replicating a mechanical alarm clock once, but it had not survived the first attempt to wake her. Piper found they didn't bounce too well.

She raised her head blearily off the pillow and scowled. She had just been sunbaking on a beach on Risa, enjoying the feeling of the natural heat on her body. The warm water had been lapping around her toes and she had felt totally relaxed.

Now reality had come back to haunt her. Today she had determined that the Caitian homeworld was going to

wake up to reality. It was make or break time for them. She just hoped they decided the right way.

She stuck her tongue out as she tasted her own morning breath, then hobbled, barefooted, into her personal bathroom. She looked at her face, noticing bags under her eyes and realised she, and her crew, needed some shore leave. Perhaps when this crisis was concluded they could have it here.

She picked up her aging toothbrush, applied paste, then gave her teeth a good scrub. She had been careful over the years to keep them in good condition. Her mother had always told her she would only have one natural set of teeth and made sure that her little girl brushed twice every day. When preparing for her Academy survival test, she still made sure she had her toothbrush.

Feeling a little more human, Piper stepped into her water shower and enjoyed the cleansing sensation of the water flowing over her. A sonic shower was great if you wanted to get clean quickly and with little mess. However, there was no comparison to the real thing. She took the time to wash her hair and condition, then, once she was done, she dried her hair and put it up in her customary ponytail that ended at her shoulders.

Even in the twenty-third century, most women wore make-up to some degree. Not Piper. She would disagree, but the fact was she was a natural beauty. Her skin was as supple as when she was eighteen, and she had managed to remain physically fit. Her green eyes caught many a man

off guard, and gave her an advantage as she was thinking while most males were just dazzled by her eye colour.

The Captain quickly donned her uniform but took a lot longer with her boots, as the analgesia Merete had given her for her knee had long ago worn off. As she finished up, she popped two pills, then checked herself one more time in the mirror before she left her cabin and headed out to the Mess, making good time on her crutches. It wasn't her first leg injury, so she was well practiced on them. As she had forgotten to eat her dinner, so her stomach started growling the moment she got out of bed.

She started reflecting on her plans for the day, but the first step was getting a hearty breakfast. It would have to be reasonably substantial this morning, as her usual fruit and nut bar just wouldn't fill her and certainly not sustain her through the trial to come.

As she entered the Mess, she looked about for her senior staff, and found most of them collected together at the tables near the Oak. At her entrance, her first officer, Sarda, looked up at her and she felt his warming presence in her mind. She had known he was back since the moment she woke up as she sensed his proximity through their link.

Piper headed over to the replicator and ordered up a banana and some cereal, plus a glass of apple juice. Before she could try to manage the tray, it was deftly scooped up by Manny who eyed her bleary-eyed. Piper frowned at her. "What happened to you? I thought you were going to

get a good night's sleep?" She felt a little annoyed that her orders had been disrupted.

Manny gave her a sheepish grin. "That was the plan, but a couple of our black guests became disruptive during the night and Security called me to restore order. Curiously, the Blacks we rescued respect me."

The Captain's eyebrows raised. "What were they up to?"

The Security Chief sighed. "Apparently, word got out that the Captain of the *Roger* and his henchmen are our "guests" in the brig. They wanted to break in and deal with them, Caitian style."

Piper grimaced. She could guess what that meant. Then she frowned. "Are you telling me they tried to break *into* the brig?"

With a chuckle, Manny started carrying Piper's tray over to the table. "Yes, they did. I told them that if they didn't stop misbehaving, I would put them in the cell next to the Captain and let them glare at each other all they liked. I also told them that when we get things sorted at home" - she spoke of Cait - "they would stand trial for crimes against sentience, among other things." Her eyes looked around as she searched her memory. "I believe you humans have a saying: That we'd throw "the Book" at them."

The Captain's grin was forced. "They're lucky I don't just space them for what they did," she said, venting her feelings.

With a sigh, Manny wiggled her whiskers in cheerful frustration. “But we’re the Good Guys. We don’t do that sort of thing.”

Piper stopped next to Sarda’s table and leaned her crutches against the end of it. She hopped over, then slid onto, the bench seat next to Sarda. The other occupants of the table were Jason Nunn, Carman Valastro, Faith, Pashtallah and Drallah. It was at this moment she keenly felt Crash’s absence. They often met for breakfast here and shared stories.

A host of “Good Morning, Captain”’s accompanied her appearance and she gave them all a collective greeting in return. Thinking of Crash brought the Ambassador to mind.

“Has anyone heard anything about Crash or the Ambassador yet?” she asked the air.

Sarda nodded. “Yes, Captain. Although there is no more news regarding our third officer other than his being held captive by the Queen, the Ambassador managed to escape and is currently with the Believers and the Opposition Party leaders.”

Piper blinked. Of the two of them, she would have put money on Crash being the one to break out. She was sure there was a story behind that one. “Anything else? The Queen has capitulated, the government has resigned, anything like that?”

“Nothing so dramatic.” Sarda shifted, knowing the Captain was being flippant to put her people at ease. “It

would have been a desirable outcome, however. The only other thing I can report is that the engineering crews have nearly finished the upgrades and the Caitian scriptures have been uploaded to Memory Alpha. They are now available for any member of the Federation to read at will. They have also been translated. There was enough research done regarding the ancient Caitian dialects that it was a simple matter for the universal translator to render them in Federation Standard.”

That gave the Captain a reason to smile. “Let's hope it makes a difference,” she said sincerely.

From her chair opposite the Captain, a little further down the table, Faith turned her attention to her. “Captain, I can't tell you how grateful I am that you've been able to upload the scriptures to Memory Alpha,” she gushed. “We've been trying for years, but Zif has managed to stop us every time.”

Jason scowled. “That's one Cait who I won't be sorry to see fry,” he said, quietly angry.

Faith put her paw gently on Jason's hand, looked soulfully into his eyes and said: “Don't hate Zif, Jason, please. I pity him. He's been deceived into believing a lie. I pray when he hears the truth it will turn him around and he will become the High Priest he should be.”

Even though the young man was tempted to roll his eyes, he managed to refrain from doing so. He respected Faith's beliefs, but he was anything but a devotee. “I don't think he deserves the compassion you're showing him,

love. All I've seen him do is hurt your people over and over. How can you forgive a monster like him?"

Taking his hand in hers, she applied a tiny amount of pressure as she stroked his cheek. The motion was so intimate that he flushed, but he did not back away. The love she was showing him was of a sister to a beloved brother. "Jason, my dear, sweet friend. The Teacher told us to love our fellows, that includes our enemies. If we only love those who love us, we're no different from anyone else. I'm sure your Captain will tell you that no civilisation would last that did so at the end of a phaser. The only way to create a lasting peace is through love, communication, respect and understanding. At the moment, my people have forgotten all of them. We are no longer encouraged to talk or think for ourselves, and so we don't really talk to each other anymore. If respect was still alive, the King would never have been overthrown and the black Caits would never have been persecuted. And if you don't have communication, you will never have understanding.

"My people need to see the truth once more, and it *will* set them free. They just need to find their hearts once more." She gave Jason's hand one more gentle squeeze, then put it down.

At that moment, Jason found himself totally infatuated. The love this young lady was capable of amazed him and enthralled him and he wanted some of it for himself. He just didn't know how to go about it.

Before he said anything that would put his foot in his mouth, the Captain rescued him.

From her place at the head of the table, Piper said: "We just need to let them know they can read it for themselves." She rhythmically tapped her spoon on the table as she thought and crunched on her cereal. She had opted for Fruit Loops this morning. An idea was forming in her mind. "I hope everyone got a good night's sleep, because this is going to be one *busy* day."

All around her, Susanna heard the sounds of her companions sleeping. Caits don't snore, so a roomful of slumbering Caits wouldn't bother each other. However, it wasn't the company that had kept her up all night. It was the thought that her husband was still in danger, and worse, still thinking she was dead.

She knew from the wall chronometer that it was now daylight in the city, and yet everyone was still asleep. Well, they had a good excuse. Of the group, the half that were believers had spent a fair amount of time in prayer for their situation. The other half, the politicians, who were cynical by nature, had spent the night strategizing. With Susanna in their midst, they felt that their cause had a chance. Her presence reminded them the Cait were still a part of the Federation, and that their friends offworld still cared and would fight for them.

A pragmatic female, Susanna knew the need for sleep. She understood her body needed rest, and yet she

could not stop worrying about Krashtallah. Although she came from a different world, her own people still held a belief in a loving Creator, and so hearing the Cait asking their compassionate god for help in saving Crash was comforting and welcome. All the same, she did not have their faith, and so she worried. And no matter how hard she tried to close her eyes and go to sleep, it kept eluding her.

Ever so quietly, she sighed. Frustrated at her lack of slumber success, she wearily got to her feet and stepped over to the replicator. Very quietly, she ordered breakfast, and a strong mug of coffee. Although her husband did not like the stuff, she had found that she had developed a taste for it during her work with the humans. However, unlike the humans, she drank it through a straw. She had yet to master drinking from a mug.

She took her breakfast into the next room where she could eat without disturbing anyone. She guessed it was used as a kind of study, with books lining the walls on a number of shelves. One wall was clear, and Susanna guessed correctly that it was a vid wall. She quietly closed the door, then turned the vid on, selecting the News Prime network. While compromised, the station still tried to report the facts when possible.

She settled down on the floor on a comfortable mat, placed her plate and mug on the low desk and began to eat as she watched the news.

The impeccably dressed and manicured presenter wore the plain and emotionless expression of newsreaders the galaxy over. Yet, as Susanna watched, there seemed to be a little less sparkle in his eye today. She had seen this male many times during her brief stay on Cait, and he had never failed to impress her with his professionalism. Now, it seemed as if he had swallowed a lemon and was being asked to report on its sweetness.

“The Queen has handed down a personal directive that the people of Cait be on the watch for an armed and aggressive fugitive who escaped from her custody last night.” A three dimensional image appeared over his left shoulder. It took Susanna's breath away. “The fugitive, Krashtallah, a member of Starfleet, is at large and should be considered extremely dangerous. It is reported he killed several guards last night and is suspected of having assassinated Minister Smeetablink at his private residence in front of his kits.” The newsreader curled a lip in disgust, but Susanna got the impression that he was not angry at Crash, but at the notion he had to broadcast this garbage.

“Citizens who have encountered this male should not approach him, but contact the Ministry of Homeworld Security so he may be recaptured. The Queen has stated she wants him either dead or alive.” The newsreader glanced off to his left, as if looking for someone. He appeared mildly distressed by the report.

Also, Susanna caught the implied “preferably dead” message. The Queen was obviously trying to start a witch

hunt and let the masses do her job for her. She cast about in her thoughts for some way to contact him, but came up with nothing. She turned her attention back to the newsreader, who was obviously warring against his better conscience. However, he had moved onto another subject.

“The Queen will be making an appearance at one after median to make an announcement. There are inside rumours that she will be announcing Cait's succession from the Federation.” At that, the newsreader's eyes widened. He was obviously reading off a teleprompter, and was not aware of the news until he had uttered it. “Also, overnight, the government passed legislation banning the Conservative Party from office. From now on, only the Caitian Liberal Party will be recognised as a legal political party. If any loyal citizen sees any member still at large, you are *ordered*,” disdain dripped from the word, “to inform the local police or the Ministry of Homeworld Security.” To his relief, the next report went on to simply cover a local weather disturbance. At this point, Susanna tuned out and considered the reports. She glanced back at the door and her thoughts turned to those still snoozing on the other side of it. Most of them were now fugitives from the law, not only as far as the government was concerned, but now the citizens were being asked to turn them in. Not good.

Her eyes narrowed as a thought came to her. There was an inconsistency between the two reports. Once more, she was glad for her virtually eidetic memory. People who

saw Crash were being asked to report to the Ministry of Homeworld Security, yet the treatment for the politicians was different. The police were just as good. Why the variation? Her experiences with Homeworld Security gave her cause to shudder. Her husband was much less likely to be treated decently by the Ministry than the police. His recent experiences with the hostage drama had led the police to give him a grudging respect. She could expect no such treatment for him at the hands of the Queen's Security People. They had become a type of Gestapo, stormtroopers who didn't question their orders because they enjoyed carrying out the dirtier jobs.

Unconsciously, she found herself muttering under her breath. "Please don't let him fall into their hands," she prayed quietly.

Krashtallahs woke up with a start. He had dreamed that Susanna was out there somewhere, thinking of him. It had been so real that he could smell her breath, her fur. He could still remember the flecks of gold in her eyes. The remembrance brought a new wave of mourning that washed over him like a wave, carrying him to a state of abject misery. The hole inside yawned like an open chasm, like a black hole of melancholy that threatened to suck him in permanently.

He wanted to yell, to cry out in his despair, but the rational part of his brain reminded him that it might give

away his location. Instead, he whimpered quietly as he took stock of his situation.

It was just past dawn in the Capital, he noted. Daylight was his enemy as his colouring may as well have been neon. There was no way he could venture outside during the day without something to completely hide his colour.

He bounded over to his unsuspecting host's closet and went through his sparse clothing. He noted a number of cloaks, giving him a glimmer that their owner had tried to hide from the world that despised his colour. He tried on a couple, and found to his dismay that he was too tall for them. His feet were totally exposed, and they were tight across his shoulders.

He dropped the last one to the floor in disgust and considered other possibilities. It was obvious to him that if he ventured out the front door as he was the authorities would be on him in minutes. The only thing he could do was somehow change his colour.

It was possible, he knew, but it would take time. He stepped over to the counter in the small flat and activated this home's computer terminal. He logged into Memory Alpha, which was connected to Cait through a subspace link, and requested the information he required. He had never done something like this before, and he had to prepare.

Chapter Twenty

Once their morning prayers were finished - Drishtagoth was loathe to interrupt his host's communion time - they got down to the business of planning their next move.

"The *Millennium* was clear," Earhaht stated flatly from her place near the door. "Your scriptures have been uploaded to Memory Alpha."

At that, Krestapan let out a delighted yelp, as did a number of the others. "Excellent! Awesome! Wonderful!" were some of the words used in elated tones by the group.

Those with their thoughts a little closer to the ground nodded in agreement.

"Now, the question remains," said the ever pragmatic Susanna. "How do we get the word out?"

At that, most looked around them with a blank look on their faces. Nobody had a clue.

Drishtagoth voiced what they were all thinking, sullenly. "The Government controls all the media."

Susanna narrowed her eyes in thought. "Is there a way to hack in?" Her time with the humans was showing again as she used one of their idioms. It carried enough clarity for Drishtagoth to understand.

"No." He was certain of that and sighed in frustration. He turned and looked away at a blank wall. It

reminded him of their options. "We neither have the equipment, nor the knowledge to even try to do it without setting fire to our home."

The Ambassador missed the reference and her visage reflected it. "Sorry?" she said, askance.

The Opposition Leader gave her a wry smile. "In a world built into forests, there's no way of drawing attention to yourself more."

"Ah." The notion of falling once more into the hands of the Queen made Susanna shudder involuntarily. She had barely escaped last time. "So, how do we get the word out?"

A gravelly voice came from over by the door. "I have an idea."

Once more, the great bulk of the *U.S.S. Millennium* warped into orbit around Cait, totally unseen to all below. The stars twinkled as the mammoth ship's ultra-secret cloaking device fluctuated, then settled as the ship came to a relative stop.

In the Captain's chair, Piper sat calmly – at least that was the air she was putting on. On the inside, Piper was worried. Earhaht's plan was sound, but there was always the chance that Murphy's Law, as Mister Nunn called it, would intervene. In her experience, it was all too often the case that what could go wrong often *did* go wrong. She looked off to her right at Science and gave the nod. "Link us up."

In her quarters in the Palace, the Queen sat, considering her options. As she was being pampered by her aides, she began thinking about the words she would use to announce her world's succession from the Federation. It was time for her people to not only stand on their own, but to take their rightful place in the order of things as a power in their own right.

And she would be the one to lead them into their destiny. She took a moment to stare into her own visage in the mirror opposite her. As she caught her own eyes, she shuddered as she remembered the nightmare that had roused her from her slumber the night before. Once more, she had found herself on the floor in front of the throne, powerless. Someone was towering over her, wearing her crown, yet, strangely, the killing blow she expected never came. Then the ultimate shame came as she slinked away into the darkness where she faded into the black and disappeared. It was at that point that she awoke every time.

She had had the same dream for three nights in a row now, and each time it ended the same. She scowled to herself and vowed that her dream would not reflect her future.

At that point, one of her groomers found a knot in her fur at the back of her head and snagged her comb. In so doing, she tugged, ever so gently on the Queen's fur.

It was enough to infuriate the monarch. The vengeful Queen spun about and cuffed her assistant soundly on the cheek, sending her sprawling to the floor. "How dare you!" she screeched as she reared on her hind legs, fury blazing in her eyes. All of the stress that had slowly built over the previous days bubbled over and the Queen let the poor female have it. She lashed out with her left foot, catching the tawny young female under the ribs, causing her to suck in a desperate breath as she rolled into a ball, twisting herself so that she moved out of reach.

Not that the Queen was going to let her off with that. She followed, kicking her again with her right foot. "I am your sovereign, you little flea!" she shrieked as she followed with a right handed punch to the side of the girl's head. "You live to serve ME! Not the other way around!"

Bending over, she took a hold of the groomer's neck fur at the back and tugged her to her feet, as the other two assistants looked on in horror. The thought that they should intervene never even entered their consciousness. The Cait, whilst technically a constitutional monarchy politically, still held their sovereigns as being something more than just normal people.

With a step forward and a sound yank, the Queen sent the young female flying towards the door, which, even though it was automatic, did not open quite in time. The sound of cracking bone was heard as her victim rebounded off the righthand door, but such was her determination to

get away from her furious monarch that she didn't let the broken collarbone slow her down.

Wanting to finish her off, the Queen stepped over to her comm panel and slapped the button. "I want that useless youth put in the atomizer and vapourized!" she said with quiet malice. She added, slowly: "And if her family complains, let them join her."

With that said, she spun about and quickly returned to her place amongst her cushions. Her two remaining assistants cast worried glances at each other before tentatively resuming their duties.

Not paying them any mind, the Queen turned on her wall vid. The news feed from News Prime came on by default and the face of her favourite newscaster, whose name she could not recall, spoke as if speaking directly to her.

"This is news on the hour, and News Prime brings you the news that matters," he said. "The Queen has indicated that she is to make an announcement to the people at one after meridian. We will bring you that exclusively on News Prime." Before he could say another word, the image changed and her avowed enemy occupied his place. Behind him could be seen a nondescript little room and two of his people stood by his side.

A low growl issued from the back of the Queen's throat as her eyes turned to slits.

"Fellow Caitians, I am Drishtagoth, your rightful Prime Minister in exile. As you may have heard, our

“Queen”, a usurper who I fear is insane, murdered our former party leader before your very eyes. She called it an execution, but a killing without due legal process is murder, plain and simple.

“Also, we have word that she intends on having our world secede from the Federation. For her to do so would be to totally disregard our highest laws, enshrined in Cait's Constitution. Such a drastic change can only be approved by a *general referendum*, of which I have not heard the Queen announce that one is coming.

“Even if she does the right thing and announce such a referendum, I urge you to send a message to our government, and our Queen in particular, and abstain from voting. The sound of silence can be the loudest of all, and, we can hope, the message will be received and our desire to have law and order restored on Cait will resume. Perhaps, in a fit of conscience, the Queen will abdicate and answer for her crimes against her fellow Cait.

“As well, I have been informed that our Great Teacher's book has been uploaded to Memory Alpha for all to read. I have been able to read some of it myself, and I can assure you of one thing. There is no mention made anywhere about the colour of the Teacher's fur – or anyone else's for that matter. He was killed because of his message, not because he was white. It would appear we have been lied to, and that we have a great apology to make to our black brothers and sisters.” He glanced to the side.

“I see our time is running out. Make a difference again, my friends. Abstain from voting. Let your voice be heard aga....” At this point, the screen went dark as the feed was cut.

The vidphone on the Prime Minister's desk jumped as he slammed the off button. It had taken far too long for News Prime to find a way to shut down what was obviously an outside feed. The source of it could not be traced, even how it was superseding their own broadcast, and in the end the only way to stop it was to shut down the channel.

“Incompetent morons,” he muttered quietly. He tapped his fingers on the desk, waiting. A glance at the wall chronometer showed that about twenty seconds had passed when the phone rang again. He noted the line was his private line and he did not have to be clairvoyant to know who was on the other end of it. With a sigh, he accepted the call. “Yes?” he asked wearily.

Through the tiny screen, she glowered at him. “Is that any way to address your Queen?” she snapped.

Cardtasharp scowled right back at her. “I am not in the mood for your childish theatrics, oh *Queen*.” He sank as much derision as he could into that single word. Without waiting for her reply, he continued. “I assume you saw the broadcast. He's right about the Constitution, and now the people are aware of the law, you're going to

have to revise your speech if you want any support from them once we *do* secede.”

The Queen was startled. “You actually want to go *ahead* with this farce?” she sneered.

The Prime Minister gave a dark chuckle. “The people can vote all they want. It won’t mean anything. Either way, we’ll announce the people have spoken and secede.”

“You are even more devious than I thought,” the Queen said with a sultry purr.

Her tone brought a raised brow from Cardtasharp. She seemed aroused by the notion. She was even more disturbed than he had earlier surmised. “Go ahead with your announcement at One. Let the people know we will hold the referendum at Four this afternoon and that the voting will take place during the following hour. Tell them the reason for the haste is to show how important the matter is to you and the government. We’ll announce the results at Six.”

“Good,” the Queen purred quietly. The power she was wielding was intoxicating her. That was obvious to the Minister, and it worried him. Then she remembered the other reason she had called and a shadow passed over her face. “Do you think it’s true what he said about the scriptures?” she asked, a little uncertainly.

For the first time in days, Cardtasharp paused to think about that one. Worry for more than the future of his people raged within him. After a lengthy pause, he said:

“The only thing I’m worried about is if the people turn against Zif. It’s up to him to prove the Blacks did what they did to the Teacher. If he can’t we could have a revolt on our hands. Our children have been programmed from infancy that the Blacks are evil for killing the Teacher. If they suddenly find out it’s all been a lie....” He gave a shudder. “We could have an insurrection on our paws.” He made a quick decision. “I’m going to call Zif and find out what’s going on. I’ll get back to you later.”

Once again, the Queen looked ruffled. The Prime Minister had a bad habit of talking to her as if she was just like everyone else. Did he truly not understand she was a female of destiny? She let her annoyance show once more as she said between clenched teeth: “I will speak with you then.” Her image winked out, thankfully.

The Prime Minister gave a little growl. “Psychopath,” he muttered. He summoned his secretary. He had to organise the Referendum and call a meeting with Gruntallash to find out how the final shipment of dilithium was going.

And if they had finally taken care of their Blacks problem. After all, if there no Blacks left to save, the point was now moot. He glanced at the wall chronometer. The comet should have fallen into the sun hours ago. Taking the last of the Blacks – and their accursed families with it. He decided then that he didn’t care what the scriptures said, he would not abide a single Black to live, let alone be born.

At least now they were all dead. Zif had said he would take care of that. He frowned when he realised he was wrong. There was *one* Black left on the loose, somewhere in the Capital. Hopefully, it would only be a matter of time before Krashtallah was hunted down. The irritating Black would suffer the same fate as his bride. If he had to, he would take care of it personally.

The subject of the Prime Minister's musings was taking great delight in anonymity. Although his flesh and nasal passages were still suffering in places where they had been burnt by the chemicals he had submerged himself in, Krashtallah was taking the rare delight of walking amongst his own kind without drawing stares.

The bleaches and colouring agents he had replicated had taken hours to apply, but the overall effect was astonishing. To the casual eye, he seemed to be a normal, everyday, Tawny Cait. He was certain that his own friends would not recognise him. Right now, that suited him just fine.

Uncertain of his next move, he decided to simply head for the Starshine Cafe and see if there was a way he could contact the *Millennium* from there. He knew that after the hostage drama only a few days before he would find people who would be sympathetic to his situation. He still had no way to contact his ship, as subspace communications were surely being monitored. Even so,

while replicating chemicals was relatively easy, it was another thing to try and make a transmitter.

Still, at least he was fairly confident his email had gotten through. As such, he knew his people would be looking for him. So, the idea was to be somewhere they would look.

As he made his way across his homeworld's idea of a city square, which was really a large open space that was unpaved and covered in a tightly groomed grass and adorned with colourful flora, he kept passing by groups of his people, talking amongst themselves regarding the recent goings on. The general atmosphere was worry bordering on paranoia. He understood why. He, too, had watched Drishtagoth's appeal to the people of Cait to abstain from voting. While it wasn't against the law to abstain from voting, his people took a general pride in making sure they participated in the democratic process. Their individual voices had always been heard before. It was how they had fashioned their lasting peace.

Now the open and free dialogue they had been enjoying for millennia had been subverted by political correctness and a religious system gone mad. Having seen many worlds and cultures, Krashtallah could see it. However, he knew the people of his world had become like the Terran frog who had allowed itself to be slowly boiled to death because the rising temperature had been gradual, like the fear mongering his government had been responsible for.

Seeing his people in such disarray moved him. He stopped for a moment, concerned for his safety, but more concerned for his fellow Cait. They were like sheep without a shepherd, and he felt compelled by his serving nature to *do* something.

In the middle of the “square” was a slightly raised mound. History lessons had told him that the Teacher himself had stood in this place before to deliver his message. He hoped by taking this action he might be heard, but also that it may not be sacrilegious. He may not have been the most spiritual person of his world, but he also did not want to offend the Creator of All.

The fact that a lone Cait stood on the mound and held up his hands for attention quickly caught the attention of many. Soon, a hush came over the crowd, and Crash knew he had to choose his words carefully.

“My brothers and sisters,” he said as loud as he could without shouting. “Cait has lost its way. The friendly world I grew up on has become dangerous and suspicious. When I see someone walking towards me today I wonder what evil he may do me, rather than try to see the good in him as I had once done as a youth.

“I now live on a world where I am not entitled to my own opinion. A place where there is only subjective truth. A place where those truths that are allowed are forced on us by threat of law and imprisonment, or worse.” He paused for a moment. He knew the crowd's mind's eye

would recall the recent execution of their Opposition Leader.

“We have allowed ourselves to become sheep, my friends. Where once we were roaring Caits on a world that respected the individual's right to choose and be heard, we now have allowed ourselves to be ruled by a government that is rotten to its very soul.” As he spoke, he saw some nodding, some afraid they may be seen listening to him. On the edge of the crowd, he saw one individual speak into a communicator. He suspected he only had a minute more before the Police broke up the crowd and arrested him. A quick genetic test would reveal his ID and that was one thing he could not afford.

Out of fear, one male blurted out: “What *can* we do?”

Crash singled out the one who had spoken and strode over to him. He spoke up once more so all could hear. “Stand up and fight! This cowardly government comes after us in the night and picks off individuals as we sleep. I say we start by telling Cardtasharp and his minions that we will no longer put up with them. That we want freedom for all Caits once more.”

“How?”

Crash didn't see who spoke but he knew the answer. “For a start, we can make our voices heard and abstain from voting, as our *rightful* Prime Minister Drishtagoth said. They may lie to us about the vote, but they *will know* that Cait does not support them and their time is over!

They will know that the people of Cait want their world back!"

A cheer went up from the crowd, but a sudden commotion to one side drew everyone's attention. The police and security forces were trying to push through the crowd and arrest Crash, but they were finding the going tough. They found themselves facing a sea of angry Cait who had no intention of letting them through. It took several minutes of pushing, cajoling and threatening before they finally made the fifty metres to where Crash had been standing, but by that time he had melted into the crowd and gone his way.

Things were not going according to plan. The notion was peculiar to Zif, and he found himself on unknown ground. Those involved in rounding up the last of the Blacks and disposing of them had not replied to recent requests for information. He still had no idea what had happened in his museum, and he seemed to be losing control of the Queen.

The White female was only in her place because he wanted her there, but she seemed to have forgotten that. What was worse, she seemed to have an agenda of her own, and now it was getting harder and harder to get in contact with her.

His spies were still passing on information regarding her activities, but it did not help when she had recently thrown out one of his people and insisted she be

vapourised! In a bid to save one of his most useful people, he had allowed her to enter the execution chamber, but he had immediately beamed her out of it when it had been closed and a pile of powder beamed in to allay suspicion.

Now, his best source of information was the Prime Minister himself, although having to deal with him was proving anything but delightful.

“Is it true?” Cardtasharp barked from the vidphone.

No preamble. No “hello, how are you today?” Straight to the point. That was their Prime Minister for you, Zif thought. Succinct to the point of just plain rude. Tempted as he was, he did not have to play by the same rules. “What in particular are you asking?” he said amiably.

The look the Minister gave him should have melted the viewscreen. “Don’t play games with me, Zif. Is it true that the scriptures don’t mention anything regarding colour when it came to the Teacher’s death?”

The minute pause before Zif answered was all the verification the Minister needed. “Uh, well, they don’t.” he said quietly.

“So it’s all just a lie?” Cardtasharp was not only shocked but horrified.

Zif drew a breath. “No, it’s not. The knowledge came in a vision given to one of our most revered High Priests one thousand, three hundred years ago. His name was Sin. He wrote it down in our Chronicles.” He finished there, as if that was all that needed to be said.

Cardtasharp was not impressed. “Are you totally out of your mind?” he said, incredulous.

The Priest did a double-take. “What?”

If he could have reached through the screen and throttled Zif, he would have. In an effort of self-control, he bit off the invective he wanted to deliver. Instead, he said: “Are you telling me that we have had thirteen hundred years of “us versus them” because one of your lot had a dream?”

At that, Zif recoiled. “It was hardly a dream. The priesthood has for many years used the Gualo Root to induce visions from the Almighty.” He smiled at that. “I’ve had some pretty good ones myself, you know.”

Eyes open wide, Cardtasharp openly growled. “Gualo Root is a narcotic,” he spat. “Your people have been getting high for well over a millennia and interpreting the scriptures through the veil of delirium.” He shook his head in wonder. “How we’ve let your people influence us for two thousand years, I don’t know. You’re all totally mad.”

That was just about all Zif was going to take. His tone became deadly and his eyes blazed with barely contained fury. “Far from being mad, my order has been making and breaking political leaders for as long as our people have had a recorded history. Think of all the Kings, Queens *and* their Prime Ministers that have died quite suddenly and under mysterious circumstances. It’s because they forgot who their *real* friends were. It’s because they

forgot where the *real* power lies on this planet. And it's not in the government. Have I made myself clear?" Arms crossed, claws extended, Zif glowered into the monitor.

Knowing he had stepped *way* over the line, Cardtasharp backpedalled without making it obvious. "So, this High Priest had a vision of the Teacher's death, I take it." he tried to make his voice as non-confrontational as possible.

Zif decided the best course of action was to let the Prime Minister *think* he was forgiven and move on. Affably, he said: "As a matter of fact, he did. He saw it in vivid colour. He saw the Teacher as being incredibly white and his attackers as dark. His killers were black. If you read his chronicle, you would be quite taken by the amount of detail. It's very disturbing."

Something about what the priest said bothered Cardtasharp, but he didn't know what. Mentally, he shook his head and let the thought go. Now was not the time for philosophical – or theological - debates. "Perhaps you can use that. I don't think there's anything wrong with letting the people know the source of the vision. It might even bring them closer to your Order."

Zif showed just enough of his teeth to let his caller know just how much that idea rankled him. "Our Order has been guarding its secrets for nearly two millennia. We're not about to start letting the common people know them now."

A lesson taught Cardtasharp years ago came back to mind. “Knowledge is power, and he who controls the information controls the world.” He had thought his old philosophy teacher to be foolish, but now he saw the truth of it. He realised Zif’s order held sway because they controlled what the people believed. A Cait’s entire worldview was given them by the Order. The people blindly followed the priests without really knowing what it was they believed – or worse – why. “What of the word that the scriptures have been uploaded to Memory Alpha?”

The news caught Zif off guard. He hadn’t seen the Oppositions Leader’s speech. “What?” he spluttered.

Finally, the minister had the upper hand. “It seems like Drishtagoth’s people managed to upload your scriptures to Memory Alpha.”

Zif acted without thinking. “We should shut down the subspace link immediately.”

Cardtasharp understood the folly in that suggestion. “I would say it’s far too late for that.” When Zif glared at him blankly, he elaborated. “As soon as word got out, I’d say half the planet rushed to their computer terminals and downloaded them. If you shut down the link you’ll only increase interest in them by making people wonder what we might be hiding.” He smiled at the irony. “No, I’d say it’s *far* too late for that now.”

The priest surprised his caller by letting out an ear-splitting roar, displaying his razor-sharp leonine teeth. He then slammed his paw down on the desk, nearly shaking

the comm terminal off it. "How could this be?" he said through tight vocal cords. "We've managed to keep the scriptures out of the hands of the commoners, who could never understand them, for so long! Now, we're going to have all kinds of people questioning them. Questioning God. Questioning our *authority*." The last words came out with a hiss.

A moment of clarity came upon the minister as he gazed at Zif through the link. He spoke with quiet conviction. "That's the nature of freedom. Your god gave us the right to choose."

Unsure of what emotion to go with, Zif chose fury. He raised his paws in anger. "Yes! He gave us the right to choose! But it has never been about whether or not He is real. It's about right and wrong. And it is right to follow the Way of the Destiny Tree!"

Cardtasharp's eyes narrowed. "So you say. That, too, is part of our right to choose. Whether to follow your interpretation of God's will or not."

The Priest growled at that. His speech took on a low, dangerous, tone. "Our order has kept His way pure for over two thousand years. It will continue to do so, and we will stamp out heresy wherever we find it."

"I think enough tragedies have been laid at God's doorstep, don't you?" The Prime Minister sighed. He knew there was no way to change Zif's mind. He was a zealot of the purest kind. Unshakable. "Good luck with that, Zif. Let me know if you hear any word from your

people regarding the disposition of the last Blacks. I will speak with you again later." In resignation, he leaned forward and cut the link.

Zif balled his paws into fist and hammered the bench top. He turned his face towards the heavens and cried: "*It is our time and we will not be robbed!*" With that said, he defiantly turned and stormed out of the room. He had people to kill.

It had taken more hours than Merete could remember to patch up the Caits who had been hurt by spacing. Most of them were on oxygen in the ship's hyperbaric chamber, the increased oxygen and pressure improving their recovery time. As she wearily leaned against the wall outside an operating room, she brushed a stray hair from her eyes and allowed herself to slide slowly down the wall, her knees bent double before her. For a time, she sat there, giving her brain a chance to stop thinking for a few minutes, but knowing the luxury would have to be kept short. A small part of her brain that refused to shut up was screaming at her to go and check on her babies, and that her engorged breasts needed release.

Speaking of which, Merete could feel how damp her bra had become and slowly, painfully, pushed herself to her feet. She had one final duty to perform before she went to sleep.

Fortunately, the thoughtful team that had designed the *Millennium* had put the CMO's quarters close to

sickbay and so, a moment later, Merete staggered into her private rooms. Naturally, her children weren't the only ones present.

“Manny!” she blurted in surprise. “I didn't expect to find you here! I thought you'd be on the Bridge!”

Her friend looked up at her with lazy eyes. “The Captain reminded me that even Security Chiefs needed a break and ordered me off the Bridge.” She focussed on the Doctor with bleary eyes. “I let your nurse take a couple of hours break.”

The healer in Merete took in Manny's state of near exhaustion. “You need a rest.” She stepped over to Rogen's cot and picked up the stirring tot. Their mother's timing was excellent, as usual. She quickly moved him over to the change table and expertly changed his diaper, then passed him to Manny.

“I'll be able to rest when I know my brother is safe,” Manny said, defiantly, but with the slur that betrayed her state. She nestled Rogen into her side, and warmed him whilst his mother changed Piper.

Too tired to care, Merete divested herself of her upper garments and sat in her feeding chair. She organised baby Piper to feed, then did the same with Rogen when Manny passed him to her. Then she turned her compassionate grey eyes on Manny. As the children began to suckle, Merete said: “You know better than that, my friend. You'll be no good to Crash if you're too exhausted to pick up a phaser.”

Manny did nothing more than nod at the wisdom of her statement, but she still refused to close her eyes. Something inside her indomitably refused to give in to slumber.

The Doctor sighed, then remembered to check on the results of her analysis of the spike. Whilst its composition had been verified chemically, it was the blood that held her fascination. The Caitian DNA genome had been mapped long ago, and from this mapping, certain aspects of the donor's being could be determined.

As the computer started rattling off statistics of the blood with cheerless monotony, Merete found her thoughts drifting. It all seemed so mundane, and she almost fell asleep when it made a statement that caught her attention and brought her back to wakefulness.

“Computer!” she said, excited, “repeat your last two analyses.”

“Working,” the computer stated. What it related nearly brought her to her feet, but she remembered her children and contained her excitement. What the computer was saying was breathtaking. She looked down at Manny, keen to share her discovery, to find the ghostly Cait had finally succumbed to her body's need for sleep and was snoring quietly.

She sighed. There was nothing worse than having a revelation and not having someone to share it with. She glanced down to make sure her children were still feeding happily – and they were – then reached over and took hold

of her personal PADD with two fingers before gingerly pulling it over to herself. On it, she tapped out some commands, and quickly a holographic representation of the Caitian DNA double helix formed before her out of thin air. She once more thanked Sarda for his invention and installation of it in her room. Another few commands brought up the DNA from the blood, and she began to inspect them visually. The more she did so, the more she marvelled.

On the bridge of the *Millennium*, Piper was tapping her chair arm in frustration. She was well aware that she could do nothing until the vote. She was confident the Queen and her cronies were unaware of the status of both her ship, and the others she had taken. She was also confident they were still unaware of the bulk of the *Millennium* hovering in orbit, safely cloaked. She remained so she could keep in contact with her people below.

It was clear in her mind that the vote would be rigged. Even if the people spoke loud and clear and abstained from voting, the government would go ahead regardless. However, now the people were going to the polls, it would look bad if she were to intervene before that took place. If she tried anything overt before that time, her adversaries would simply use it against her politically, telling the people the Federation was trying to squelch their democratic rights and such.

She had tried to have Susanna beamed up, but the Ambassador had been adamant. She wanted to see things out with Drishtagoth, and Piper respected that. In fact, it was good to have a representative of the Federation close to him. However, Piper suspected Susanna's main motive was to stay close to those who could bring her word of her husband's whereabouts and safety.

There had been nothing from the news media regarding his capture, and as governments were loathe to advertise their failures, so it was clear Crash was still at large. That knowledge gave her hope for his safety, but also concern for his state of mind. As far as she knew, he was still operating under the knowledge his new bride was dead. While one of the most capable officers she knew, she was worried he would turn his talents in more destructive directions in a quest for revenge.

While receiving his email brought her hope for his safe return, being unable to reply to it brought her nothing but frustration. He was a major asset on the ground, and being unable to communicate with him was almost wasteful. Yet she still had faith he would get in touch with her. The ball was in his court, and she just had to wait for him to play it.

Becoming aware of a growing stiffness in her spine, and realising it had been some time since she had taken a break, she turned the Conn over to a junior officer and went to the Rec Deck for some exercise with strict

instructions that if *anything* happened, she would be notified.

The food on the *Millennium* was not too bad, considering it was being replicated by a group of people who knew little of Caitian cuisine. Mind you, Martin mused, there were only so many ways one could prepare fresh meat.

He and his two cohorts sat together, segregated from the rest of his people. The six Starfleet security officers, phasers in hands, were taking no chances with them. They had been assigned by the Security Chief, and if Martin knew anything of the officer from what he had encountered at the Cafe and since, she was not one to be underestimated. And not only that, she knew what kind of people she was dealing with. After all, she was a Caitian female.

As he ate his midday meal, he watched as Amantallash's mother played with the kit, Drallah. She was watching over him for her daughter as she slept. The Captain may have issued orders for all to get some rest, but, like the Captain herself, Manny was not one to sleep whilst work needed to be done. And as long as people like himself remained on board, there was work to do.

A small part of him felt sorry for inconveniencing her. At heart, Martin was an old-fashioned gentleman. He didn't like putting anyone out. Yet the situation had called for action. And, although she was white, he had to give her

grudging respect for not only loving her black brother, but being willing to be under his authority. It was a notion that was foreign on his world, and he found himself longing to be a part of this culture that not only accepted him the way he was, but influenced his own kind in such a way as to follow their example.

He sighed. There was no way that was going to happen now. His actions below had not only alienated him from his own people, he had broken Federation law, and so he would never get a chance to serve in Starfleet.

The only way he was ever going to get a chance to do so was to somehow redeem himself in the eyes of the others. And the only way he was ever going to do that is if he could somehow disappear first. And *that* was about as likely as the security officers downing their weapons just because he asked nicely.

He glanced at the lead security officer who was eyeing him suspiciously. No, he thought. *Definitely* not likely.

His male companion, a hothead he had recruited from the University called Prontatrill, whispered under his breath. "When are we going to escape from these people?" he said with fear mixed with disdain.

Martin did not move his gaze from Pashtallah, who was helping Drallah out of the Oak. He had climbed up a little too high for his age. "We move when I say so – and not before." He added a growl for good measure.

Prontatrill scowled at Pashtallah. "I say we make a run for that pair and use them as hostages. We could force the Captain to give us a shuttle and then...."

Martin's nails screeched across the tabletop as he balled his paw into a fist. The sound shut up his compatriot and drew the attention of the security people who started moving towards them. His tone was deadly. "If you so much as ruffle a single hair on any of their heads I will gut you and make you watch as I strangle you with your own entrails."

The youth's eyes went wide in horror at the visual image and the certainty that Martin was serious. "Yes, sir," he said quietly.

Yet Martin did not miss the hint of rebellion. He would have to keep a close eye on him.

The moment ended as the security officers waved them to their feet. "Okay, you three." the lead guard said, waving his phaser in the direction of the door. "Lunchtime's over. You have an appointment with the brig." His no-nonsense tone and body language fairly yelled: "Don't mess with us!"

Martin acquiesced and started towards the door, and with a final look at Pashtallah and Drallah, who were continuing with their play, oblivious to the danger nearby, he could not help but have a little hope that the future of Cait was safe as long as people like them could play and not care about their colour.

The word on Cait spread like wildfire. Not only was there to be a referendum on the question of succession from the Federation, but there was a growing movement against voting at all.

Like most Federation worlds, Cait had its own version of the Internet, and it was not long before pages and forums hotly debated the topic. Both sides of the political equation watched as the Cait, both male and female, voiced their opinions in online blogs and in chat rooms. In his “borrowed” quarters, Krashtallah used his skills to quickly create his own anti-government web site, stating his reasons for abstaining from voting, and then he protected the site with every skill in his decidedly large personal arsenal. He noticed with glee that the number of hits his site was getting was increasing almost exponentially. He also rejoiced that, for the first time in so long he had forgotten, his people were voicing their opinions without fear of reprisal. He guessed the sheer volume of messages being posted were beyond even this world's government to censor.

Unbeknownst to Crash, his wife read his website. She noted with an aching heart that one of the charges he made against the government was her “murder” rather than just execution. It was obvious to her that he was still unaware that she was alive. She wished there was some way of finding him via his website, but he had protected both it and his identity so effectively that it may as well have been written by a ghost.

In his underground control centre, Zif was berating his people for not only failing to tear down Krashtallah's website, but every other one that had sprung into being. He noted with alarm that the majority of them were decidedly anti-government, *especially* those that mentioned the Queen. His stress levels were increasing to the point where his fur was standing on end and eyes were like saucers. What bothered him the most about what was being written was the frequent references to the scriptures and how they failed to mention the Teacher's colour. It was becoming clear to the religious leader that the people were getting tired of being lied to, and their search for the truth was becoming personal, rather than simply accepting the word of his priests.

The control of the average Cait was slipping through his fingers. He could almost feel it happening, and, now the word was out, there was nothing he could do to stop it.

At the prescribed time, the people of Cait assembled in their homes to vote on the question at hand. Even those on the dark side of the world had risen from their slumber to voice their opinion. When the time came, the screens on the walls in every home on Cait glowed green, announcing in their written language not only the intent of the vote, but the choices given. And, with most having debated the topic either verbally or electronically, they made their voices heard.

In his temporary residence, Krashtallah stayed only long enough to make it look like he had voted, then left. He had considered trying to stage some kind of mass rally to decry the Queen, but had decided against it. Whether his people decided to vote or not, he decided they deserved the dignity of doing so personally, in their own homes. Besides, he had no illusions that the government forces would try to put down any kind of protest, and probably with more than undue violence. Whilst he hated the present government and all it stood for, he would not try to stage a coup that could end in the deaths of many of his countrymen. At least, not yet.

Now, he quickly made his way to a public transporter and on to the Starshine Cafe. It had been his intention to get there all day, but one thing after another had ultimately prevented him from doing so. As he briskly walked, he noted that more and more people were emerging from their homes, and most of them looking quite pleased with themselves. He could only guess at what they were thinking, and the more pessimistic side of his nature feared the worst.

Still relishing the freedom his new colouring gave him, Krashtallah leisurely instructed the transporter to take him to the Starshine Cafe and grinned in pleasure when it deposited him not one hundred metres from it. A quick sprint, and he found himself padding up familiar steps to the door he had glared at Martin Luther through

only days before. After years in space, the feeling of wood beneath him was very welcome.

The automatic sensor above the door registered his presence, and drew it inside to make way for him. The lack of reaction to his entrance into a public place was something that he was still getting used to. All his life, just entering a room in any one of Cait's plethora of buildings brought looks of concern, suspicion or even open hostility. Here, today, at the Starshine Cafe, nobody paid him any attention other than a quick glance brought by his sudden motion into the building. It was nearly unsettling.

Krashtallah found his way over to the booths and took a seat at an empty one. He cast a glance about for a familiar face, and found the friendly visages of both the proprietor and the waitress from the other day. He had no idea of their names, there was never any time to be introduced, and Manny had done the debriefing. Not wanting to bring any undue attention to himself, he waited for the waitress to attend to him. Within moments, she had taken care of some patrons who had been waiting longer than he before lighting up with booth with one of her trademark smiles.

“Like, what an I get ya?” she asked, a smile on her lips and a paw on her hip. At that moment, Crash's stomach growled and he realised he hadn't eaten in hours. “I guess you'll want more than a latte,” she said with a cheeky smile. Suddenly, she stopped grinning. She sniffed the air around her, and her eyes widened in

astonishment. "I'd know the smell of hair dye anywhere," she said, patting the pink tuft in her head fur she had done the night before, "but that's not the only thing I smell." Her eyes narrowed with delight, then she slipped into the seat opposite Crash. "I never forget a scent," she said.

Fighting the fight or flight reflex the engaged in situations such as these, Crash just looked coolly across the formica at his sudden guest. "If you know who I am, then you know I can't let the whole world know I'm here."

Tish nodded slightly, understanding. She leaned forward and lowered her voice to the point that Crash had to focus his ears on her to hear her at all. "The price on your head is huge." At the look on his face, Tish added: "Don't worry your fur, sir. You're with friends. You and your people saved us from that fuzz-brain Martin Luther, so there's no way we're going to turn you over to the fuzzier Queen. Besides, you're a friend of the family."

Those few words put Crash at ease. It was clear that the young female understood the ancient traditions regarding hospitality. One thing you did not do was turn on your friends and family. It just wasn't done. He let out a sigh of relief and relaxed, letting his tail lay flat next to him instead of bouncing around the air, revealing his agitation. "Thanks," he said with a heart-felt smile. "Do you think I could get something to eat? I'm famished."

With practiced ease, Tish slid out of the booth and slipped out her order book. "What'll you have? It's free." She flourished her pen in the air, ready to fulfil his wishes.

Suddenly feeling like royalty, and not really worthy of it, Krashtallahash ordered a juicy steak – raw, of course – and a fruit juice. With a quick smile, Tish took off to pass on his order, but a glance in her direction put him on edge once more. Tish was talking to someone he thought must be the owner, who looked his way, recognition clear in his eyes. Worried that things were about to get very messy, Krashtallahash started edging off the seat, his eyes on the door.

Before he could rise, Tisktabrisk strode over to his booth and put a friendly paw on his shoulder. Quietly, he said: “This is a place of sanctuary for you, brother. Do not fear.”

Crash considered himself a good judge of character, and one glance at his host's expressions put him at ease once more.

A nod over his shoulder, and one of Tisktabrisk's other staff members brought over a plate with the biggest steak he could remember seeing. With that was a glass of juice that he could have bathed in.

“Eat, my friend,” Tisktabrisk said. “Then we will talk.” They left him to enjoy his meal while they tended to other customers.

Without pause, Crash tore into the steak. He had no idea just how hungry he was until he took his first bite. And it was soooo delicious! A part of his brain told him that food always tastes better when you're hungry, but the rest of his brain just told the voice to shut up and just enjoy

the meal. Within moments, he dropped the bone on his plate with a satisfied thunk before taking a huge draw on the straw protruding from his glass. Feeling rejuvenated, he looked over to Tish, who took the hint and invited her boss back to his table.

“What can we do for you, friend?” Tisktabrisk asked, eager to help.

Crash gave a little chuckle. “I know it's a big ask, but I was wondering if there was some way you might be able to help me contact my ship.” He really didn't expect a positive answer, but it never hurt to ask.

Tisktabrisk shook his head. “I'm sorry, my friend. This is a cafe, not a comms shop.”

Tish tipped her head to the side, a thought come and dismissed. “It's a pity we don't have that communicator Merete left behind anymore.”

Crash gave a start. “The Doctor left one here?”

The waitress nodded. “She was very clever. You remember, she stuck it to the bottom of the table with it switched on. That's how you were able to hear us.”

Crash remembered. The intel was invaluable. “So, it wasn't collected afterwards?”

“Nope,” Tish said, leading Crash to wonder if this young lady spent all her spare time watching old Earth movies. Her manner and vernacular were excellent reproductions of old Earth style.

“Then what happened to it?” Crash tried very hard to keep his impatience from showing in his voice.

Tish gave Tisktabrisk a look, unsure what she could and should not reveal.

“Go ahead,” her boss said confidently. “She’s one of his people.”

Thoroughly confused, Crash just looked from one to the other of them, waiting for them to fill him in. He had no idea who they were talking about. “Wha..., who?” he stammered.

Tish slapped his arm playfully, but kept her voice low. “Why, the Ambassador took it, silly. She was in here yesterday.”

Crash was not sure he heard that right. “What Ambassador?” he asked, dazed.

A little concerned for their friend’s state of mind, Tisktabrisk rubbed Crash’s shoulder. “The Federation Ambassador Susanna ... something. She escaped from the Queen’s death chamber and came here, looking for help.”

The smile that came over Crash’s face could have reignited a dead sun. The pure joy that radiated within him was beyond his ability to express. The one he had sought all his life, the other part of his being, the one he thought lost to him, was still alive! It was all he could do to stop himself from quivering in ecstasy. With delight, he told them: “Her name is Susanna Llash, my wife! I thought she was dead!”

Delighted to have been the bearer of such glad tidings, Tisktabrisk gave a low, proud growl. “She is not, sir. And I would suggest you keep your voice down.”

Having been brought back to the moment by the subtle warning, Crash lowered his voice. He cast his gaze around looking for anyone acting suspiciously, but came up blank, thankfully. "Where is she?"

Tish gave him a small smile at that one. "Safe, sir," she said quietly. "I don't want to say openly because there's a lot more at stake than her life alone."

Crash nodded his understanding. "Alright, then. Can you take me there?"

Tisktabrisk arched his whiskers forward positively. "We can, but not now. We must wait for sunfall."

While Crash's heart burned to be with his beloved again, there was no way he was going to put either of them at risk by acting irresponsibly by trying to find her during the daylight hours. A Cait's night vision was nearly as good as the day, but there was no point in trying to draw attention to one's self. The thought warred with his sense that he was practically invisible now with his artificially coloured fur, but there was no point in pushing your luck.

His train of thought was interrupted as a message popped up on the Cafe's wall vid screen. The fact that it came on by itself indicated the importance of the message it, and every other screen on the planet, was about to report. The vote was in. He touched each of his host's arms and pointed to the screen as a hush came over the room. There was not a Cait or offworlder who was not interested in the result.

Seemingly serious, but concerned at the same time, Cardtasharp appeared and gave an address that he was obviously aiming at the heart strings. "My fellow Cait." The Prime Minister was blissfully unaware at the disgusted snort from Crash. He continued solemnly. "Your voice has been heard and will be acted upon immediately. Your vote has overwhelmingly given flight to what will become the greatest chapter in our world's long history. From this time on, we go it alone. You have voted for succession, and so we have. A letter has already been drafted and will be dispatched by diplomatic courier to the Federation Council today. Never mind their opinion. This is a great day for the people of Cait!"

Krashtallah mused that the letter had probably been drafted weeks ago. He was fully aware that the whole thing was a lie. A quick glance around the cafe confirmed that his fellows knew it was, too. But what to do about it?

Cardtasharp continued, and Crash could not miss the air of smugness around him. "My fellows, it is no longer for our voice to be one of many! A voice lost in the multitude. From now on, when Cait speaks, *she ROARS!*" With that said, the screen went blank, then switched itself off.

"Now, that was straight out of the litter box!"

The voice came from the other side of the cafe, and Krashtallah strained to see who it was, but could not make it out. Nevertheless, it was joined by numerous others, all in agreement.

A lone voice spoke up in the midst. It was young, male, and definitely idyllic. "Where is your patriotism?"

Krashtallah could not help but growl at that comment, and found himself joined by seven others, all on their feet and moving towards the lone speaker, menacing.

Yet the young tawny male stood his ground. "The Queen is our sovereign!" he pleaded. "Doesn't she deserve our loyalty?"

At that, Crash pulled up short. He waved to his fellow Caits, and they followed his lead to stop. Instead of attacking the youth with claws, he decided to appeal to his mind. "Have you even *met* the Queen, son?" he asked.

The youth shook his head, no.

"Would you support someone you knew was psychotic? Would you support a government that tries people without the courts, throws them in jail, and executes at will those who disagree with it?" At the boy's bewildered look, he continued. "*I have* met her. And I can tell you with absolute certainty. *She is not sane.*" The last words came out with a hiss. "I watched the Queen murder our government's Opposition Leader, simply because he was following the King's order. *Should we follow her?*"

Again, he shook his head.

Crash's eyes narrowed to slits. His voice was a low baritone, full of emotion, yet even though he was quiet, everyone heard him. "Our religious leaders have kept the truths of the Teacher to themselves and fed us lies for generations. *Should we follow them?*"

“Our Prime Minister holds office only because he refused a lawful order from our *rightful* sovereign. *Should we follow him?*”

Completely out of his depth and confused beyond his ability to think rationally, the youth grasped at the only truth available to him. And it came to him in a flash of recognition. “You’re that fellow Krashtallah! Aren’t you! You’re the one the Government’s after!”

Every eye in the cafe turned to Crash. Knowing the risk, yet unwilling to deny the truth, he calmly answered: “Yes, I am.”

The words hung in the air like a wrecking ball, looking for something to smash. Yet nobody moved.

One older male stepped forward and stretched out his paw, human fashion. “Pleased to meet you, sir,” he said respectfully.

The ice broken, every other being in the cafe circled around him as if he was some kind of rock star who fell from the sky.

“Are you him?”

“I thought you were taller.”

“Why are you tawny? I thought you were black.”

“Can you help us?” one person asked.

That was the question Crash was waiting for. “I think I can,” he said, radiating confidence. “But first, I need a computer with Net access.”

other males noticed him go and made to follow, but looked back at him first for his permission, as if they needed it. Crash was touched by their trust in him. He nodded. "Stop him, but don't kill him. Otherwise, we're just as bad as the Queen."

"Yes, sir!" they said with gusto, then darted out the door in pursuit of the youth.

He turned back to his new friends. "I'd appreciate your silence regarding my colour. It's the only way I can move about freely." The others indicated their understanding, then listened as he laid out his plans. In the back of his mind he mused that, even though he now knew his wife was alive, he may not be able to catch up with her soon after all. There were more important things to get done. He had a planet to save.

Chapter Twenty-One

The Caitian capital had one of the quietest evenings on the street it had for years. It was because nearly everyone who was awake was online swapping opinions about the day's goings on.

Once dusk fell, Krashtallah and his new friends relocated to a home on the outskirts of the city owned by one of his followers from the Cafe. She swore her allegiance to their movement, and Crash had taken her at her word. Besides, if they were going to return to the old ways of friendship and trust, he believed he must lead by example.

The twenty-odd Caits quickly made themselves at home whilst Crash, with the help of a fellow, started work on a new web site. Its purpose was simple, and its aim precise. If they were to ever prove to the people that the voting had been rigged, they needed someone to hack into the government's computer system – no mean feat – and to back it up with a repeated vote taken from his website.

Using all the skills at programming at his command, he created a shadow vote, asking any and all Caits to register their *real* vote on his web-site. He requested that all votes be made only once, as he explained on the site that any rigging or tampering with the result would wind up with as unfair a report as the one the government

performed. He also did his level best to protect it with the best encryption and firewalls at his disposal.

Once again, word got out about the duplicate vote. The ever honourable and noble Cait responded with vigour, and soon the votes were pouring in. Those with less honourable notions fought it, tooth and nail. In Government, the Prime Minister and his people fought it because they did not want their fraud to be discovered. The Queen railed in the privacy of her chambers because she could see the vision of her personal empire dying before her eyes.

Zif on the other hand, had a fair idea of who it was that was behind the website. His staff was feeling the pain as he unleashed his fury on them. It was bad enough that their long-laid plans were coming apart in front of their eyes. It was a whole new level of shame that it was being orchestrated by a lone Black. Zif believed in the scriptures. But he had a much greater faith in the traditions that had been added to his religion since the Teacher walked the plains. His belief that the Blacks were indeed guilty of the blood of the Teacher was so profound that he would have sooner believed the moon was made out of wool than to believe otherwise.

The High Priest had no sooner stormed into his underground intelligence centre than he was bellowing: “Have you shut it down YET?” He came up behind a bank of monitors being operated by some of his world's foremost computer experts. White Caits, of course.

As one, the group ducked for cover. The boldest of them at least ventured: "Not yet, sir."

Zif bent over the desk, peering right into his face. The obvious reply was uttered with a sneer: "And *why not?*"

The technician was tempted to answer: "Because we're not magicians." However, wisdom prevailed. "Whoever it is is using a level of encryption that is beyond our ability to penetrate. Even with a supercomputer, there isn't enough bandwidth to try every single combination to crack his encryption before tomorrow."

He may as well been speaking ancient Egyptian. All the same, Zif was not going to let on his complete lack of understanding. He was far too proud to show any kind of weakness. He decided on a completely different angle. "So, if we can't get him online," that much understanding he had managed to glean, "we will have to get him in the real world." He frowned in thought as an idea percolated. "Are you able to give me an idea of *where* he is running his operation from?"

The technician, for the first time that day, began to see a ray of hope. "We *may* be able to trace his address, but it'll take a while."

It was not exactly what Zif wanted to hear. "Do it *quickly*," he hissed. "I will not let that" - he visibly trembled as he said it - "*Black* undo centuries of good work."

When the technician did not move immediately, he got a cuff under the ear from Zif, sending him tumbling to the floor. He was smart enough to stay there.

“Get a move on!” the Priest bellowed before turning and leaving their midst.

As one, the technicians breathed a sigh of relief then got back to work.

As the night wore on, Krashtallah watched as his website received more and more hits. It seemed the whole globe had gotten wind of what he was trying to do, and the vote counter already scored in the millions. He wanted to get at least half his world's opinion regarding the vote, as that amount should be enough to convince anyone of the overall thinking of the world's population.

Those who read his website felt strongly regarding the subject, one way or the other. However, there was much debate regarding the cryptic message in the bottom corner. It simply read: “I know you're out there, Fluffy.”

Even Cait's version of the talking heads were debating it on late night vid.

One stunning female considered: “Perhaps it's the author's private deity.”

A male sitting on a cushion opposite shook his head in disagreement. “No, I think whoever it is is just trying to mess with those who oppose him,” he said solemnly. He refused to voice the fact it was the government.

Another was a little closer. “I think it's a pet name for something or someone.”

One particular viewer smiled to herself. “You have no idea,” she said with a slight smile. Susanna shed a silent tear of joy. Her husband knew she was alive.

She flipped open her communicator, hit the encryption key, and signalled the *Millennium* still in orbit above. “Fluffy calling,” she said with a chuckle.

Piper replied. “You're in a good mood,” she said, her tone curious.

Susanna's tail curled in delight. “I've had word from you-know-who,” she said, delighted. “He knows I'm still in the land of the living.”

The Captain could be heard giving a quick laugh. “Nothing ever did escape his attention for long,” she said. The Ambassador could hear her smile over the link. “How did he contact you?”

“In his web page, there's a line that says: I know you're out there, Fluffy. It's his pet name for me.”

“Oh.” Piper sounded a little disappointed. “So you can't get a message back to him the same way.”

“Sorry,” Susanna said with a regretful sigh. “I can't.”

“Damn.” There was silence for a moment then Piper spoke again. “I can't wait much longer. We're going to have to move quickly before the Queen and Cardtasharp consolidate their positions. When is the vote in on his site?”

Susanna glanced at the wall chronometer. "Six before meridian tomorrow," she said into the grille.

"I'll give it fifteen minutes after the vote is in before we come in," the Captain said quietly.

The import of her statement was not lost on Susanna. Piper was going to launch an all-out attack on the government and it's Department of Homeworld Security. "I understand," Susanna replied. "Fluffy, out."

Even given their encryption, she still wasn't going to give out her name, just in case someone was listening.

It was a good thing, too, because someone *was* listening. That someone was a minor analyst in the Ministry of Homeworld Security. Her job was a simple one – cryptography. In her time she had managed to crack some of the Federation's enemy's strongest codes, yet she remained a minor analyst because her fur was a little darker than usual. Whilst she was technically Tawny, due to her slightly darker colouring she was looked upon with suspicion. Even though her talents were unquestionably brilliant, her superiors kept her on a short leash.

This led to Kintabung having what humans would call a "chip on her shoulder". Her IQ had been tested long ago, and while it was widely known it was higher than anyone else in her entire ministry, she remained in Cait's version of a technological dungeon – the basement of the Ministry of Homeworld Security building. As the Ministry had many departments, it had been decided some time

before it would be better to house them all in a single building. So, contrary to millennia of tradition, the Ministry of Homeworld Security was a sprawling concrete and steel edifice that reminded one of a brick with windows – and there weren't that many of those.

Especially in the basement. An omission that was not lost on Kintabung. She longed for just a little sunshine. However, she knew it was never coming, so she decided to let the light of truth instead shine on her superiors. She made a habit of pulling off cryptographic miracles that continually drove home the point of her intellectual superiority.

At her “desk”, a table littered with notes, computer tablets and keyboards, Kintabung balled her hand into a fist and gave a smug smile. “I got you,” she said victoriously.

Even though she had missed the beginning of the conversation, she had made a point of recording it so once she had broken the cypher; she would be able to hear it in full. Now, as she had done just that, she listened with more than a little curiosity. Piper's last point brought her ears and whiskers on end. It appeared an attack was imminent!

Not bothering to report to her immediate superior, she was fed up with his annoying habits, Kintabung made her way over to the lift with a copy of her report in her hands. She stepped out of it a moment later and walked straight over to the Minister's office, expecting to be let straight in. She knew what they thought of her, but she was tired of caring. She was never going to get anywhere

in her career, so she had decided to have as much fun doing what she did anyway.

The Minister's aide stood and blocked her way. "Where do you think *you're* going?" he asked suspiciously.

Kintabung stopped and scowled at him. "If it's not obvious to you, I suggest you get your eyes checked," she said testily.

"Not without an appointment, you don't," the functionary declared, drawing himself up to his full height, which was still three centimetres shorter than Kintabung.

She gave him a look that made him wonder if she was considering eating him for dinner. "How about you let me in before we all find ourselves out of a job tomorrow – if we're lucky?"

The aide just gave her a confused look. "What are you on about?" he said.

His nemesis just sighed. "I need to remind myself that you're not responsible for the fact you were born stupid." She patted his shoulder. "It's not your fault," she said, as if comforting him. "Now, I know this is a lot for you to understand, but I need to speak to the Minister before there is nothing left of this building but a smoking crater. Understand?"

There were many things the aide did not understand. Death was not one of them. "I'll announce you now," he said fearfully.

Kintabung smiled. “Good boy,” she said sweetly then she waited as she was admitted to the Minister’s inner sanctum.

Since his elevation to Minister for Homeworld Security as well as the portfolios of Energy and Transport, Gruntallash had found himself totally snowed under with work. Given that this was the ministry that needed the most attention in the current situation, he had left an assistant running his other ministries whilst he took care of Security. Harried, and not sleeping well, he looked up from his computer tablet and gave this interloper a dirty look. As he was still new here, he had no idea who she was, but whoever she was, she was not welcome.

“What do you want?” he growled.

Kintabung tilted her head to the side. “To survive the next day,” she said cheekily, as she slapped her report down on his desk. Without waiting for permission, she began filling her boss in. “I managed to decrypt a message between someone on the ground and someone else in orbit. It was Starfleet encrypted, but I managed to crack it. Now, it mentions an attack due tomorrow at a quarter after six in the morning.”

That brought the Minister to his feet. “What?”

The analyst par excellence just smiled like the cat that got the canary. “I suggest you listen to the recording.” She held up her personal sound player and watched the look on Gruntallash’s face change as she played the message. It was clear he recognised one of the voices.

“That's Captain Piper,” Gruntallash said when it finished. If a Cait could have paled, Grun had done so. “The other voice is familiar, but I can't place it.”

Now for the piece de resistance. Kintabung showed her gleaming fangs in a wolfish smile. “It's the voice of a dead woman,” she said. “I ran it through our recordings of all beings known to us on file.” She leaned forward and flipped the report forward a page. A multi-coloured feline's image looked up at them. “It would appear the Queen wasn't quite successful at killing the Ambassador, *sir*,” she said with dark cheer.

Gruntallash slumped into his chair, dumbfounded. How could it be so? While he had not been there for the execution, he had had it confirmed by the Prime Minister and the Minister for Information.

Sympathy for his brother did not enter his consciousness at the news.

Kintabung, knowing it would take some time for this not-too-bright being to assimilate the news, turned and left. She headed back to her desk and suppressed a smile. They would be calling her again soon, she thought. This could be fun.

It was sooner than she thought. No sooner had she sat down at her desk her manager was hassling her to report to Gruntallash's office. She casually stood, sauntered over to the lift, then marched into the Minister's sanctum. He didn't mince words.

“Did you say the signal was coming from orbit?” he snapped.

Kintabung stepped around his desk, peered over his shoulder and squinted myopically at the pages. “Yep,” she said. “That’s what it says.”

Annoyed at her sassy ways, but not angry, Gruntallash snatched away the report without moving. “Did you manage to find the source?” he asked.

Kintabung was soothed a little by his deference. She liked being regarded for something other than her fur. “Sorry, that’s not my department,” she said simply. Before he could speak further, she added. “I had assumed it as overhead as the signal strength was strong, there was no time delay in the conversation and the quality of the connection was excellent.”

The Minister scowled. “Then it must be some kind of ruse,” he said, considering her words.

Genuinely interested, the analyst arched her whiskers forward askance. “Why do you say that?”

Considering her intelligence, Gruntallash gave her a quizzical look. “Because there’s nothing up there,” he said, as if it was plain to all.

Kintabung slapped his shoulder playfully. “How am I supposed to know that?” she asked. “I’m stuck in the dungeon all day.”

At that, Grun rolled his eyes. She had a point.

“It could be a satellite,” she said, thinking out loud. “Why?”

Kintabung smiled. "Repeater satellites can be very small. They probably left one in orbit to keep track of their people on the ground. I'd get one of your hotshot pilots to scan the skies directly over us and destroy it, if he can."

The Minister's eyes widened at her resourcefulness. It was a good idea. "Maybe," he said, thinking it over, then: "Perhaps not. If they're unaware we can listen in on them, we could get some useful intelligence."

At that, the analyst shook her head. "I don't agree," she said, gazing off into the distance. "It would be better to disrupt their communications to mess up their coordination when the time comes. Besides, just because you find a satellite and kill it doesn't mean that they know we can listen in on their communications. They will probably think that it was found by accident and destroyed. Besides, we know when they're going to make their move, and it doesn't take a genius to work out how they're going to attack us." She pointed skyward to make her point.

He shrugged at that. Once again, she made a good argument. Still, the decision was his. And, much as it ground upon him to work from the advice of an underling, he gave the order for a fighter to go on a seek and destroy mission.

When Gruntallah let go of the call button on his communicator, Kintabung looked at him with something akin to pride. "Now, that wasn't that bad, was it?" she asked in that annoyingly condescending manner of hers.

He let it go as her ingenuity had not only brought the Captain's plans to light, but gave them a way to strike back. With something akin to gratitude, he looked up at Kintabung and gave her a friendly smile. "That was good work," he said, with that air of superiority that all people in management tend to use and consider their prerogative.

Kintabung shrugged. "You should try my cooking," she said light-heartedly. It was not as if he was going to take her up on her offer anyway.

Distracted, Gruntallahs muttered: "I might at that." He was already thinking of food, and the lateness of the hour. It wasn't too late to visit his mother and get something for dinner. Without thinking, he looked her in the eye and said: "Come with me."

Tapping when one is bored is a habit Piper knew she had to get out of, but she did it anyway. She had just finished her rounds of the bridge, checking on each station one by one. She took in a vast amount of information at a glance as she observed each console as she passed by. As an officer in Starfleet, Piper had spent some time in virtually every station of a starship as she made her way up – meteorically – through the ranks. Such experience helped her digest the information she saw and to know what to look for.

Overall, her ship was in great shape and the fighters on the flight deck were ready to scramble. Her crew were well rested or resting, and everything was poised in

readiness. And that was a problem in itself, the Captain knew. That *knowing* that action was coming soon was keeping her people on edge, and raising most being's blood pressure. Including her own.

She noted that Communications had not passed on any messages from the *Jolly Roger*, the *Troy* or the *Cork*. They were under radio silence unless an emergency demanded it be broken. So far, so good.

“Er, Captain.” The Science Officer’s voice sounded concerned. “We have company,” he said.

Piper looked up from her chair arm console and looked to the main screen. On it, a lone Caitian fighter could be seen moving on an intercept course. The Captain frowned. There was no way the Cait could have detected the ship, let alone be even *aware* her ship could have a cloaking device! “That’s weird,” she said quietly.

She watched for a moment as the fighter kept closing. “Are her phasers armed?” she asked Science.

The officer manning the station shrugged apologetically. “Sorry, Captain, but without an active scan, I can’t tell.”

The Captain nodded in understanding. An active scan would alert the fighter pilot that there was a ship looking him over, perhaps even give their game away. She frowned. She would have to leave their station. “Z plus ten thousand metres, one half impulse,” she ordered. “I don’t want him running into us.”

Invisibly, the *Millennium* flew straight up and away from the planet and out of the fighter's line of flight. The Science Officer kept the viewscreen centred on the pilot and they watched as it flew through the very spot they had previously occupied, then circled back at a higher orbit.

Fascinated, the Captain watched as the pilot repeated the action, each time moving out another kilometre until, a mere five minutes later, Piper ordered they move the *Millennium* once more, but this time off at a forty-five degree angle and out twenty kilometres.

"What is he looking for?" the Science Officer wondered out loud. "He has to be scanning for something, but what?"

The Captain's eyes were narrowed as she had been considering that very question since the moment she realised he was scanning for something. The only logical possibility was that he was expecting to find something – something he was equipped to deal with. Whatever it was, it had to be small and unthreatening. It didn't appear that the fighter was flying shielded.

It had to be something his superiors had detected and decided he could deal with. Now, what could his superiors have possibly detected orbiting above Cait's capital?

The truth of the situation came to Piper suddenly, and appallingly. They hadn't detected her *ship*, but they *had* detected her transmission.

The question now was: did they know it was her and, if so, did they know her plans?

It would have come as no surprise her message was encrypted. Since the dawn of the information age, humans had been encrypting communications as a matter of course. Before that time, some embarrassing phone calls have been overheard – leading to all kind of strife for those involved.

They could be wondering why a call was coming from seemingly empty space, she thought. There were other ships in orbit, but none in her area. Also, since the trouble started, most starliners were now treating Cait as if it was infected by a plague, and so the spacelanes above the planet were now largely empty.

Curiosity was one thing, she thought. Curiosity would lead to scans of the area, or even a hail. In this case, nothing but sending a fighter up to scan for something – and possibly destroy it.

And if he was on a search and destroy mission, he had to be after something that could be considered a threat. As far as Piper was aware at the moment, the only real threat to Cait was her and her ship.

“Damn,” she said under her breath. She turned her gaze to the Science Officer. “I believe our communications have been intercepted and decrypted,” she said with a touch of anger.

He considered her words for a moment then nodded his agreement. “I concur,” he said simply.

The Captain rounded on the Communications Officer. “Microburst this to our people electronically, not by voice. Move to encryption level Omega” – the highest

level available – “and all future comms are to be by text only. Then send a message to the Ambassador. There’s been a change of plans.” She then hit a button on her chair. “Scanner, I need you to rustle up something for me fast.”

Boring. Boring. Boring. That was all that was going through the Cait pilot’s head as he scanned the area above the capital *again*. He had been circling above his homeworld for over ten minutes, scanning for a repeater satellite that his superiors insisted was there, except for one little problem. It wasn’t. He had tried again, and again, and found nothing.

“It could be really small,” he said to himself, mimicking the smarmy attitude of the officer what had ordered this little sheep hunting expedition. He sighed. “That’s all I’m going to find on this trip,” he muttered. “Sheep.”

He circled around again and increased his altitude another kilometre once more. Once more, there was nothing.

He almost missed it, but as he neared the end of this arc, he finally picked up a small satellite that couldn’t have been bigger than a sheep after all. He couldn’t be sure as he had never actually seen one.

He also knew why he had taken so long to find it. The device was moving on a perpendicular course using a small control thruster, as if it had detected him previously

and was trying to get away. He grinned to himself. All the better.

Bringing his craft around and adjusting his speed, he brought his fighter up behind the fleeing little robot. Fortunately, it travelled a straight line and made his job easy. Not bothering to use his computer aided targeting systems; he fired using the crosshairs in his cockpit. It wasn't much of a challenge, but it was still satisfying watching the resultant mini-explosion as it was vaporised.

After performing a small victory roll that all pilots do regardless of species, he turned and headed for home to report his success.

From her position in the *Millennium* only a couple of kilometres away, Piper did not repress the smile that creased her lovely face. She glanced to her left at her old friend, Scanner, who wore his boldly and proudly. "What *was* that?" she asked, mirth showing in her voice.

"Trash," he said with a laugh. "I just threw some defective old tricorders and Padds in a photon tube, set the motor for a five second delay then beamed it into space. His scanners would have lit up at the signals from the tricorders like a Christmas Tree. Most fighter jocks I know wouldn't know the difference between a tricorder and a catfish, so I'm pretty sure he would have thought it to be exactly what he was looking for."

Piper shrugged. "At least he was nice enough to take out the trash for us," she said, covering the grin on her face

with a few fingers. She turned to Comms. "Have we had word back from the Ambassador?" The answer was in the affirmative. "Good. At least she's been warned. There's every possibility that they traced her signal and are hunting for her. Worst case scenario, they were able to identify her voice, and I can only imagine how mad that'll make the Queen."

The Queen didn't know yet as Gruntallah had yet to report Kintabung's discovery. His mind was on his stomach and the conversation he was having with his underling. He was finding the female's complete lack of deference to his station refreshing. It wasn't every day he met someone who didn't care about his position in Cait society. She seemed only interested in people's minds. He had to admit to himself that, in her eyes, he probably wasn't that bright.

It was now late at night and there was very little illumination beyond the public transporter they stood upon. The wind was blowing in a storm - they could smell it - and it would not be long before the rain would be pounding the soil. The lighter branches were swaying in the breeze, and loose leaves were flying. With the desire to get out of the elements foremost in their minds, the unlikely pair eschewed their conversation for a brisk run across the open ground between the transporter and the home of the Llash clan.

Had he looked, he would have noticed a lack of light in the windows, yet his mind was on the tasty meal he imagined would come to him soon. He hit the tree trunk at a run, followed by his companion, and quickly found himself standing on the porch outside the door. It was at this point that the storm hit the trees with uncommon ferocity, the rain pelting the ground so heavily they lost sight of the transporter pad. As was his custom, he opened the door without preamble and let them in.

Their first impression was how dark everything was. It was surprising just how dim it was, but it was momentarily lit as a flash of lightning shone through the windows. Nothing seemed out of order, but Gruntallah still frowned to himself. His mother almost always left a light on, even if she and Father were going out to visit.

“Mother, Father, I’m home!” he shouted. Never mind he was possibly rousing them from slumber. After a moment’s further silence, he assumed they had gone out for the evening to visit friends or family – not that they had much of one. Both his parents were only kits.

“Lights,” he stated for the computer. Obediently, they shone out, illuminating the warm home he was so familiar with. He sighed. He was used to be waited on, but even he found it unreasonable to expect Kintabung to serve him in his family home. Disappointed, he dropped his cheerful demeanour and sauntered over to the food replicator. “Hungry?” he asked his guest.

Struck by the strangeness of the situation, Kintabung just nodded and looked around the home with interest. It was clear a relatively large family had lived here, but equally obvious that the kits had grown and moved on. “So, this is where you grew up?” she asked. It was lame, but it was the best she could come up with.

Gruntallah had taken out two of his mother’s plates and had placed them in the food replicator, then hit the button for his favourite cut – times two. He glanced back at her over his shoulder. “I guess you could say that. It was a strange way to grow up, being the middle kit between white and black.”

At that, all Kintabung could do was tilt her head to the side as she tried to digest the cryptic message. “Are you saying you had a white *and* a black sibling?” she asked, her eyes widening at the revelation. The enormity of the rarity of such an event did not escape her.

Grun growled to himself as he considered his youth. His sister got the vast majority of the attention whilst Crash got almost as much, just not positive. Grun had gotten the dregs. The notion that he had literally been stuck in the middle between two extremes had never been lost on him. He was the average one, and it had shown in his grades. Somewhere along the way he had decided to do something in his life which would grab his Father’s attention, and he had done just that when he had entered politics. He had been a Party player all the way, and found he had a talent

for it. In answer to Kintabung's question, he simply nodded solemnly.

She rolled her eyes. "I would have hated to be between those two," she said, speaking her mind, as always. "They must have been at each other's throats all the time. Poles apart."

As Gruntallash placed the plates on the table, he paused in reflection. "No, they weren't. Amantallash was self-absorbed, as most whites are."

His companion nodded. She had met few whites, but the analysis was accurate.

"Krashtallash, on the other paw," his whiskers arched in surprise at his insight. "He was quite fond of Amantallash, even though she didn't return the favour. Well, most of the time. I know when he left suddenly for Starfleet, he didn't even say goodbye. I guess something happened that even he couldn't forgive, although I have no idea what it could be."

Kintabung tore off a piece of meat and chewed thoughtfully. "I gather your sister joined the priesthood," she said after she swallowed.

Gruntallash gulped his food and scowled, but his guest realised it was not a reaction to her personally. "No, she didn't. For some bizarre reason she ran off and joined Starfleet, too. And then, to add insult to injury, she goes and takes a human for a mate."

Kintabung started in surprise. What his sister had done was unthinkable. She blinked as she tried to

assimilate the notion. Without considering her words, she simply blurted out: "She must really love him."

Her host scowled at her. "What does love have to do with anything?" he asked, naively.

Repressing the cheeky smile she so dearly wanted to express, Kintabung scoffed down the last portion of her meal. In the privacy of her thoughts, she said: It's no surprise you're still single. Instead, she voiced: "Can you point me towards the litter?"

Gruntallah simply pointed offhandedly down the hallway and Kintabung took that as her leave to find it. As she passed a bedroom, she looked in casually, curious about the enigmatic family that lived here. What she saw disturbed her. The mattress had been partially pulled off the bed base, and several pieces of furniture had been knocked over. A glance back over her shoulder confirmed Gruntallah could not see her, so she ducked inside to investigate. The more she looked around her at the dishevelled state of the room, the more she worried. Compared to the rest of the home, everything here was out of the ordinary. The lady of the home was neat and tidy – houseproud even – and such a woman would never have left a room in this state. She checked the bed and noted that the fur left on it was tawny. Putting the pieces together in her head, she came to a disturbing conclusion.

"Minister Gruntallah!" she called, the concern she felt clearly evident in her tone.

Her host was not tardy. He appeared in the doorway seconds later. "What is the matter? Couldn't you find it?" he asked, not unkindly.

In answer, Kintabung simply gestured about her. "Is this where your mother sleeps?"

Gruntallahash was not completely ignorant of his parent's affairs. He knew his mother slept in Amantallahash's room these days. "Yes," he said slowly, as the impact of what he saw about him slowly dawned on him. "Oh, my..."

"I thought you didn't believe in Him," Kintabung said, quietly, remembering an earlier topic of conversation. Before he could make a cutting remark, she added: "I'm sorry. I don't know what else to say in situations like this, so I make stupid jokes."

The personal revelation caught Gruntallahash off guard, and so he decided to let the remark go, whilst he filed the info away for later consideration. He took his eyes off her and considered the room once more before disappearing down the hall and into his father's room. His voice echoed down the passageway. "If they took my father as well, it was without a struggle," he said, trying to sound matter-of-fact, but not quite pulling it off. A rising dread was filling his chest and head, making it hard for him to function. A fog of fear began clouding his thoughts.

Kintabung tried to understand what he was going through. His parents were missing, and she had a feeling her boss had an idea what had happened to them. So did

she, for that matter. Being tied to a desk didn't leave her ignorant. Just the opposite as her job led her to uncover all matters of secrets. "Do you think they were sent to the comet as well?" she asked, knowing the danger revealing such knowledge could put her in.

Her boss stuck his head into the room once more. "How do you know about that?" he asked, a catch clearly evident in his voice.

She gave him a slight smile. "You forget what I do for a living," she said slyly, trying to bring him some cheer. "I've broken all kinds of codes in the last couple of years."

Gruntallah gave a nod of understanding. "Including the military's," he said, absently.

"Just for the practice."

He shook his head. "It's a good thing you're on *our* side," he said with a deep sigh. Suddenly very tired, Gruntallah sat down on his haunches and perused the room once more, hoping he was wrong about his parent's fate, but knowing he wasn't. They had been taken to the comet, and, if everything had gone to plan, they were now dead, along with the rest of the blacks. It was as simple as that. He saw the truth of it as clearly as $1+1 = 2$.

And he was a part of it. He had helped with the logistics of moving the dilithium from the comet back to Cait. A wave of guilt washed over him as he realised he had been complicit in singling out the Blacks as a slave labour force to mine the comet. A way of getting rid of

them, once and for all. "It should have stopped there," he told himself in his thoughts. "It should have stopped there, then only Krashtallah and his kind would have been taken." Yet now, it seemed as if Zif had gotten carried away, had taken the plan a step further. A step that seemed so obvious now, but one he must have been deliberately blind to.

Now, the plan that seemed so certain, so sure, to his eyes was obscene. His animosity towards his brother for the taunts others had directed at their family had resulted in him becoming a virtual orphan for participating in an attempt at the extermination of the Blacks. He looked down at his paws and realised that they were, to all intents and purposes, covered in blood. His eyes widened as he could practically see it dripping off his claws and onto the floor. His father's and his mother's blood.

Nausea washed over him and he found himself gagging. Losing his sense of equilibrium, he almost keeled over backwards, but an outstretched paw caught the door and kept him from crashing to the floor.

Seeing his distress and feeling for him, Kintabung leapt over and caught him as Gruntallah flailed about hysterically. The cry of anguish that ensued from his mouth overwhelmed her defences and she found herself shedding a tear with him. Even though he was a male, she managed to steer him towards his mother's bed and eased him onto it before he was overwhelmed with grief and passed out.

For the first time in her life, Kintabung did not know what to do. Here was her boss, a government minister, a being who was supposed to be in charge and in control, out like a light because of grief. She looked down at him, feeling a connection to this poor male unlike any other before, and taking compassion on him, curled up behind him on the mattress behind him, not wanting him to wake up alone. Before she knew it, she, too, was asleep.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Frustration was a sensation that was becoming very familiar to the city police force. They, like the military, had been tasked with hunting down Krashtallah, and anyone who may be helping him. However, there were many on the force who were only giving grudging effort to the task. They had seen firsthand how the male they were seeking dealt with situations, and, whilst they, like the rest of the population, had been programmed to hate Blacks, they had come to have a certain level of respect for this one. Not to mention his own sibling, a *White* of all things, took her orders from him and did so respectfully.

Now they were hunting, door to door, in the eastern fringe of the city, for him. Somehow, somewhere, someone had traced his location to that general area, and now the entire police force were searching him out – fruitlessly.

Including Captain Graptasan, who was leaving another home after wasting his time turning it over, looking for Krashtallah. Given his earlier encounter with him, it would have been understandable that he would harbour a grudge against him for his sister's treatment of him, from a human point of view. However, he did not. He was from a long line of peace keepers, rooted in the traditions of long ago where one asserted their dominance

just like Amantallash did. She had caught him off guard, and had paid the price. While he had suffered some loss of face, he had learned from the encounter and would not make the same mistake twice.

Now, he growled to himself at the stupidity of the task set him. He knew enough about Krashtallash that he would not allow himself to be caught so easily, and yet his people were being sent on this wasteful sheep hunt. In the dark – the forest here was thick and the night was moonless – he tapped his wrist communicator and checked in. “Has there been any sight of him?” he asked, not expecting a positive answer.

He did not get one, either. “No, boss, there’s been no sign of him,” came the tinny reply.

Graptasan rolled his eyes even though there was nobody to see the gesture. “No surprise there,” he growled. “Alright, I’m going on to the next home on the list.” He shut off the link then trained his electric torch in its general direction. His people could see well in the dark, but not *that* well.

Before he had taken two steps a voice stopped him. “That’s far enough, Captain,” it said.

He *knew* that voice! He looked above him into the trees, but saw nothing. He lifted the torch, but before he could spot anything, it was knocked out of his hands. He looked down at the ground to find it, and only found the sparking remnant of it, pierced through by an arrow, of all

things. He sighed. "You know, that's going to come out of my pay," he said, resigned.

Unseen, Krashtallah said: "You can bill me."

Graptasan laughed at that. Judging by the comment, it was clear Krashtallah did not mean him harm. "What can I do for you, Commander?" he asked genially. He did not reach for his wrist communicator as he feared whoever fired the arrow might repeat the exercise and he did not fancy having his arm pierced through.

From above, Krashtallah noted this and gave him credit for his intelligence. "I wanted to ask you something," he said, cryptically.

The Captain tilted his head to the side. "You could always look it up on the Net," he replied cagily.

The voice came back with an echo. "What I want I can't get over a machine. I wanted to ask you: have you chosen what side you're on, yet?"

The officer scowled. "What do you mean?"

"Come on, Graptasan," Crash said, a little impatiently. "As a friend of mine would put it; Tomorrow, all Hell is going to break loose. Have you chosen whether you're going to fight *for* the people, or against them?"

With more than a touch of irony: "Now there's a loaded question if I've ever heard one."

Unseen, Crash sighed. Semantics was a game he had little time for. "Well, I'll let you in on a little secret. I know you know I'm running another vote on succession. And I know you know already how it's going to come out.

You can't have been on the police force for as long as you have without learning the will of the people. Now, when it all comes to a head tomorrow, *whose side are you going to be on?"*

The question sent a chill down Graptasan's spine. He had been avoiding that very question for some time. He knew enough about the people that they would sooner or later take action – one way or the other. He just didn't know what side he was going to be on. The survivor in him wanted to be on the winning side, but he had yet to ask himself what price he was willing to pay to live. Was living worth his soul? Could he live with supporting a regime he did not personally support?

These questions warred against his loyalty to his sworn duty, which was to keep the law and support his people's system of justice.

Seeing the war going on in the officer gave Krashtallah hope. He needed people within the government to support his move against the establishment. He wasn't sure that he could rally enough civilians to his cause. They had grown too soft and dependant on the government over the years.

"What's it going to be?" he asked softly, not wanting to push too hard.

Caught between wanting to do the right thing and not being sure what it even was, he simply said: "You'll know when the results of the vote becomes known. I am sworn to serve the people, and serve them I shall."

Above him, in the pitch dark, Graptasan failed to see the smile on Crash's face. "I would expect nothing less from you," Crash said. "Farewell."

The sound of rustling leaves could be heard from all around him and, startled, Graptasan turned his head in all directions, trying to get a sense of Crash's escape route. Then it dawned on him. Krashtallah had been anything but alone. He guessed about five other people had been hiding in the trees around him. One of them had undoubtedly been the archer who took out his torch.

In the distance, he could hear the sound of a public transporter being operated, a number of times, and, although he knew he could follow and check the transporter's logs for their destination, he also knew that the Commander would have left nothing to chance. The log would have been erased.

He sighed to himself. By this time, his nemesis could be literally anywhere on the planet. He sat down on a nearby fallen log and took a deep breath and pondered his position. He also wondered where he would be at this time tomorrow.

There is one truism about any planet. Only between one quarter to one third of its population was ever asleep at one time. Unless, of course, you were living on one of those extremely rare worlds that always kept one side pointed towards its sun. In that case, you learned to sleep in the light.

As that was not the case with Cait, the voting was going along furiously all through the Capital's night. Whilst most were careful to keep the vote true, some overly enthusiastic people had taken to voting a number of times. Crash's people were careful to watch for these and nullify their vote. They were making a point of keeping this vote as honest as possible.

As the world turned, and the local time at the Capital drew nearer and nearer to the sixth hour of the new day, the people began holding their breath. The tension in the air was fairly palpable.

In the palace, the Queen once more woke from the same nightmare, and once again swore it would never happen.

In the Prime Minister's private residence, Cardtasharp tried – fitfully – to sleep. His personal alarm was set for five.

In the Llash home, Gruntallash finally came around at a little after four, found to his surprise that he wasn't alone, and decided on a course of action.

In the Chapel, Susanna finally got some sleep, along with the Opposition party members and most of the Believers. Only Krestapan stayed awake and spent the night in prayer, unknowingly joined by Drishtagoth in the next room.

On the *Millennium*, the officers and Alpha shift got some sleep before being roused at five for a full day. The same was the case on the *Troy* and the *Jolly Roger*, whilst

the crew of the *Cork* slept in their own quarters on the *Millennium* as she was docked in the hangar deck.

At six, local time, in the Capital, a number of things happened simultaneously.

The result of the vote was immediately posted on the Net. The will of the people was clear: ninety-five percent were *against* succession.

Crash immediately posted a new message on the page. It resulted in immediate action, all over the world.

On the far side of the moon, the *Millennium* and her tiny fleet powered up for their part. They wasted no time orbiting the planetoid and heading for different positions about Cait.

That's when things started going wrong.

On board the *Troy*, things were going sweetly all the way into orbit. They, like the other four craft, immediately came under fire from the ground, which the officer manning the weapons console eagerly targeted and returned from the *Troy*'s meagre compliment of phasers.

With the "topside" of the vessel facing the ground, the *Troy* opened its bay doors and deployed their third of the *Millennium*'s fighters, which fanned out and engaged the Caitian fighters. That was when the fates seemed to conspire against them. A lucky, long-distance shot from a Caitian fighter penetrated their belly shields and entered the docking bay, detonating with devastating effect. Energy arced throughout the liner's power conduits,

overloading many systems including the shields, which immediately went down.

On the bridge, the crew scrambled. Brankovian ordered the shields be restored as soon as possible, but the damage was already done. Emu, at the pilot's station, did her best to avoid the ground-based, as well as space-borne, fire, but their hull was still being scored by blast after blast, even as their few engineers scrambled to restore power.

The Acting Captain, Brankovian, glanced over at Faith, who was manning the navigation station, and mouthed: "I'm sorry," as it seemed their fate was sealed.

The scene was not missed by Piper, who watched with dismay from her command chair. "Order the fighters to cover the *Troy*," she ordered, even though she knew it was probably already too late. "Helm: intercept course!"

A ground-based shot killed the *Troy*. It knocked out the liner's impulse engines. Without them to sustain their orbit, the *Troy* began falling from the sky like a stone. Within seconds, her forward hull was glowing with the friction of re-entry.

Emu fought to keep her nose up, it took only seconds more before the craft was a fiery meteor, heading for the surface.

"Tractor beam!" Piper called once they got closer. The *Troy*'s heading was actually bringing them closer, and

under, the *Millennium*. For a moment, it seemed like they had success, as the green tractor beam seemed to have slowed the descent of the *Troy*. Then, the most peculiar thing happened. Something cut the beam, severing its link with the *Troy*.

“What the hell happened?” Piper snapped. She glanced over at the Science station, where her science officer was looking into his scope with widened eyes.

“It can’t be,” he said in awe.

“What can’t be?” Piper said impatiently.

“One moment, Captain,” the officer said, checking his instruments.

“We don’t *have* a moment, Mister,” Piper growled.

The look on the officer’s face made it clear he was aware of the situation. “Yes, Captain, I know. I just had to be sure that what I’m seeing is real.” He cleared his throat then reported. “Captain, a shield has been erected around the *whole planet*. It’s between us and the *Troy*, Ma’am.” His shoulders slumped in defeat. “We can’t get to them.”

Startled, Piper turned her attention to the viewscreen where she could just make out the shimmering effect that was the tell-tale sign of a large deflector screen. “Now we know what they needed all that dilithium for,” she muttered. “How strong is the field?” she asked Science.

“Forty gigawatts,” came the fateful reply.

“Damn,” Piper muttered. There was no way of taking down a field of that size. She could bombard it for

weeks with the *Millennium*'s megaphasers and still barely scratch it. She toggled her chair communicator. "Millennium to *Troy*. We are unable to assist you as a forcefield is preventing us from reaching you." She paused for a second, not knowing what to say. "God be with you."

"He always is," came Faith's unmistakable voice from the overhead speaker. Even with the sound of straining metal in the background, her unshakably positive attitude shone through. "We'll see you later."

The Captain just hoped it wasn't in the afterlife. The way the *Troy* was going down, if they didn't get their impulse drive working in the next thirty seconds, they were done for.

The planet-wide network nearly went down with the interest shown in the final result of Crash's independent vote. Billions of hits on his site overloaded the network hubs, and when these went down, word of mouth took over. The millions who had read the result, and saw Crash's message, took action and passed on the word. All over the world, the extra power being poured into their grid by the newly operating reactors helped beam people into the capital from wherever they lived. Farmers, architects, doctors, teachers, kits. It seemed everyone wanted to have their voice heard. Within minutes, the streets were being choked with Caits eager to demonstrate their opposition to their government's policies.

As one, they began moving towards Parliament

House.

Within its stately corridors and ornate offices, once calm parliamentarians scrambled about madly, trying to do *something* that might save their lives. The Minister for Information was called within moments of the vote's result to the Prime Minister's office.

"Order the news services to debunk the vote," Cardtasharp snapped. "I want everyone to return to their homes."

Vultanik shook where he stood. "I'm not sure they'll comply," he said honestly, with more than a touch of fear.

Small as he was, the roar he gave was mammoth in size. His teeth glistened in the morning sunlight. "If they say no, see how brave they are with a phaser in their face! Now, GET OUT!"

Vultanik fairly scurried from the room and ran for his offices. As soon as he was out the door, Cardtasharp called for his secretary. "Get me the Minister for Homeworld Security immediately!"

Within moments, Gruntallah stood opposite the Prime Minister, his usual, haughty self. "What can I do for you, Prime Minister?"

"Mobilize the army and have them surround the ministry buildings. Have them set up a perimeter. If anyone breaches it, shoot to kill. I want them to hold the

line.” The ice in his voice was deep frozen. He meant every word.

Gruntallash nodded. “Yes, sir. Is there anything else?”

Cardtasharp looked up at him with slitted eyes. Gruntallash was being a little *too* helpful. “That’s all for now. I’ve already ordered the defence shield switched on and sent for the *Cait’s Roar*. Sorry for not going through your office.” Not that he was. It was just politics.

The minister nodded his understanding. The order should have come through him, but he was in no position to argue the point. This was neither the time, nor the place. He glanced upward to where he thought the *Millennium* was sure to be. He wondered how prepared Piper was for what was coming. “Yes, sir,” he said, turning a little as if he had pressing work elsewhere. “If there’s nothing more, I have many pressing matters to attend to.”

Now the Prime Minister was well and truly on his guard. Gruntallash was being *too* smooth, especially as it was now crunch time. It was as if he had turned off his feelings and was operating on remote control. “Do you need any assistance, Minister Gruntallash?” he asked suspiciously.

The Minister for Homeworld Security gave a small, reassuring smile. “Not at all, Prime Minister. I am certain all will work out as it should. This will be a great day in Cait’s history.”

Still wary, but largely assuaged, Cardtasharp let it go. "I won't keep you any longer, then." He waved him out dismissively and turned back to his computer screen.

In the hall outside, Kintabung waited for her boss who strode out of the Prime Minister's rooms and made a direct line for his own. "Now what?" she asked him quietly as she fell into step with him.

"Now we make them pay."

On the far side of Cait's moon, a certain, non-descript crater did something craters do not normally do. It split apart and started opening upwards and outwards. It soon became clear that the crater was not a crater at all, but an enormous doorway that gave access to a vast, sub-lunar cavern. It was lit from within by a huge lighting system that gave ease of viewing to what it housed. Since what was inside had needed a large space to work quietly away from prying eyes, this space had been phasered out and covered over clandestinely in a short space of time. The infrastructure had been quickly manufactured off world from a dozen different suppliers, each totally unaware of the other's existence in the organisation, and also their purpose.

Whilst Piper and her crew had thought the *Jolly Roger* to be Cait's guard dog starship, they couldn't have been farther from the truth. The *Roger* had been used as a support ship to bring in what was needed to patch up and

restore the means Cait's leaders were going to use to begin expanding their own, little empire.

Once the doors were fully retracted, the ship slid out, barely missing them as the hull passed by them on each side. The ship's saucer section was quickly clear, followed by the engineering hull and her massive warp nacelles which glowed with barely controlled power.

To the untrained eye, one could mistake the starship for the *U.S.S. Millennium*, such was its similarity to the Federation vessel. But the *Cait's Roar* was not a copy of the Federation flagship – she was its predecessor, for underneath the saucer's Caitian paint lay a different ensign: *NCC-2001 U.S.S. Ingram*.

Now clear to navigate, the ship quickly swung about and headed for Cait and a rendezvous with her sister ship.

With flames shrouding the ship's bow, the *Troy* looked more like a falling star than a starship desperately trying to land.

At the helm, Emu did her best to keep the star liner's nose up and glide the vessel in rather than have her drop like a stone and leave nothing but a large crater in the planet. Her nimble fingers raced over the controls, adjusting trim, firing retro rockets and desperately trying not to lose her cool.

Beside her, Faith, her twitching tail her only a little sign of nervousness, operated her board under Brankovian's direction. The Acting Captain was well aware that Emu was doing her best, and that any input from him would only distract her, so he issued orders only to those who needed them. "Faith, instruct the computer to turn the Inertial Dampeners up to maximum, and the Structural Integrity Field as well," he told her evenly. He knew just how badly he needed to keep his head together for the sake of the crew. If he panicked, the crew could panic, and then there would be no hope for any of them.

As Faith tapped out the command, Emu grimaced. She knew the order was a last ditch attempt to keep them alive. The hope was that, when the ship hit the surface, the inertial dampener would keep them from becoming strawberry jam against the forward bulkhead when the vessel suddenly decelerated. It was a highly implausible possibility, as the impact was certainly going to cause widespread damage throughout the ship and cause the inertial dampeners to instantly fail. The Structural Integrity Field might hold them together long enough for them to stop, it might not. Oh, well, she thought, at least they'd had fun.

Sarda, aboard the *Cork*, was the first to notice they had an uninvited guest. An odd reading on his screen, then

a glance out the portal next to him confirmed it. Given all his Vulcan self-control taught him by masters, his eyes widened in open surprise, his mouth parting ever-so-slightly. Without another thought, he mashed the comlink button. “*Cork to Millennium*,” he said, the concern evident in his voice.

On the other side of the world, Piper brushed a finger against her chair control pad. “Piper,” she said succinctly.

“Evasive manoeuvres!” Sarda barked, not that it was necessary. Jason Nunn was already engaged in a dogfight with three Caitian fighters.

“Huh?” Jason said quizzically. His jaw dropped when he followed Sarda’s pointing finger. Closing in on their position was clearly the outlines of an *Ingram*-class starship, yet it was clear she wasn’t the *Millennium*, - UFP starships were painted white - this one was painted with the tawny colours of a Caitian warship. “Oh my...” he said before driving their mini starship into a corkscrew motion that messed with their senses so badly one could not look out the window without becoming nauseous. Jason’s course took them in a general line away from the enemy ship, but not fast enough. The skies around them burst into bright glaring balls of exploding plasma as the tiny ship came under fire from the starship’s phasers.

Jason changed tactics, but not quickly enough. Out of the corner of his eye he saw the glow of a photon torpedo as it streaked towards them.

The *Cork* disappeared in a blinding glare as the torpedo exploded.

On the *Millennium*'s bridge, Piper suddenly realised her day was about to become a whole lot more interesting. She listened to her first officer's report in amazement, but knew him too well to not take the information at anything other than face value. The report was cut off abruptly, and Piper glanced over at Science. Her officer had been listening. "I'm sorry, Captain," he said solemnly. "The *Cork* is gone."

The Captain frowned. If the *Cork* had been destroyed, she would have felt Sarda die. She was familiar with the sensation, and it wouldn't have been the first time. Still, now was not the time for idle speculation. She had a crew to lead and a planet to save. "Signal the *Roger* to act as support for our fighters and to keep out of the enemy starship's way. I don't care if they have to keep the whole planet between them. Pilots, watch for a new wave of enemy fighters from the new ship."

She leaned forward in her chair, the old familiar gleam known to all warriors in her eye. "Helm, bring us to bear on the intruder."

"Captain," came a word from Communications. "They're hailing."

"Onscreen."

The being that filled the screen oozed confidence. "Captain Piper," he said without preamble. "I am Captain

Draltashack of the *Cait's Roar*. I would appreciate your immediate and unconditional surrender.” His tone was polite, almost apologetic.

Piper reclined in her chair, her eyebrow raised at the bald statement. “You assume much, Captain.” She steepled her fingers together and gazed at the screen. All around her, officers busied themselves at their posts, yet in the midst of them Piper was at peace as she considered her foe. Intelligent, that much was clear, yet the question begged. How much did he know about starship battle tactics? “You know full well I will do no such thing. I will never let the Federation’s flagship be turned into a war machine to spread the Queen’s terror.”

In response, her foe seemed a little unsettled. He blinked a couple of times and grimaced as if he had just eaten something unsavoury. Again, he spoke with an almost apologetic tone. “Captain, you and I are people of duty. I must fulfil mine, as you must yours. See you on the other side.”

The viewscreen winked out to be replaced by the familiar star field about Cait. In the distance, yet closing, could be seen the *Cait's Roar*. Without waiting to close the distance, she opened fire.

Dressed once more in her cloak and hood, Ambassador Susanna Llash made her way to the bus-sized flitter along with a group of the Believers and members of the Opposition Party. At one side walked Drishtagoth,

proud, head held high, a look in his eye as if he had been born for this day. To her left moved Earhaht, her ever-present guardian. She had tried to reason with the Horta that her presence could draw all kinds of unwanted attention.

To her credit, Earhaht had been adamant. Where the Ambassador went, she would follow. While she had been tasked with providing security for the Believers and politicians, her highest duty was to protect the Federation's Envoy. There had been more than a touch of steel in the Ensign's voice when she had flatly stated that she was going with her and that was that.

Drishtagoth turned his attention to the sky and smiled. "It's a beautiful day for a coup, wouldn't you say?" he said glibly.

Susanna's eyes dilated a little in surprise at his joviality given their circumstances. They had no idea how the Government's forces would react when they showed up. They just may decide to shoot them on sight. Still, she had to admit that his up-beat attitude had merit. Rather than shoot him down, she decided to bolster his notion. "Yes, it is at that." She allowed herself a moment's fantasy. "I wonder if the Queen would like it if I stuffed her in her microwave machine and turned it on High."

They both knew she was referring to the Execution Device. Before either of them could comment again, Earhaht spoke up. "I heard microwaves are bad for your health."

The Ambassador nearly choked. She wasn't sure whether the Horta had been trying to be funny or not, but the unexpected comedy helped calm her nerves. She paused for a moment, taking Drishtagoth's hand in hers, and chortled for a good thirty seconds before she was able to suck in a lungful of air and settle down. She gave Earhaht a winning smile and thankfully said: "Good one."

She then turned and entered the flitter. Earhaht had to take the vehicle's cargo space, there was no room inside for her in the packed interior.

Drishtagoth pulled an elbow that was not his own out of his face and spoke to the driver, Krestapan. "Are you sure this thing will fly with so many on board?"

The Elder gave him a cheerful smile and said. "It's not us I'm worried about," he said. He pointed towards the back of the flitter. "Earhaht weighs a ton."

Susanna rolled her eyes at the comment. He probably wasn't far from the truth. "I suppose we'll have to go on faith," she said with a grimace. She did not like their chances.

Someone down the back of the flitter spoke up over the rest of the conversations going on. "Remind me once again *why* we're flying?"

Drishtagoth turned towards the back and spoke up. "Because Cardtasharp has shut down all the public transporters for "Maintenance", he said."

"Yeah, right," chipped in one of the Believers.

From the cargo space could be heard Earhaht's voder, turned up loud so she could be heard. "I believe Mister Nunn would say that was "bogus","" she said sarcastically.

Susanna nodded, her eyes on Drishtagoth. "It's bogus all right," she said with a sigh, her temporary feelings of mirth evaporating. She could see it in his eyes; he understood. The Government suspected a coup might be attempted.

In another part of the Capital, Krashtallah was already at work trying to organise having the transporters turned back on. He had no idea that his Captain was fighting a pitched battle in the skies overhead. He could only suspect that his wife was going to be part of the day's drama.

In his mind, he was on his own as far as Starfleet was concerned. The Captain had yet to make contact with him – and vice versa. It wasn't safe to try to contact Susanna. He could only hope that everything was going to work out.

As he sat on the doorstep of their latest hide-out – they moved to another building every half hour – he could just make out the sun rising over the horizon through the trees. He took a breath of his world's fresh air - air rich in natural scents from the plethora of flora species mixed with the dew of the morn' – and smiled. It was a good day to die. He had no illusions that he was still Number One on

his world's wanted list. Wanted dead – alive if it wasn't too much bother. However, dead was just fine. He sighed. There was no getting used to the feeling that he had an enormous target printed on him.

He tore his gaze from the beautiful vista and turned to his most trusted aide in his short stint as coup organizer. For all her youth, Tish with her coloured head hair had proven to be very resourceful. Her job as waitress at one of the Capital's most popular café's had introduced her to people of all walks of life, including those who walked the corridors of power.

“Is there *anyone* you can think of who might be able to get the transporters going again?” he asked, a little exasperated.

Tish grimaced. “Nobody, off the top of my head,” she said. Then she tilted her head to one side as a thought came to her. “I could try *her*,” she said thoughtfully.

“Who?” Crash asked.

The youth smiled. “Just someone I know who works for the Department of Transport. She's a computer whiz or something. If there's someone who could hack in and get them going, it would be her.”

Crash held up a finger. “Yes, but what would her motivation be for helping us? Does she have a problem with the government? Would she do it to help free her fellow Cait?”

Tish shrugged. “I don't think so. I think she'd just do it for the fun of it. She's a bored genius.” With that

said, she sat down next to him and relaxed for a moment. They had both had a very busy night, and that was on top of a full day's work the day before for her. Tish was exhausted.

The Commander gave her a friendly pat on the head. He was getting fond of this young lady. "You worked hard last night. Why don't you take a break for a little while?"

The patriot in Tish came to the surface. "Because the transporters aren't working yet."

Crash simply nodded his understanding. There was still work to do. He handed her this home's "telephone" handset and let her make the call.

"You'll never guess who I just got a call from," Kintabung said, letting herself into Gruntallah's office.

However annoying the behaviour was, Gruntallah had come to better than tolerate it. For all her flaws, Kintabung was an accomplished female. He gave her a mild scowl. "I'm in no mood for guessing games, Kin."

She sat down on the other side of his desk and grinned at him. "Fair enough, Grun," she said with her usual cheekiness. "A female I know has asked me if I can re-activate the you-know-whats."

The wheels inside Gruntallah's head began turning. If all of this went south, it would be good to have someone to blame the mess on, the politician's voice told

him. Shut up! the rebellious Cait within him cried in exasperation. This was no time to play politics.

“If we turn them on, we’re going to be neck deep in angry Cait,” Gruntallash said quietly. He wasn’t certain his office wasn’t bugged. In fact, he was almost certain it was.

In response, Kintabung simply nodded. He was surprised when he suddenly reached out and grabbed her arm and drew her to him. Her first reaction was to cry out, but then she realised what he was doing. She responded in kind and put her arms around his neck. It was widely known the most corrupt officials bedded their secretaries and staff. She nuzzled his ear for effect, whispering: “What do you want me to do?”

In kind, he nuzzled hers. “Can you do it without leaving any traces?”

Her answer was cryptic. “Is Zif a whacko?”

Twenty-four hours ago he would have argued the case against. However, Gruntallash had seen the endgame of Zif’s policies, and now he had seen the light. The religious leader’s policies and behaviour were anything but sane. “Then do it.” Getting into the spirit of things, he nibbled her ear.

The sensation sent a tingle down Kintabung’s spine, making her tail shiver in excitement. Suddenly, it wasn’t all for show any more. “What about the other thing?” she asked him with a small purr of abject pleasure.

Hormones rushing, Gruntallash growled back.
"You let me worry about that," he said, panting. At that point, he dragged her off the desk.

Chapter Twenty-Three

An electronic chirp caught Susanna's attention and she reached inside her cloak for her communicator. With a deft flick of the wrist, she answered: "Fluffy here."

Her code name elicited a few laughs from her Caitian companions.

"This is the *Millennium*," came the voice of the young communications officer. Sounds of warfare could be heard behind him. "I have a message from the Captain for you." To Susanna's ears, he sounded afraid. "The *Troy* has been shot down and should make landfall on your continent."

Flying above the trees as they were, Susanna had an uninterrupted view of the skyline. She looked around her, but it was one of her friends who saw it first. "There it is!" cried a female Believer. She pointed off to their rear at what could be described as a falling star in the morning sky.

Susanna spoke directly into the grille. "Understood," she said, then snapped it shut, breaking the connection. "We've got to get some people to the crash site before the government people get there."

Drishtagoth nodded his agreement. He made a call on his personal comm unit.

The command centre for Cait's Ministry of Homeworld Security was dark, but its occupants didn't mind. They liked it that way. It was easier to see the nearby screens and take in the information at a glance.

Some of them reached from the floor to the ceiling, but they were not the most amazing sights to see. Standing in the middle of the circular command floor was Cait's leading General, a being simply known as "The Warrior". His real name was lost to memory, and few would be foolish enough to disrespect him. Whilst Klingons wore knives with intricately carved figures etched in them to denote victories, the Cait had forgotten how many foes "The Warrior" had dispatched – with his own teeth and claws. For a peaceful race, he was remarkably good at what he did. Part of the reason for Cait's peace was found standing right here. Nobody would dare try anything stupid whilst this being was around.

From where he stood, the General could see every screen, but that was not where his attention lay. Around him, and on all sides, was a holographic representation of every starship encircling Cait – a virtual battle simulator. At the moment, his attention was held by an *Ingram*-class starship closing in on the *Millennium*. He listened intently to his captain's conversation with Captain Piper then nodded to himself in satisfaction when the order was given to open fire.

He was momentarily distracted by the sight of a smaller starship – he had no idea it was the *Troy* – as it

continued its descent through the atmosphere. He frowned to himself. It appeared it would hit the ground in the middle of Cait's one and only desert about three hundred kilometres to the north of the Capital. He scowled to himself, considering whether to commit any troops to covering it, but decided against it. Judging from its trajectory, it would either burn up or hit hard. Either way, there would be no survivors.

He turned from the image and put their fate out of his mind. He had more important tasks to attend to.

“I want One Squadron to keep attacking the *Millennium*'s aft. Two Squadron can focus on our captured starship” - a reference to the *Jolly Roger* - “and I want Three Squadron to take care of the *Millennium*'s fighters.” He watched for a moment as his orders were relayed and the ships deployed as ordered. As he watched, two of his fighters were destroyed, with no losses yet on the Federation fighter's side. He scowled. This was not good. What his pilots lacked in training and skill, he had hoped to make up for with sheer numbers. It wasn't working out that way. His fighters were being knocked out of the skies like flies.

“How soon can we get reinforcements up there?” he growled angrily.

From the doorway a voice came that was anything but welcome. The diminutive Prime Minister stood there, Zif at his side. “We can't spare any more of our resources fighting the Federation ships. If we lose them

all, so be it. We are protected behind our shield. The Federation cannot touch us."

Without turning or even looking in the Prime Minister's direction, the General managed to project a menacing air. "My people are up there fighting *your* war, Prime Minister. Pretty soon they're going to run out of ammunition and fuel and they're going to need to land. I will need to shut down the shield temporarily to allow them free passage."

The minister's eyes narrowed to slits. "Under no circumstances will you bring down our home world's only real defence, General. Not for any reason. Do you understand me?" He put every ounce of authority into his words that he could muster.

The General was not impressed by the politician's bluster. However, he had taken a vow of loyalty to his world's leadership, and, being a being of his word, he was bound by it. He let his displeasure be heard by simply hissing: "Understood."

"Keep me updated," the Prime Minister said before raising a small device and pressing a tiny button embedded in it.

The General recognised it as a simple recall device for a personal transporter system. His observations were confirmed as Cardtasharp was enveloped in a shaft of light before disappearing. He noted to his annoyance that he had left Zif behind to watch him. A glance out of the corner of his eye let him know the priest was studying him,

and the Command Centre, closely. Unconsciously, he flexed the fingers and claws of his right paw as he imagined crushing the wind out of the priest's throat.

With a slight shake of his head he brought himself out of his fantasy world and back to the real one. As he did so, another Cait fighter winked out of existence.

“General, sir,” an aide spoke from one of the terminals. “We’re getting multiple requests from our pilots to land for refuelling.”

The Warrior’s ears flicked back angrily. “Damn him,” he swore quietly. A solution suddenly presented itself. He suddenly remembered what the *Ingram*-class had been designed for. “Have the fighters refuel on *Cait’s Roar*. Let her withdraw from the fighting temporarily if she has to.”

The Queen sat in her parlour, seemingly oblivious to the happenings in the world, and above it. Somewhere in her mind, a little voice was telling her she should be concerned with what was going on, yet the proud Queen within simply told it to shut up.

So she sat there serenely as her beauticians worked to keep her looking good whilst she eyed herself in the mirror.

As the *Millennium* shook from another blast, Merete grimaced and kept her hopes up that the ship could continue taking the pounding. Aside from the Tholian ship

months before, the vessel had never come up against another ship that could match her. Until now.

Worried that her sickbay would soon be filling with casualties, all the same she knew that her current mission was more important. She held onto the railing and prayed once again that her children would be safe with one of her nurses minding them in her quarters. Yet the news she carried was so shocking it had to be told, no matter what the circumstances – or price.

The turbolift door opened on a scene of organised chaos as the bridge crew went about their duties minding the vessel's functions, and those of their fighters. She overheard Piper giving an order that what fighters that could do so would recharge and refuel on the *Jolly Roger*. She didn't know why, usually they did so on the *Millennium's* hangar deck, unless the ship had taken damage there.

She noted the Captain glance in her direction, taking in her presence before returning to the view screen. "Make it fast, Doctor," she said, matter-of-factly.

The Doctor didn't take it personally. The Captain had learned to put on a veneer of detachment when in crisis situations. "I have to beam down to the surface immediately."

That statement got the Captain's attention. "WHAT?" she said, swinging her chair to face her. She looked startled. She glanced over her shoulder to bark an order to Manny. "Make sure Engineering keeps our aft

phasers charged and pick off as many of the fighters as you can. They're our priority. They're just trying to wear us down. Keep our forward phasers firing intermittently at the *Ingram*.” She turned back to her friend and spoke quietly. “I know it's not cowardice, so why?”

“I found out something totally amazing,” Merete said. She leaned forward and whispered her findings in the Captain's ear.

Piper's eyes went wide in disbelief. “You can't be serious,” she blurted out, knowing full well her friend would never have brought her this unless it was otherwise.

“It's true, and I can prove it.” Merete crossed her arms as she did when she was certain of something and stood firm.

The Captain considered the situation. “Even if you're right, I can't do anything with it at the moment.” She gestured at Cait on the viewscreen. “They've put up a shield around the entire planet. I couldn't beam you down if I tried. Besides, we need to keep *our* shields up so we don't get cut to pieces by the *Ingram*.” She scowled to herself then made a decision. Piper stepped over to the weapons console and studied the readout. She pointed to a position on the screen. “Manny, I want you to try to herd all of the Caitian fighters to this point then detonate a high yield warhead in the middle of them. It should take care of the lot of them in one stroke.”

Manny nodded her white furry head in understanding and began laying down patterns of fire that

kept the fighters dodging the constant stream, but brought them steadily closer together. Within moments, she had them within the desired sphere of space then she fired the high yield torpedo. The bright red globe streaked out of the *Millennium*'s dorsal and rocketed into their midst. The result was devastating. Those that were not vapourised were knocked out of the fighting permanently. Manny noticed one fighter got away, but she took him out with an expertly timed phaser bolt.

The job done, the Captain stepped forward. "Signal the *Roger*. Prepare to drop shields and take on a visitor." She glanced at Merete. "Get down to Transporter Room One and take whatever you need. Go."

Needing no further impetus, the Doctor vanished into the turbolift.

Manny spoke up from her console. "Captain, the *Jolly Roger* is being constantly bombarded by fighters. She cannot afford to drop her shields, even for a second."

It was at that moment a familiar voice sounded over the speakers. "Can we be of some assistance?"

Out of pure reflex, the moment Jason Nunn had spotted the photon torpedo, he had slapped his hand down on the warp drive control panel. It had taken a fraction of a second for the *Cork*'s engines to respond, but it was enough for the small starship to leap into warp before the torpedo detonated. One light minute later, Sarda ordered the vessel

out of warp and Jason brought the vessel to a stop near the system's artificial asteroid belt – the starship graveyard.

At the weapons console, Carman let out a huge sigh of relief. "I thought we were dead," he said with a slight quiver.

At that, all Sarda could do was raise his eyebrow. It was the closest he could come to an admission he would agree to the statement. "It would seem the mystery of the *Ingram's* disappearance has been solved."

"To say the least," Jason said with a grin. "I wonder what they've been doing with her since." His eyes narrowed in annoyance as a thought came to him. "I hate to think what they might have added to the bastard since she vanished."

Sarda pursed his lips. "Speculation will not garner any new information, Mister Nunn. Perhaps we should quickly study my scans of the *Ingram* before we return to the fight." The Commander keyed the controls and brought up different details on each officer's screen.

After a few moments, the three of them agreed that there seemed to be very little change to the original design – except for one notable exception. The *Ingram* was still undergoing trials as the type's prototype. She had gone out that day incomplete, and the Cait had done their best to finish the job. However, they were not privy to all of Starfleet's most secret equipment, and the *Millennium's* officers noted the *Ingram* had never been fitted with a cloaking device.

The three officers looked at each other with raised eyebrows, each unconsciously mimicking the others.

“We have to get this back to the Captain as quickly as possible,” Carman stated with certainty.

Sarda nodded sagely. “Indeed we do, Lieutenant. Mister Nunn, take us back to the fighting, but make sure the *Millennium* is between us and the *Ingram*.”

Piper looked up at the ceiling with barely suppressed joy. “You may be of assistance all right!” she shouted. “Prepare to receive a guest! I need her beamed down to Fluffy's position as soon as the shield is down.” She didn't include the obvious: “*If it comes down.*”

The Captain turned to the helmsman. “Turn us so our dorsal section is exposed to the *Ingram* and drop the ventral shields so the Doctor can beam over. As soon as transport is complete, re-raise the shields.”

From the *Ingram's* point of view, the *Millennium* executed a sudden nose-dive without going anywhere. The Federation starship's phasers kept blasting away, but it was clear to the *Ingram's* captain that the ship was protecting something. However, he miscalculated and decided to abort taking on the fighters and immediately ordered the *Ingram* to circle around the *Millennium* and attack her exposed belly.

In Cait's underground Command Centre, the General saw this and cursed. Unlike the *Roar's* captain,

the General had spotted the *Cork* as soon as she had dropped out of warp and suspected the two ships were exchanging something.

“Captain!” the General bellowed. “Pull back at once!” Even though he gave the order, he could see it was too late. The fighters, left relatively unprotected and gathered together for docking, received a barrage of torpedoes that destroyed the majority of them and left the remainder unable to navigate. What remained of Two and Three Squadrons now had their hands full fending off the *Millennium*’s fighters and the *Cork* and *Jolly Roger*, who were also now well and truly into the fray, whilst remaining a respectable distance from the *Cait*’s *Roar*. “You fool!” he cried in fury, his claws unsheathed.

By the time the *Roar* got past the *Millennium*, she was already shifting position, her shields clearly up again. Now, with no fighters to distract her, Piper was giving her foe everything in her arsenal.

When the *Troy* hit, she hit hard. Despite Emu’s best efforts, the *Troy* had kept flying as if she were a space-borne brick. The best the pilot had managed was to make it possible for the ship to hit at an angle rather than straight down. As she made contact with the desert’s dunes, sand flew in all directions as the one time starliner dug a mile-long trench through the sand. In some places, the heat from the friction melted the sand into glass.

The impact smashed the tubular warp drive nacelles and tore them from the hull. What remained of them was barely recognisable. The rest of the ship buckled and tore, pieces of the plating flying off every which way. The frame twisted as she dug into the dunes, but did not rip completely apart. The impact only took seconds, but the result was devastating.

If it had not been for Brankovian's safeguards, the ship would have become nothing more than scrap metal. As it was, there were a number of casualties.

On the shattered bridge, Emu pushed herself up from the console she had clung onto for her very life. She quickly checked over body, looking for breaks or contusions, but found none. She had been lucky.

The air conditioners should have removed the smoke from the sparking consoles and ruptured ODN conduits, but they were no doubt smashed beyond repair. Remembering her Starfleet training, she smacked open the side of the console where all starships kept a first aid kit for the pilot – including a mask. She put hers on, then went in search of survivors.

Her first duty was to her captain, and so she tried to find Brankovian among the wreckage as he had been thrown clear of the command chair. Using a torch she had found in the console, she played it about the front of the room near the viewscreen. What she saw made her heart sink.

All the same, she rushed over to the Andorian's broken form. If his back wasn't broken then it should have been, she thought to herself. Knowing a little of his people's physiology, she checked the back of his neck and elbow for a pulse. There was none.

"Damn!" she swore angrily, not knowing who she should be mad at. She reached up to his sightless, staring eyes and closed the lids one last time for him. "Be at peace, Lieutenant," she said quietly.

"It was too soon for him, I think."

The voice startled Emu and for a moment she wondered if, after all this, she would now have to fight for her life. Instead of an attack, a gentle paw stroked the back of Brankovian's head.

"I shall miss you, my friend."

It took a moment for Emu to remember this was Faith, her friend. She wondered vaguely whether the impact of her head into the console had left her with concussion. "He was a good man," she said hoarsely, dejectedly. "Are you all right?" she finally asked, only now remembering.

In the distorted light from the torch and the sparking and burning consoles, Faith looked down at her. "I'm fine," she said. "I rolled myself up in a ball under the console just before we hit."

Emu nodded at the information, only dimly aware of what she was saying. She tried to stand, but the room

started to spin and the dim light suddenly got a whole lot darker, just before she blacked out.

The pilot slumped to the floor. Faith dropped down and retrieved the first aid kit Emu had been carrying and ran its med scanner over her. It verified what she suspected. The pilot had a concussion and would likely be out for a while.

With surprising strength, Faith leaned over and pulled Emu's dead weight up and over her shoulder. She then carried her over to what was clearly labelled, in her people's tongue, an emergency exit, smashed the safety glass covering the button, then punched it. The explosive bolts holding closed the hatch above her blew, flipping it up and out, and a single rail ladder dropped down automatically.

Adjusting Emu's weight, and with a final, sad look back at her fallen friend, Faith began the climb up to relative safety.

As if having one annoying spectator in the Command Centre wasn't enough, now the new Minister for Homeworld Security had decided to make his presence felt. The General tried to shrug off the intrusion, but he could not but help feel like he was a child who needed watching.

“What can I do for you?” he asked his uninvited guest. Actually, it was guests. The Minister appeared to have his secretary with him.

Minister Gruntallash seemed a little distracted. "Nothing, General. Just keep doing what you're doing."

The General frowned at that comment. The politicians who visited this center almost always asked for a situation report. "Don't you want to know what's going on?" he asked, a little confused.

Gruntallash stepped forward – all the way into the holographic display. "Actually, I could see that for myself." He pointed upward. "We don't seem to have a lot of fighters left and the shield is up. Have some of them landed for refuelling?"

The Warrior scowled. "No, they haven't. I am having to distract the *Roar* from her primary role of taking care of the *Millennium* to support the fighters because our beloved Prime Minister ordered the shield to not come down – period."

"Now, that's paranoid," Gruntallash stated. "We can't keep the shield up forever."

A voice from across the room begged to differ. "It's not paranoid, Minister. It's merely being prudent."

Gruntallash turned to see Zif stalking towards him. "If the *Cait's Roar* is lost today, we will need the shield to protect us from Starfleet." His voice was low, but the certainty of his beliefs was clear.

"A referendum was held," the Minister countered. "The Federation Council will have to abide by the ruling and back off."

Zif sniffed in derision. “They know the truth, Minister. They know the vote was compromised. Their own Commander Krashtallah confirmed that with his duplicate poll.”

Several people around the room shifted upon hearing the statement. Zif seemed not to notice.

Gruntallah could not help but feel a stab of pride for his wayward brother. Of the whole clan, he seemed to have his head on straight and was seeing clearly. “I am sure you will not allow him to get back to his people and inform them.”

Standing just outside the holographic display, Zif stood with his arms folded, an air of distrust hanging about him. The General wondered if that has his permanent state of being. “He has proven elusive.”

Gruntallah wondered at that. He knew Zif had resources that few were aware of, and that his intelligence people were second-to-none on Cait. Yet he could not help but feel that he was trying to deal with the situation himself. “I’m sure he’ll turn up,” he said, trying to sound upbeat. “Then we can get the police to pick him up.”

At that, the priest actually cackled. The sound was disturbing, as if the mind generating it was not quite sane. “The *police*?” The priest mocked. “I wouldn’t trust them to pick up a sheep.”

“Then what?” Gruntallah asked, curious.

The priests eyes grew crafty. “Never you mind, Minister. Too much knowledge can be a harmful thing.”

For all Zif's protestations of being a representative of the Almighty, right then and there both General and Minister found themselves looking into the eyes of His arch nemesis. There was something *demonic* about him that found even the General falling back a step.

Tearing his eyes away from the priest, Gruntallahash looked up once more to check on their force's progress. The *Roar* and the *Millennium* were still sparring, and Cait's fighters were still being picked off, one by one. He shook his head in dismay. This policy was going to leave them without any fighters – and worse – no qualified pilots to fly them or their replacements. “General, we're going to have to drop the shield and give our people a chance to land. I can't believe the fighters have much fuel left.”

The General nodded his agreement. “We need pilots more than we need ships,” he added knowingly.

Gruntallahash thought about the Prime Minister's order. “Is it possible to drop only a *portion* of the shield? Only disengage one shield emitter?”

“Yes, it is possible. The remaining emitters will try to fill the hole, but it will still leave a gap big enough for our fighters to come home. They're not doing much good up there anyway.” He turned and was about to give the order when he found himself nose to nose with the priest.

“Your orders were to not drop the shield for *any* reason,” he growled menacingly.

The General shrugged. “The orders are misguided. They will result in the loss of *all* our pilots at a time when

we need them the most. Besides, the hole we're making is not big enough for a starship to pass through, just fighters." He spoke up for his people to hear. "Prepare..."

His words were knocked out of him by a lightning fast punch to his people's version of a solar plexus. Zif continued his attack with a kick to the head that sent the General sprawling. "Not another word, General, or I will finish you off." The words were devoid of emotion. Just a simple statement of fact.

Gruntallah looked down at the his people's greatest warrior and wondered what kind of a being could put him down so easily.

On the floor, the General could only curse himself for his stupidity. He had underestimated his foe, and that was usually fatal. He held up a paw, and begged off for a moment, feigning compliance whilst he got his lungs working properly again. It took only a half minute then the General lashed out with his tail, wrapped it around Zif's feet, and pulled him to the floor. The move would have caught any normal Cait by surprise and put him down, yet Zif managed to get his feet under him once more and pounce on the General. The two of them rolled around for a moment, trying to get a grip on the other when they both managed to get their feet up and push the other away, making them slide to opposite ends of the room. Each then leapt to his feet and advanced on the other once more.

The General circled his prey, his eyes ablaze with anger. "You fight like an assassin." The insult was meant

to sting, but there was something in Zif's fighting style that was familiar.

"Who do you think trains them?" Zif countered as he moved to the side, claws extended, looking for an opportunity. The comment was meant to strike fear into his opponent.

It had the opposite effect. It simply angered The Warrior – once he got over his temporary shock. His eyes narrowed as he tried to squelch his anger. Anger only helped you to make mistakes, he told himself. Turnabout was fair play. "Then it's a wonder they've lasted this long," he stabbed.

As he continued to move, the Priest's eyes flared in anger. "We have maintained our ascendancy above the common people for millennia because of our skills," he said through clenched teeth.

The General tilted his head to the side and continued to mock Zif. "And I thought it was simply by false piety." At this point, he stopped and appeared to be indecisive regarding his next move.

The pause was seized upon by the Priest and he launched himself through the air, his teeth and claws aimed directly for the General's throat.

At the last moment, the General spun to the right, allowing Zif's momentum to carry him past him. As he moved, he brought his right paw in a chopping motion that caught the priest on the tip of his nose. Blood sprayed in all directions and soaked his white robes.

Zif managed to land on the floor on all fours, but was left dazed by the blow. He turned and tried to find the General once more, but he couldn't see him through the haze of pain blinding him.

Not that he had much time to consider it. Wasting no time, the General had followed him and now swung a vicious blow that caught Zif at the back and base of his skull.

The assassin/priest went down, dropping unconscious to the floor, landing with a mighty thud.

The General turned to one of his aides and pointed at Zif. "Bind him quickly, there's no telling how long he'll be out." He stepped once more towards the centre of the room then paused. Something had come to him. "Check his mouth for false teeth. I seem to remember a rumour they have a suicide tooth implanted. Pull it out with pliers if you have to. Just make sure you don't crack it." He looked down at Zif's cassock once more and thought the red colouring was much more appropriate than the white.

As he took his position once more in the centre of the room, he noted the two starships were still pummelling one another and he still had some fighters left. With a glance at Zif's prone form, he made a decision. "Damn the Prime Minister," he muttered to himself. He spoke up. "Drop the shield near the fighters and let them come home." While we still have some, was the silent message.

As his order was being implemented he remembered he still had some guests. He searched for

them over near the door to find them, but, curiously, the Minister and his secretary were gone.

Regardless of the Government's meddling, the crowds were growing. The atmosphere was electric. The people were furious, but not at each other. Of that, Susanna was grateful. She did note a level of tension with the people regarding themselves. A recording of her husband's speech had made it onto the Net, and many had heard him speak of the people's descent into servitude. In their vernacular – they had become sheep.

The Ambassador's concern was that the people had yet relearned how to be lions. They were finding their soul once more, of that she was grateful. Yet these people still needed someone to guide them. A shepherd, of sorts.

She had noted here and there small tussles among the males, in particular. The rage these people had to be directed, of that she was sure, but how?

She looked at Drishtagoth, who had come to the same conclusion. They needed some way to bring the people together, to give them cohesion. "Get me a Loud Hailer," she heard him say to one of his fellows. It was hardly necessary.

A booming voice came from behind and above her. Someone was calling to them from the trees. A familiar voice.

"People of Cait! Hear me!"

Susanna turned and gazed up at her husband, who was standing on the roof of a small home. From his vantage point, he could see for hundreds of metres, and the people could see and hear him. Unknown to her, he had set up holographic relays all around the Parliament so that the people could view and hear him everywhere.

A profound hush came over the crowd as they gazed upon Krashtallah. His colour was tawny still, but there was no mistaking the bearing of a born leader.

He seemed about to speak once more when he noticed a change over at the nearby public transporter. The light upon its roof that indicated whether it was or wasn't functioning had turned green. They were operational again, and within seconds people started pouring through it once more from all over the planet. A smile came over him as he realised he was about to be hip deep in Cait. He held up his paws once more and once again he had silence.

“People of Cait!” he cried. “For too long we have remained shackled by a government led by a tyrant of a Prime Minister and an insane Queen. Backed by the corrupt Priesthood, our leadership has grown fat with the products of their duplicitous actions. They have been telling us that we need security for all Cait, while stripping us, little by little, of our rights.

“YES! Our rights! Not what the government allows us to do, but what the government cannot do to us! A government is supposed to serve the people, not turn its people into servants!”

Susanna heard a collective growling coming from those around her and found her own hackles were starting to rise in sympathy. Tails everywhere started slashing this way and that, the only physical sign of this people's feelings.

“Our rightful King, Kraltathat, is probably dead at the hands of the Queen.”

That statement brought a stirring among the people. Kraltathat had been a much loved King.

“Before he died, he *lawfully* made a decree to dissolve Parliament. The Opposition Party *lawfully* was entitled to take office and lead our people in their place!”

The growling increased in volume. But never so loud that Krashtallah could not be heard.

“And now our *lawless* government has not only *defied* his decrees, they have turned and slaughtered him like a sheep!”

At that, the people roared! As one they lifted their heads and let their voices be heard. All around the Parliament, Caits were heard venting their anguish at their lost King, and honouring his memory. To Susanna's ears, the noise was practically deafening, and she knew that the people in the building, and the King's Palace beyond, *must* be able to hear them.

Sure enough, in the Prime Minister's office, Cardtasharp heard, and, for the first time, feared for his

life. He began making calls to make sure his defences were sound.

In the Palace, the Queen heard, and shivered. Her dreams were starting to become reality, of that she was sure. She looked about her for her entourage, but, strangely, they were missing. She called for her guards, and, obediently, they came. Yet she noted that some of them were missing.

“Make sure my retreat plan is ready to execute at a moment's notice!” she said as regally as possible. Yet her own guard noted the slight crack in her voice as she spoke.

In the Command Centre, the General got word that the Prime Minister had called and had insisted he send more troops to guard the Parliament buildings and Palace.

“Does the Prime Minister think that soldiers fall out of trees?” he asked no-one in particular. “I do not have unlimited resources.” He frowned to himself and considered the situation. “Send half the troops from each Shield Installation Guard Unit to the Parliament to assist. And tell the Prime Minister that's all I can spare. If that's not good enough, he might have to earn the right to govern the people the old fashioned way,” he added grimly.

His aide went about implementing his orders when things got worse. “General! We've gotten word that the Public Transporters are operational!” Before he could

respond to that, another aide cried: "General! The shield is down!"

Stunned, he cast his eyes about him and saw the truth of it. As one, each planetary shield emitter was powering down. "Get them back up again!" he snapped.

The operator cast his eyes down. "I'm sorry General, but we're getting all kinds of system failures! It's like the computers are being attacked from within!"

The General snarled. Computers! You could not live without them, but you certainly could not trust them! "Someone has penetrated our defences and introduced a virus, no doubt," he said quietly. He knew when he was beaten. As if to add insult to injury, his holographic display winked out of existence, and even the lights failed, plunging the room into pitch black.

The ever resourceful General slipped a tiny light out of his pocket and played it around the room. "That's it, then. It's time to fight like *real* warriors. Everyone with me! It's time to go to help our people at Parliament!"

In the Minister for Transportation and Homeworld Security's office, Gruntallash shucked off his robes of state and hung them on a hook on the wall, leaving him with nothing but the fur he was born with and his pocket transporter control unit. Each government member was issued with one for personal use and in case of emergencies.

On the other side of his desk Kintabung snapped shut her personal computer, then put it in a satchel on her back. “The virus has definitely disabled the shield by now,” she said. “And I can confirm the public transporters are operating again.”

Gruntallash gave a vicious grin. His mate knew it wasn't directed at her, but at Cardtasharp and the Queen, who, to his knowledge, had killed his parents. “Good,” he growled. “Let them get out of this one.” He beckoned Kintabung forward and she stepped around the desk and into his arms.

“This hugging thing the humans like doing is growing on me,” she said happily.

“I am beginning to understand what my sister sees in humans,” Gruntallash said with a small sigh.

Kintabung didn't miss the feeling. “What is it?” she asked gently.

Gruntallash was not used to opening up to anybody so readily. It still took some willpower, but doing so with Kin was somehow easier than others. “I wonder if I will ever have the honour of sharing a meal with her again after my recent behaviour,” he said, his voice full of regret.

His mate nuzzled his neck. “Perhaps you're on the “road to redemption”, as the Teacher would put it.” She squeezed him a little tighter.

“*If there is a road to redemption,*” he said soulfully, “then it will be a long one for me.” He raised the transporter control. “Time to go,” he said simply, then

pressed the controls and the pair vanished in a beam of light.

The two of them materialised behind the public transporter near the front of the crowd and began making their way forward through the crowd. It was their undoing.

Gruntallahash found himself in the middle of a group of Opposition Party members, who noticed the interloper in their midst, and instantly recognised him.

Grabbed roughly by twenty hostile Conservative Party members, he and his companion were dragged forward to Drishtagoth and Susanna, who Gruntallahash gaped at in amazement.

“I thought you were dead,” he said in wonder.

Susanna scowled at him, pushed back her cowl, then stepped up to face him. “More like hoped, I’d say,” she said unkindly, her lips bearing a sneer, showing only a small portion of the loathing she held for this being. “Trying to hide, were you? If your plan was to disappear into the crowd, you chose the wrong place, my friend!”

The Opposition Party leader joined her and looked down on the ground where Gruntallahash was being held, and humbled. “We are not animals, yet you and your people make us want to act like animals,” he stated with only a touch of anger. “Should I let these good people kill you and wear your blood? Or are you willing to face judgement when this day is over?”

Gruntallash gulped. He had known he would be in for a hostile reception once this was over, but had hoped to fight *with* these people, not *against* them for his very life!

“Don’t kill me, please!” he said, trying not to sound like he was begging, but failing miserably. His handlers weren’t impressed and the arm holding his neck was beginning to tighten. “After all, *I* was the one who organised the public transporters to come back on,” he choked out through a partially strangled neck. “The planetary shield is down by *my* hand!”

By this time, Krestapan had joined them. “Perhaps he is telling the truth,” he said gently. “We don’t want to shed innocent blood.”

At this point, their attention was diverted as the crowd parted around them. Gruntallash looked up into his twin’s eyes and saw only pity. Then his attention shifted to his fur and he gaped openly. With tawny fur, he was a mirror image of himself. Only, like a mirror, the person standing over him was his opposite and he realised only then, his brother was the better Cait. He dropped his head in shame. His brother’s disguise had done more than help him blend in. It has shown him the real difference in a person was truly on the inside.

“I’m afraid my brother’s hands will always be guilty of innocent blood,” Krashtallah said matter-of-factly. He was deliberately trying to be hard to read, but inside he was a mass of conflicting emotions. Part of Crash wanted his brother to suffer for all of the injustices he played out on

both him and others. Another part of him still yearned for some kind of bond with him. Regardless of all that he had done, Gruntallash was still his brother, and as he had managed to forge a good relationship with his once estranged sister, perhaps it wasn't too late for his brother as well. He decided on the better angels of his nature as he looked down on Grun and saw him as just another helpless sheep looking for direction.

Gruntallash began to flail about as his captor's grips grew tighter.

"HOWEVER," Crash said, giving him a tiny glimmer of hope. "I have just two questions to put before you this day, Grun." The coup leader sat down on his haunches before his errant brother, took his chin in his hands, and looked deep in his eyes, searching out his soul for any deception. "Remember, you never could lie to me, brother," he said quietly. "One: are you for us, or against us?"

The former politician bowed his head in submission to his brother. It was witnessed by all around them and honoured. "I am for you, brother, and for the people of Cait."

Krashtallash decided to accept this, even though part of him refused to believe it. "Two: are you willing to answer to justice once this is over?"

At that he could only shrug in answer. Resigned to his fate, he said: "If Cardtasharp finds me, I'm dead. When this day is over, I'm probably still going to be dead, or as

good as dead under the people's judgement. I know I would rather be dead fighting against the people who killed our parents, not with them."

The news of his parent's demise came as a shock to Krashtallah, but not an unanticipated one. He had been aware of Zif's actions, and suspected his parents would have been taken as well. He grieved for his mother, but he found only emptiness in his heart towards his father. All the same, his next words came out through a tight throat as he reached down with an open, and empty paw. "Then fight with us brother, and be redeemed." Crash lifted Gruntallah to his feet and ordered his companion be released as well. His attention was drawn to Kintabung's darker than average fur and looked again at his brother. Perhaps his attitudes *were* changing. He reached out a paw to his companion. "And you are..."

Gruntallah answered for her and spoke with pride. "Kintabung, my mate. And when this is over, she will be my wife."

Crash tipped his head to one side and smiled at his brother. "Perhaps it is possible to get water from a stone after all," he said. His tone grew introspective. "However, it may be a little soon to be making long distance plans – for all of us."

Before his brother could answer him, Crash turned to Susanna, embraced her and nuzzled her passionately. "I have missed you so much, my beloved," he said with all the love he could muster.

Susanna cast up her pussy cat eyes and looked deep into Crash's leonine ones. "And I you. I am the proudest female on this planet, my husband." She gave him a quick grin. "Now, let's go and change history."

He nodded then led the way back to the tree and onto its roof. Susanna paused for a moment, spun on Gruntallash and snarled: "My husband may have it in his heart to forgive you, but I can tell you: *I don't!*" She held her hand out towards his throat and unsheathed her formidable claws. "If you make me doubt your sincerity in any way, I'll rip your throat out myself." She spun about and ran to her husband's side, bounding up the tree. At that moment, she didn't feel much like an Ambassador, but it felt good to vent her anger towards Gruntallash.

Crash smiled at her as she joined him. He turned and gestured for the people's attention once more. "My friends! Hear me!" Once again, his vision came back on for the crowds and his voice was amplified. "Today is a great day for Cait when the people take back their world!" He held up his wife's hand and the crowd saw her. "This is my wife, Federation Ambassador Susanna Llash. She is an example that the Queen is not all powerful. Just days ago she tried to execute her, yet Susanna survived.

"Similarly, the Queen and our pirate government are trying to kill our culture, but, like Susanna, *we are hard to kill!*" The last was finished with a roar that was echoed throughout the camp.

He nodded to an associate who adjusted their equipment so now the soldiers guarding the Parliament could hear them.

“Males and females of Homeworld Security, hear me!” he cried with feeling. “I am giving you five minutes to put down your weapons and join us, or find yourselves crushed under the weight of millions of your fellow Cait!”

His statement was not exaggerated. In fact, it was more than a little conservative. The transporters for miles around had been working ceaselessly, disgorging Cait from all over the planet, and each and every one of them made a bee-line for the Parliament complex.

To Krashtallah's dismay, only a few took up his offer. They were people with particular courage as, in the face of either death by angry citizen or possible death by court martial – or worse – they dropped their weapons and made a break for the treeline from their positions either in mobile weapons platforms or dug in in trenches about fifty metres into the grassy area.

Curiously, that area included the Teacher's Mound. And it was one area even the Homeworld Security people dared not disturb.

Unfortunately for those whose conscience got the better of them, their officers had been given orders to shoot deserters on sight. It was thought it would discourage mass desertions. It was an effective strategy as, after the eighth

person had been shot in the back, nobody else tried it. Not a single deserter had made it to the treeline.

The news got back to a seething Krashtallah. Susanna noted to herself that, if her husbands eyes could have turned red with fury, they would have.

Below him, Drishtagoth leaned over to Krestapan and said: "I hope there's a special place in Hell for the officers responsible."

An almost embarrassed Krestapan found himself unable to disagree with his friend. If there wasn't one, then he found himself hoping God would make an exception in this case.

On the rooftop, Susanna leaned in to her husband. "What are we going to do now?" she asked quietly.

Crash shook himself and turned to her. "Go ahead with the plan," he said quietly. "I had hoped more would have come over to our side." He turned his gaze towards the heavens. There were clouds in the sky, but, overall, it was quite a pleasant spring day. "I'm just praying for rain. It could help our chances."

The Ambassador nodded her understanding. She, too, was concerned that a lot of the people congregated below them were about to die.

Chapter Twenty-Four

The morning sun played over the surface of the *Troy*'s wreckage. Already hot from the friction of the ship's quick descent, their comfort wasn't improved by the heat of the day.

The *Troy*'s chief engineer, a gifted young engineer from Vulcan named Solik, helped Faith take care of the wounded. Some were still emerging from the emergency hatches on the ship's topside surface, but the reports coming in of those who had perished below were disheartening. The *Troy* had carried a skeleton crew, but of the twenty-four who had manned the vessel, only fifteen had survived the crash. And of the survivors, only ten of them were conscious, with three of them whose injuries were so bad they wished they weren't.

Solik had quickly instructed Faith on the use of human first aid equipment, and, being the good student she was, she began ministering to the wounded's needs. A quick scan of Emu showed the New Zealander had a concussion, but no swelling of the brain. Faith simply made her comfortable then went to help the others. Among them were burns, breaks and a number of contusions. Those in the most pain Solik knocked out with painkillers.

Faith estimated that it had only taken about fifteen minutes for rescue craft to arrive, and the clearly labelled

flitter ambulances landed directly on the hull, which was still strong enough to support them.

Faith saw the trepidation in Solik's eyes as the first aid technicians alighted from their vehicles and ran out to attend the wounded. Faith simply gave him a smile to placate him. "Whether they are for the government or against them, our people will never leave someone to die if we can help them. It was the Teacher's way," she said simply. "Help people if you can, whenever you can."

The Vulcan raised a brow. "A most logical attitude. I think the humans refer to it as: "Paying it forward"."

As the technicians fanned out, Solik began directing them towards the most seriously injured and informing them of their condition. He may not have been a physician, but today, he was the next best thing.

They helped, then watched as the wounded were loaded onto the ambulances. More arrived as they worked, and everyone was loaded either on a stretcher, or took a seat. Before they departed, a female whose uniform Faith recognised as being a senior officer, took her aside and spoke to her briefly. Faith nodded, then joined Solik in his ambulance, shutting the door behind her.

"Might I enquire as to what she told you?" he asked with a glance at the officer in question.

Faith wondered at the Vulcan's formality and remembered what Sarda was like. She put it down to a cultural schism. "She told me not to worry. These ambulances were sent for by Drishtagoth, the leader of the

Opposition Party, and we're being taken to a hospital that is friendly to his cause.”

Although it was against his people's nature to do so, Solik visibly relaxed. “That is fortunate,” he said stoically.

“I thought your people didn't believe in luck,” Faith said with a small smile. “That would suggest that the universe possibly does have a destiny, rather than all of us being the result of some cosmic accident.”

Solik looked her in the eye and said completely deadpan: “Vulcan's don't have to agree with each other to believe in logic. Our belief that we better ourselves by suppressing our emotions – especially the base ones that can lead us into compromising our moral standing – is fundamental to who we are. *However*, just because we use the same mode of didactic thinking does not draw a forgone conclusion that we will always reach the same determination. In fact, it is my experience that it is quite the opposite.”

Faith frowned in confusion. “What are you trying to tell me?”

Solik tilted his head to one side. “Not all Vulcans believe we are the result of a “cosmic accident”, either.”

Before they could continue, the ambulance lifted off and swung about as it adjusted its course. Both Faith and Solik got a last glimpse of their once proud vessel as they passed it by. Faith placed her paw on the glass and said sadly: “I will return to give you a proper burial, my friends. I promise.”

The *Troy* vanished into the distance behind them as the ambulance went supersonic. A short time later, it alighted on the hospital's landing pad and an Emergency Medical Team bounded out to meet them. The doors were pulled aside and the litters quickly taken inside. Faith and Solik escorted them, and both noted their people were being well taken care of.

As the ranking officer, Solik enquired of his fellow Starfleet members and their conditions. Once satisfied, he tried to make a call to the *Millennium* to check in, but got no answer, which came as no surprise.

Having done all he could, he sought out Faith and found to all intents and purposes that she had disappeared.

“Curious,” he said to himself then took a seat and waited with his conscious fellow crewmembers.

For the twentieth time, Sarda wondered whether the designers of the *Cork* had Mister Nunn's aerial acrobatics in mind when they constructed her. Whilst keeping a watch on his scanners for any indication that there was a change in the planetary shield, he could not help but be drawn by the young Aussie's piloting skills. As the starfield whirled about them and the planet below and the moon beyond seeming to do cartwheels on their horizon, Jason still managed to keep the fighter he was chasing not only in front of him, but he was gaining on it. Each time the Cait pilot zipped to one side, Jason pre-empted the

move and zagged to meet him. A couple of his phaser bolts had already left scorch marks in the other's hull.

Even though the young human was essentially flying a truck that was trying to shoot down a sports car, his skill had already downed two Cait fighters with little damage to the *Cork's* shields.

To Jason's right, Carman Valastro kept a wary eye on the aft scanners, looking for any sign that they were in someone else's crosshairs.

"How's it going?" Jason asked as he once more fired the vessel's phasers. The shot scorched the Cait vessel's stubby wing.

Carman did not look up from the scanner. The whirling image out the window made him nauseous. "There's only about nine of them left," he said in his professional manner. On the job, he was all business. Off the job, he could party with the best of them.

Once more, Jason brushed the phaser fire control button. This time, his shot was true and the enemy fighter was no more. Rather than be elated, Jason cursed. "This is nothing but a turkey shoot, as Scanner would put it."

Sarda turned a worrying eye to his scanners once more. While Piper was keeping the *Ingram* at bay, both were showing signs of damage from the engagement. "Not for the Captain, it is not," he said quietly.

Jason nodded, then loosed two photon torpedoes at the *Ingram* for good measure. They impacted the forward shields, but, like the *Millennium*, the triple shielding of

both vessels was hard to pierce and they made little difference to the engagement. Indeed, the *Ingram* Captain was acting as if the other two Starfleet ships weren't even there.

The Commander was tempted to reprimand Jason for wasting two torpedoes, but held his tongue. The young man's frustration was understandable as there was little they could do to assist their Captain.

“Sarda, don't worry about Piper,” Merete AndrusTaurus said from her chair behind them. “If there's one person I know who can pull this off, it's her.”

The Vulcan Commander was in no position to argue with her. He had every confidence in his Captain's abilities. But, like any man whose partner is in trouble, he worried. Suddenly, there was a change on a dynoscanner. “A gap has opened up in the shield at 15 mark 355 at five hundred kilometres.”

“We're there,” Jason said, already adjusting his course. Before them he could see the remaining Cait fighters making a beeline for the invisible gap. Obviously, their people had informed them, he thought to himself.

Around them, the Federation pilots were letting them go as their quarries made a run for it. Jason made a dash for the gap and closed on it just behind the final Cait pilot.

Sarda was already on the commlink to Earhaht. “Ensign Earhaht, this is Commander Sarda calling from the *Cork*. Prepare to receive one crewmember with important intel.” His fingers danced like lightning over the controls,

yet he was finding it difficult to find a clear space to set Merete down, and time was running out. There was no guarantee the shield gap would remain much longer.

Wisely, Merete had already stepped into the transporter chamber with her equipment. She gave them a quick smile for good luck before the beam took her away from them.

Carman was watching over the Commander's shoulder. "Where did you put her down?" he asked, curious.

The Vulcan merely raised his brows in mild embarrassment.

The politicians scattered as a transporter beam lighted in their midst. Merete AndrusTaurus materialised, along with an equipment pouch slung over her shoulder, on top of Earhaht.

"Excuse me!" came an annoyed voice below her and Merete stepped off the Horta with the help of Kintabung.

"I take it you're from the *Millennium*," Kintabung said, noting her red Starfleet uniform.

Distracted, Merete simply nodded. "Sorry, I'm in a bit of a hurry. Can someone take me to either Krashtallah or Ambassador Llash?"

Krestapan stepped out of the crowd, shook her hand and introduced himself. "They're over here," he said, then led her over to where Krashtallah was laying out his plans

with Drishtagoth. Earhaht followed her, drawing many bemused looks from the locals.

She received a friendly smile from both he and Susanna, and both simply looked at her, askance. "I've got some information for you that could make a world of difference to what you're planning."

"Anything that can save lives would be welcome," Drishtagoth said eagerly. He glanced at her satchel as if there was some magic potion that could make all their troubles vanish within it.

Merete gave a clenched teeth grin. "I'm not sure how it will do that, but I'm sure the people need to know what I've discovered."

Crash was starting to get a little impatient with is colleague. "Then how...."

The Doctor ushered them over and she threw her arms around the necks of Drishtagoth on one side and Susanna on the other. Crash leaned over to face her. "What I've got to say could be taken two very different ways, Commander," she said, then whispered it for only their ears to hear.

Their reactions were mixed. Susanna's eyes widened in surprise, but that was all. Krashtallah and Drishtagoth recoiled, stunned. "That can't be true," Drishtagoth said.

Merete stood firm. "I analysed the sample myself, sir. There can be no mistake. Besides, there were other peculiarities about it that could lead me to no other conclusion that the sample was not only genuine, but that

my interpretation was correct. Anyhow, I can prove what I say in a manner that no-one can argue with.”

The Opposition Leader's whiskers arched forward in curiosity. “How?”

He received her beatific smile in reply. “I can use your own equipment, sir.”

At that, he could only shrug. “Fair enough,” he said. “However, now is not the time for such revelations. There may come a time shortly when we can use it to our advantage, but revealing this now would only bring derision and possible accusations of bias.” Drishtagoth shook his head. “No, now is not the time.” He looked her up and down at this point then turned to Crash. “Commander, I would recommend we keep the Doctor as far from the action as possible. This is no time or place for a human.”

Merete was tempted to point out she was of the Palkeo Est, but let it go. It wasn't relevant. She looked around her at the buildings nearby. She pointed to one of them. “I want to use that building for triage and to prepare people for emergency evac to hospital. It's close to that clearing over there for ambulances to land,” she pointed off to the left, “and that transporter there.” She pointed off to the right. She put her hands on her hips, daring them to disagree with her. “If you're right, things are about to get bloody. I'm a Doctor and I want no argument from any of you. You need me.”

Drishtagoth, Crash and Susanna shared looks and realised she was right. Drishtagoth delegated the duties and sent her off to prepare for casualties.

As Earhaht moved to follow her, Crash stopped her with an upraised paw. "Ensign, I need you for another job."

In Scanner and Manny's quarters, Pashtallah was having a battle trying to keep Drallah's nerves from becoming completely shot. As the ship rocked around them during the heat of battle, Drallah rolled up in a ball and whimpered.

Pashtallah found it hard to sympathise sometimes, especially as her views had become tainted by her husband's lack of empathy towards Krashtallah. It was at times like these that she was beginning to realise just how skewed her perceptions had become. As she sat next to the kit, she found herself fighting the reluctance to soothe the black kit. He had grown on her a lot during their time together, yet she found herself still being dragged down by her programmed prejudices.

"I want my mama," Drallah said in a small voice racked with soulful pain between his many sobs.

The Llash kits mother didn't know what to say. It was certainly not a wish she was able to grant. "I'm sorry, little one," she said gently. "I can't give her to you. I'm not even sure in all this that I could give her a call at your home." She stroked the back of his head soothingly.

Drallah's head popped up from under his arm. His green eyes looked up into Pash's brown, balled his paws into fists and said, "No! I don't mean *her*! My mother sent me away!" The heat in his voice almost made Pash recoil. "She doesn't love me! She *hates* me! So does my father!" He pointed up at a photograph of Manny and Scanner on the shelf. "She's nice to me! She rescued me and gave me somewhere to stay! She's taken care of me!" His voice was one of a drowning person pleading for rescue and seeing a glimmer of hope. "I want her to be my mama!" With those final words, Drallah dropped his head behind his elbow once more and sobbed.

Moved to tears, Pashtallah found herself sniffling along with Drallah. She thought of her daughter and the incredible changes that had brought her from behaving like a spoiled brat at home, to becoming the passionate wife and defender of those she had once mocked along with the rest of their kind. She knew she could take no credit for those changes. She often found it hard not to blame herself for the mess her children had become. And yet, both Amantallah and Krashtallah had overcome adversity and matured into not only respectable people, but people who were truly *respected*.

The omission to her list of names was plain in her heart. She ached for Gruntallah and the foolish choices he had made. Choices she had done little to help him avoid. The guilt she had felt earlier now washed over her fully

and she found herself sobbing uncontrollably. The pain came out in racking cries that threatened to overwhelm her.

Next to her, Drallah had noticed the change in his companion. He didn't understand, but he felt he had to comfort her somehow, so he tucked his head under hers and rubbed her neck fondly.

Managing to pull herself together for a moment's control, Pash said through a very tight throat: "I wish Manny was your mother, too. She'd be a good one."

At that point, the emotion was too much for both of them and they sought comfort by crying into each other's shoulders, the distant sounds of warfare temporarily forgotten.

The *Millennium* rocked as she was hit by another barrage of torpedoes. Piper had her vessel circling the *Ingram* trading phaser bolt after phaser bolt, like old Empire battleships trading cannon balls. Whilst both ships were equipped with megaphasers, phasers powered directly from the warp drive engine, neither Captain wanted the other ship to be in the other ship's direct line of fire. Whilst they circled each other at a distance of one kilometre, neither of them could get a bead on the other with their main guns. Both were mounted on the ship's warp drive pylons, facing forward and aft. As they were now side to side, they were useless.

Photon torpedoes streaked from one to the other in wide arcs from both forward and aft launchers. Each

pummelled the other, trying to bring down the other ship's triple shielding.

As the ship stabilized again Piper glared at the screen in frustration. The ships were too evenly matched, and unless something happened, they would keep on like this for hours.

That would not be the case, she knew. Sarda's scans had revealed the other ship had more than the usual complement of torpedoes. In that area, the *Millennium* was overmatched. However, even with those torpedoes, the other ship was unlikely to bring down her ship's shields.

As they circled once more, Manny loosed another barrage of torpedoes at the *Ingram* that were focussed on the other ship's engineering section. She followed it up with focussed standard phaser strikes, but she growled when she realised she had only managed to bring down one of the other ship's three layers of shielding.

In the centre seat, Piper watched as the moon passed through her main viewer once more and got an idea. "Helm, on the next few passes, bring us gradually closer to the moon so we can swing around it."

The helmsman smiled to himself. "Aye, Captain," he said, then executed the order.

Whilst things seemed under control on the bridge, it was far from the truth in Engineering. The engines – including the warp drive – were under constant strain. The impulse engines were

under duress keeping them at full impulse while in an area of space with *two* gravity wells, and the warp drive engines as they were powering everything else, including the phasers, photon controls, shields, etc.

Scanner watched as his gauges slowly crept towards the red line as, one by one, the circuits were reaching their breaking points after the almost half-hour of constant barrage. He knew his counterpart on the *Ingram* was probably having the same concerns, but he knew it was only a matter of time before something failed. He just hoped it was going to be on the *other* ship first.

His job was being complicated by the fact he was exhausted. His people had been pulling double shifts as a good portion of his staff had been assigned to both the *Jolly Roger* and the *Troy*.

He took a moment to replicate a cup of coffee – in a non-spill cup – and popped another upper into his mouth. While he generally didn't approve of the practice among his staff – prolonged use tended to dull the thinking – the situation demanded extreme measures.

After a few minutes, the drug started taking effect and Scanner began to feel invigorated. The timing was good as a barrage of photon torpedoes, followed by a volley of phaser strikes, overloaded the power conduits feeding the shield emitters along the port side engineering deck – including the entire port side nacelle.

Their enemies quickly seized the opportunity, even as Scanner's team raced to bring the shields back on line. The

entire vessel was rocked as three photon torpedoes tore the port side nacelle apart. The aft section of it broke away completely, spinning off into space, forcing the *Ingram* to dodge it as they continued their pursuit.

In fact, it was their salvation, as, during the confusion of having to avoid a collision, the *Ingram* ceased firing.

Ever the pragmatic soul, Scanner brought the secondary units online and re-raised the shields around the nacelle. Yet the shields around the engineering hull – especially around the rec. deck, failed to reinitialise. He swore and tried again, forcing the control computers to hard reboot. It took another thirty seconds, during which the *Millennium* did not come under fire. Scanner couldn't understand it, until he heard the Intruder Alert klaxon.

The *Millennium* had a lot of Caitian guests who were not confined to sickbay due to their ill treatment at the hands of their captors. Some had been assigned quarters, particularly families, but the remainder had simply chosen to stay on the rec. deck. Their reasons were understandable. It was the largest open space on the ship and, as they had been cooped up in the mines or cargo holds for some time, they had become a little claustrophobic.

The Cait, most of whom were black, had spent most of the last half hour hanging on to the furniture, the tree, or sunk their claws into the grass. Lying on the ground didn't help as the floor sometimes dropped out from under them.

A young couple sat near the great transparent aluminium window and watched from a ring-side seat as the two ships bombarded each other.

“That was a good shot!” the male, Slantacring, a nurse in training, said to his prospective mate, as a phaser bolt found its mark on the *Ingram*. “Captain Piper will kill those grawwnnrowl.” The word refused to translate and is a particularly nasty epithet in the Caitian tongue and it has no literal meaning in Terran languages.

The female, Amantasoul rolled her eyes – again. “The phaser controls are computer guided. It would take a lot for them to miss,” she said, a little impatiently. Her time apprenticing as a starship mechanic was nearly over, so she knew from experience.

“Wow!” said the overly enthusiastic Slantacring as the *Ingram* loosed its volley that took out their shields. “Oh, my....” he said after he picked himself up once their port nacelle had been destroyed.

Amantasoul gulped at the damage to their vessel, then frowned. “Why have they stopped firing?” she asked, concerned.

The answer came in the form of the sound of multiple transporter beams as a boarding party materialised. The new arrivals wore the uniforms of Homeworld Security and each carried a phaser, among other things. Some of which, when Amantasoul thought back later, would be useful for sabotaging a starship.

The six uninvited guests looked around them to get their bearings, then found themselves surrounded by thirty very angry Caits – not all of them black.

The Starfleet security guards keeping a friendly eye on them from the doorway raised their weapons to fire on the boarders, but found they couldn't get a shot as the one time prisoners exacted their revenge, and there was nothing subtle about it as they quickly despatched them in grizzly fashion.

So stunned were the security guards that they froze. By the time one of them considered stunning them en masse with a wide beam the damage was already done. The whole episode lasted fifteen seconds, then the bodies were simply left in the middle of the floor. Almost afraid to look the two stepped over to look for lifesigns. It was clear once they got closer that it was a pointless exercise. The injuries were that severe. Some of the boarders were no longer in one piece. Crewman Andrew Simmons turned and vomited on the floor.

His partner's communicator chirped for attention. Crewman Sally Ryers, similarly nauseated, answered. It was her boss, Lieutenant Manny Sandage, calling from the Bridge. "We've had an intruder alert and found they boarded in your area," she said urgently. "Can you confirm?"

The young Ensign glanced her at the former prisoners who were cleaning the blood off themselves with a satisfied air, then answered. "Yes, ma'am, I can confirm

we were boarded by a raiding party of six. I can also confirm that they chose the wrong place to board us.”

Manny gave a wry grin at the reply as she felt pride for her kin below. She simply answered: “Too bad for them,” then closed the commlink. She switched off the intruder alert alarm. “The situation is under control, Captain,” she reported, deadpan.

The Captain was too busy to answer verbally. She responded with a nod as she worked to keep them alive. The port warp nacelle was toast, of that she was certain. Whilst the ship could still theoretically go to warp, it would be only warp one and that for only a short time before the remainder of the port nacelle caused them more grief.

Scanner had immediately shut down the flow of plasma to the nacelle as a trail of it could have been easy for the Captain of the *Ingram* to decide to ignite, and then they would have been in a world of trouble.

“Take us to warp one and get us around the moon,” she ordered calmly. “And keep circling it at warp until I say otherwise.”

Piper's replacement helmsman frowned in confusion, but input the order obediently anyway. The *Millennium* shot away from the *Ingram* which quickly fell behind as Piper sought the protection of the planetoid.

On the bridge of the *Cait's Roar*, the captain roared in delight. "Watch the Federation female run!" he said smugly. "Lay in an intercept course and follow her."

The helmsman acknowledged the order then took a moment as he entered the instructions into the board which still read in Federation Standard. Whilst he had taken courses, it was still far from being even his second language. By the time the *Cait's Roar* leapt into warp, the *Millennium* had already disappeared around the other side of the moon.

Piper watched the tactical display on her chair arm for just the right moment. When the *Ingram* was no longer visible, she ordered: "Raise the cloak! Helm, take us away from the moon at a perpendicular angle.....now!" She then hit the chair control to call Engineering. "Scanner! I need you put a containment field around the port nacelle, then load it up with some plasma as quickly as you can. Beam a few photon torpedoes into it for good measure."

The voice of incredulity sounded from the speaker. "You're not going to do what I *think* you're going to do, are you?"

The Captain nodded, even though the gesture was lost on the engineer. "You bet!" she said confidently. "Now, get to it!" She then turned back to the viewscreen with a feral grin on her face, her eyes set in stone. "I didn't start this fight, but by God I'm going to finish it!"

Captain Draltashack of the *Cait's Roar* looked at the viewscreen incredulously. Where had the *Millennium* disappeared to? The vessel was crippled and should still have appeared on their screens and scanners, and yet there was no sign of her. He frowned to himself. There was something strange going on here, that was for certain. He glanced over at the Science Station. "Well, where are they?" he snapped, letting his irritation show.

The Science Officer shook her head in amazement. "I don't know what to say, Captain. Our scanners show that she was there one second, then gone the next." Still shaking her head, she said: "I just don't understand it!"

Draltashack ticked off the clues on his fingers. "Warp crippled, limited to *maybe* warp one and impulse power. Where does that leave us?"

The Science Officer rolled her eyes. "It's almost as if they had a cloaking device."

The Captain laughed. "The Federation doesn't use them. They think it's not "sporting"." And yet, as he considered it, the notion had some validity. The engineers who had initially examined the *Ingram* had noted that something appeared to be missing – as if it had yet to be installed, and whatever it was, it was linked to the shields. "Not possible," he said, before he got the surprise of his life.

On the *Millennium's* viewscreen, the *Ingram* grew in size as they closed in at full impulse. With the vessel's cloak raised, the *Ingram* had no clue they were coming.

As they closed to one kilometre from their target, Piper's plan was put into effect. What she wanted had to be timed so precisely that she gave no order, but simply sat back and let her people do their jobs.

At the one kilometre mark, three things happened. Firstly, the explosive bolts that released the port warp nacelle in times of emergency engaged, severing it from the pylon on which it sat, but not affecting the megaphaser emplacement below it. Secondly, the *Millennium* came to an abrupt stop. Thirdly, the detached warp nacelle kept going, shooting forward without losing any momentum and out of the space enveloped by the cloak. Like a oversized bullet, it kept going at a thousand kilometres an hour and crossed the distance between them in seconds. Loaded with plasma and with the torpedoes acting as detonators, it exploded against the top of the *Ingram's* primary hull with a concussion like a small sun exploding that not only destroyed the shields, but caved in much of the top surface of the *Ingram's* hull and even buckled the central pylon connecting the primary and secondary hulls!

Not done, the *Millennium* decloaked, becoming visible to sensors and the naked eye to use the opportunity to act while the *Ingram* crew were undoubtedly shell-shocked. The Federation flagship moved in swiftly to deliver the fatal blow. Now, with the *Ingram* within

striking distance of the *Millennium's* megaphasers, Piper had her ship close the distance with her ship turning slowly on her Y-axis, appearing to spin around her deflector dish as the megaphasers did their deadly work. The manoeuvre made it possible for her phasers to cut *right through* the *Ingram's* primary hull like a knife so that the beams projected beyond the hull! They cut through deck plates, power conduits, and especially data cables, to not only cut off the bridge's control of the ship, but to literally cut the bridge *out* of the rest of the vessel!

It took all of fifteen seconds to complete the task, but when they were finished, the centre of the *Ingram's* primary hull floated free of the rest of it, atmosphere venting from sections that were not already closed off.

Piper toggled her chair arm for a commlink to Engineering. "Scanner, I need an energy burst to knock out the rest of the *Ingram's* power systems. Make sure nothing works."

From the other end of the commlink, Scanner gave a resigned: "Aye."

The Captain gave a wry grin. "Don't worry, Scanner. I'm going to give them five minutes to float around, then we're going to beam the survivors straight into the brig."

She heard a dark chuckle from Scanner. "Serves them right, I suppose, for what they did to my ship."

"I wouldn't worry about needing a tow for us, my friend," the Captain said, gazing at the view screen. "I'm

looking at a whole pile of spare parts to fix our damaged systems.”

“I hear that!” Scanner said, then delivered the pulse his Captain requested as he had been organising it while they had been talking.

On the view screen, the *Ingram* suddenly began to spark all over as the energy pulse worked its way through every remaining system, just in case someone on board her decided to try and continue the fight from either Engineering or Auxiliary Control. Piper noted the pulse was directed, and that Scanner was paying particular attention to avoid the warp nacelles. She smiled to herself and considered herself fortunate once more to have such a brilliant crew.

Piper turned to Manny. “Make the arrangements, Lieutenant,” she said with a grin.

The white Cait turned with a smile of her own and headed for the turbolift. “With pleasure, Captain,” she said as she disappeared below decks. She shared her husband's heart. It pained him that his ship had been so badly damaged, and so it hurt her. She just knew she would have to be on her guard to not let it affect her professionalism whilst dealing with her prisoners.

At the Conn, Piper turned back to view the screen. Her actions had brought about a victory, but the cost so far was a badly damaged ship. She took great pride in her vessel, but more importantly in her crew, for without the latter you cannot have the former. She raised her voice a

little to get everybody's attention. "People, listen up! This is what I want you to do...."

Chapter Twenty-Five

The battle for Cait had begun. And yet not a single shot had been fired. Watching from his vantage point in the trees, Crash sat nervously hoping that his gamble would pay off. Before him and across the field between the forest trees and the Parliament complex lay a virtual minefield for his people to cross.

True, he could simply have the people move across in great numbers, but he had no doubt that would result in hundreds of casualties, particularly on his side of things. He had no intention of letting anyone who had sided with him die unnecessarily.

Next to him, Susanna rubbed him between his shoulders to try to ease some of his tension. "You're a ball of worry, my dear," she said with a small smile. Her attempts at lightening his mood did little more than take some of the rough edges off it.

Krashtallah turned to look at his wife, the concern he felt plain in his eyes. "I have good reason to, Suzy," he said with a sigh. He gestured at the field before them. "These Cait are highly trained people who will no doubt kill quickly and efficiently."

His wife nodded her agreement then gave him a cheering smile. "Then it's a good thing we have an Ace up our sleeve."

The reference was not lost on her husband. The Captain had taught her people how to play poker. She said it was good training, although right now he didn't see how it could help him. "You never know when you'll need a good Poker face," she often said during a game.

Poker. There were more lessons to learn from the game than just how to keep a straight face. Crash smiled as an idea crystallised in his head.

And just in time. Susanna's communicator, now in Crash's possession, chirped in his hand. He tapped a button on it to send a similar chirp to the sender. It was a "go" signal.

Crash peered through the leaves at a trench about two hundred metres forward of his position, to the right. There seemed to be a commotion within it and one Cait could be seen to be frantically trying to jump out of the trench when they were mysteriously pulled back into it. Suddenly, there was silence.

In his own language, Crash could hear people calling out to them. "Hey, are all right over there?" The silence was practically deafening, as Crash had given instructions that all his people – over a million of them – remain silent until he called.

One soldier was sent to investigate. He scurried over and dropped into the trench. A scream was heard then no more.

"What's going on over there?" an officer called. He was answered with more silence.

There was another chirp from Crash's communicator. He replied similarly once more.

This time the commotion came from one of the armoured personnel flitters that had a phaser cannon attached to its roof. It rocked from side to side for a moment, then all was still.

Seeing the machine move, an officer popped his head over the edge of the trench he stood in and gazed at it through a set of binoculars. There were no signs of movement from within. He had one of his people scan it for lifesigns, but there were none. All he could do was scratch his head in wonder. He pointed at one of his soldiers and told him: "Go and check it out."

After hearing the hysteria from the nearby trench, it was understandable that the soldier was reluctant to go. The soldier simply gulped, and wondered whether disobeying an order carried a penalty he could live with.

It wasn't. The officer pulled out his phaser and vapourised him with it. He pointed it at the soldier next to the now vacant space. Nothing needed to be said. The soldier bounded up and out of the trench and bolted over to the armoured flitter, pressing himself against the side facing the Parliament buildings. He then looked inside and couldn't see anything for a moment until his eyes adjusted to the gloom within. With seeing came understanding.

"Well?" the officer hissed at him.

"They're all dead," the soldier shouted back.

An amplified voice issued from the forest. "It will continue if you don't lay down your weapons and surrender peacefully. You know me. I am Commander Krashtallah of Starfleet, and I am employing a new weapon developed in secret by our people. I don't have to come out to kill you. I can do it from here. Now, you know your brother Cait don't want to kill you. We want our two thousand year long peace to continue. But unless you surrender right now, we will have to use force."

It was a longshot, Crash knew, but he had to give it a try.

His answer was predictable. "I don't care what tricks you're playing, Blackie," the officer he had seen replied. It was a voice full of hatred. "We are going to hold the line and protect the Queen and our Parliament from the likes of you."

Crash sighed. He had guessed as much. He tapped twice on his communicator, a message telling Earhaht, who had been doing the damage out on the field, to return. He held up his hand and let it drop.

The signal was passed and, five seconds later, in excess of one million Caits roared at the top of their lungs. Susanna covered her ears as the air literally shook at the sound. Windows rattled, buildings shook, and even Merete covered her ears with her hands it was so loud.

Distracted by the noise, a number of soldiers and officers stood up to search for the source of the sound,

even though it was coming from everywhere about them. It was a mistake they would not have a chance to repeat.

Placed at random spacings around the complex Crash had stationed people who were good with a bow. As the soldiers revealed themselves, the archers took their shots and most of them found their targets.

Then all hell broke loose as the people of Cait, long weary of their abusive government and draconian laws, decided it was time for a change. As one, they rushed forward, the field filling with angry Cait in seconds. Some shots were fired, but the soldiers generally froze in fear. The veterans among them stood and fought, the General among them, yet they were overwhelmed by the sheer numbers of Cait.

Like a flood, they kept coming. If one fell, ten more took their place. Those guards foolish enough to offer resistance were literally bodily torn apart. Those wise enough to lay down their arms and simply not fight were generally left alone. The General put up a fairly good fight, but even a Cait like he, with his long history of proud victories, could not hope to win against the massive number of his people who poured into the field.

The General found, to his surprise, that he was simply restrained, his hands and feet tied, even as he watched another soldier under his command torn to shreds by the people's bare hands.

The roaring continued as the people kept coming. Finding their Caitian heart again, they took back the power

that had slowly been stripped from them, little by little, by a government that had not only taken away their rights under the guise of offering “security”, but had even gone so far as to tell them how they should think.

Caits poured into the Parliament building, seeking Ministers to seize. They were all under orders from Krashtallah. None of the Parliamentarians were to be killed. They, and their underlings, were to be taken alive.

The same for the Queen. However, some, in a frenzy of bloodlust after the complete obliteration of the security forces outside, continued their murderous spree.

In amongst the crowd were Krashtallah, Susanna, Drishtagoth, Gruntallah, Kintabung and Tish, who had joined them from another part of the field she had organised. They did their best to not only stay together, but to keep their people on target. Down the corridors of power they rushed, the people flooding in behind them. Susanna glanced behind them and worried that there might be such a crush that people would die of asphyxiation.

Through the outer office of the Prime Minister they flew, Tish taking a few of her people to seize the secretary, then they flooded into the Prime Minister's office.

It was empty.

Gruntallah nodded his understanding. “He used his personal transporter to escape,” he said knowingly. He looked back the way they had come. “I’d wager a number of cabinet members have fled the same way.”

“Where would they go?” Susanna asked. All she got in answer were blank looks.

Crash growled. He was not going to be refused justice, not when he was this close. He took out his communicator and flipped it open. “It can't hurt to try,” he said at Susanna's doubtful look. He spoke into the grille. “Krashtallah to *Millennium*.”

He got an answer quickly, but it wasn't who he expected. “*Jolly Roger* here, Commander. Lieutenant Briers commanding.”

Crash recognised the name. Briers was soon to leave for the Command Candidacy Course at Starfleet. Piper had been moving him around the different departments to learn them all before he left. She had high hopes he would make a good officer.

“Briers, it's good to hear your voice. Status Report.”

The noise down the hall was making it hard for Crash to hear him. At the sound of someone screaming, Crash sent Drishtagoth out to keep the peace.

Crash missed most of what was said. “Sorry, I didn't hear you.” He turned up the volume.

“Yes, Commander.” This time the sound was clearly heard. “The *Millennium* has just finished her engagement with the Caitian starship *Cait's Roar*. The Captain was victorious, but the *Millennium* won't be going anywhere for a little while. We're operating as temporary support for the fighters. We've just taken the last of them aboard. Also, the *Cork* is en route to the *Millennium* to assist.”

“Understood,” Crash said. “I need you to gather what ships you can and blockade Cait. I have a feeling the former government members might try to flee.”

“Roger, Commander. Blockade Cait and search for escaping prisoners.”

Crash gave a bloody grin. “I couldn't have said it better myself,” he said with a touch of mirth. “Watch for former Prime Minister Cardtasharp, Minister for Information Huttajink and especially the Queen. They are not, I repeat, not, to get off this planet.”

“Gotcha, Commander. Good hunting.”

Crash flipped the communicator shut and turned to his motley little band. “Next stop, the Palace.”

Matters were different at the Palace. Sheer reverence for the building and its history slowed the people down. Those who reached the huge, carved wooden doors that guarded the entrance found them unlocked, but so heavy they were difficult to move. Once they were a few metres apart, the masses pushed forward and the first people through the door found themselves in the huge entrance hall that led towards the Throne Room that was conveniently positioned near the front of the building for audiences. The Ballroom where the *Millennium* crew had been entertained days before was behind it.

The Entrance Hall was made, in true Caitian style, of redwood timber that was ornately carved on the walls and the pylons that held up the roof. Some held depictions of

warfare from the old times before the Teacher, while others told the story how his coming changed everything about their society. There was no furnishing, so the area was largely empty.

Except for the twenty-odd priests who stood between the doors and the Throne Room. Each wore a cassock, their hoods put back to reveal their white heads and faces. Each also stood conveniently close to a pillar.

The priest in the middle stepped forward. "HALT!" he called out so forcefully that the people responded. "YOU CAN NOT COME IN HERE! THIS IS THE HOUSE OF YOUR SOVEREIGN!"

The younger people among the crowd stopped, so conditioned were they to obey the will of the priesthood. Their elders stepped past them. One female spoke for all.

"Move aside. We don't have any argument with your kind today! We're only here for the Queen!"

The Priest shook his head. "You don't have the authority. The Queen holds the ultimate power on this world, short of God Himself."

The older female spoke again, her silvering fur rippling in anger. "The Queen is psychotic, and her time is over." She stepped forward, the others with her following her lead.

To their surprise, each priest shucked off his cassock, revealing skin tight black garments that held pouches and belts, each lined with different kinds of weapons. Across each priest's back was a quiver, full of arrows. As one,

each priest took out a metal bow and snapped it together so that the rope was tight and ready to fire. With blinding speed, each priest snatched out an arrow and fired, taking down twenty of the invaders. Two seconds later, they repeated the exercise and took down another twenty. Each expertly killed. Even if the arrow missed the heart, which they rarely did, the poison tip quickly finished the job.

Seeing forty of their fellows downed so quickly caused the crowd to panic, fearing they would be next. The crowd's bravado vanished as the people at the front desperately pushed to get out as the masses outside fought to get in. It was sheer pandemonium as those caught in the middle were crushed to death.

The priests paused for a moment, taking delight in the ease of the turnaround. Their leader noted that they weren't leaving as quickly as hoped, so, with a nod, they each took out another arrow and slowly placed it in their bow.

Those in the crowd watching them scrambled even harder to get out and managed to force the people outside where the sheer weight of people pushed the doors closed once more. Those caught in the doorway quickly perished for lack of air.

Standing on the roof of the Parliament building opposite, Krashtallah watched the shocking melee. Taking an offered megaphone, he called to the crowds. "STOP!" he cried, putting every ounce of authority into his voice.

It took a moment, but he managed to get the people's attention. "Move back!" he called. "You're crushing the people at the doors!"

The sea of tan below rippled and moved away from the palace, as the waters receding from the shore. As they did so, the carnage became apparent.

"Damn," muttered Susanna when she saw the bodies. She took her husband's elbow. "This isn't your fault, you know," she said.

Crash nodded. "I know. The doors were open, now they're not. Somehow, the people were pushed out again. But how, I don't know." He looked up as a shadow passed over the sun. It was a news flitter, beaming out images of the event to the world. He gestured for it to come lower.

Helpfully, the pilot brought the craft down to roof level. Crash saw that it was a News Prime flitter, and the reporter was someone he was familiar with. "Can you take us down there?" he asked, pointing at the Palace doorway.

Fear for his safety waged against his desire for the scoop. That much was obvious as the emotions played over the reporter's face. Greed got the better of him. "Okay," he said, dazzled that he had not only the coup leader in his flitter to quiz, but the Leader of the Opposition and the Federation Ambassador!

The flitter lifted off and Krashtallah found himself nose to nose with a remote camera. "So, how do you feel that the coup is going so far?" the reporter asked.

Crash, Susanna and Drishtagoth shared a look of sheer incredulity at the inanity of the question. Susanna smiled and replied, off camera, in as droll a voice as she could: "It seemed like a good day for it."

Both Crash and Drishtagoth covered their mouths to hide their laughter as the flitter bumped to the ground. The crowd had moved back to make room for them. No sooner had they touched down than Crash opened the door and jumped out. Susanna ambled after him and Drishtagoth took a final look at the camera before disembarking. "For those watching this from home, please don't transport over here. Stay at home where it is safe. The situation is under control." With that said, he followed the Llashs over to the Palace doorway.

"What pushed them back?" Susanna reiterated.

Crash looked at the crowd nearby and saw a male who looked terrified. He stepped over and looked him in the eye. "Do you know who I am?" he asked.

The male gulped, then nodded. "Yes, sir."

Crash put his paw on the male's shoulder in a friendly manner. It seemed to calm him a little. "Can you tell me what happened in there?"

His new friend gulped once more, then told the tale. He was a little off on the details, but the overall story was accurate.

Crash nodded his thanks. "You're sure they were wearing black outfits and they were carrying bows."

"Yes, sir," the male repeated, nodding.

The Commander gave him a short bow. "Thank you, sir," he said, honouring him. "What clan do you come from?"

The male's back straightened proudly. "The Prest can, sir," he said with a delighted grin.

Crash spoke from the heart. "You bring honour to your clan today, my friend." He then took his leave of him and returned to his associates. "We've got a problem. But I've got an idea."

Ten minutes later, Krashtallah stood at the hidden rear doorway he had escaped through only two days before. In his hand he held a tricorder he had ordered beamed down from the *Jolly Roger*. It was currently switched to scan for life signs, so he had an accurate location of every person in the Palace – what there were of them.

Although Crash had a suspicion that the Queen had already fled, he had to know for sure. The monarch and the parliamentarians needed to answer for their crimes, although he knew the crowd were out for blood and would be quite happy to dispense old fashioned justice.

He took another look at the readout and smiled. It seemed that this old entrance had been forgotten as it lay unguarded. Escorted by his bride, Drishtagoth and two other willing Opposition Party members, Crash opened the door, careful not to let the aging wood creak under the strain.

Drishtagoth stepped forward, eager to enter, when Crash shot out his hand and held him back. "Just because they're not guarding this door, it doesn't mean they haven't left something nasty." Crash scanned beyond the door for signs of electronics or explosive devices. There were none. "It doesn't hurt to be cautious," he said in a whisper.

Together, the small party walked down the dim hallway illuminated only by the light shining through the door. Within moments, they passed the cell Crash had been held in, and as he looked into it, he remembered the pain he had felt whilst in that dank place. Of loneliness, but mostly despair after believing that his bride was lost to him. The memory of that day passed over his face like a shadow, and Susanna picked it up.

"What is it?" she whispered.

He looked down at his wife and wondered what had motivated him to bring an *Ambassador* into this situation. She didn't have the training to face their opponents. He realised he just wanted her with him so he could protect her, as he had failed to do so only days before.

Suddenly doubting, he stopped their little party. "Are you sure you're up to this?" he asked, the worry he felt for her very evident in his voice and solemn eyes.

Susanna looked up into her husband's eyes and loved him even more for his concern. "Don't worry, my dear. I may be an Ambassador, but I'm not entirely useless," she said with a small smile.

The joke brought a laugh from the politicians, but only a smile to Crash's face.

"I have had training in the Martial Arts, my dear, so you don't have to worry about me." She allowed the anger she felt burn in her eyes. "Besides, I want some good old-time revenge."

Drishtagoth looked from one to the other of them. "You can't argue with that," he said agreeably, a knowing smile on his face. He patted Crash on the shoulder. "Sometimes, it's just best to agree with them. Believe me, ten years of marriage has taught me a few things."

Crash looked from one of them to the other then rolled his eyes and capitulated. "Okay then. Let's do this." He opened the door leading into one of the Palace's lush corridors which was eerily empty. "Follow me. If we do this right, there should be no more bloodshed."

A few minutes later, after finding the right doorway, they found themselves in cramped conditions, huddled together trying to see through the minute cracks in the walls. The ancient hidden passageways within the walls were labyrinthine, but, with the help of Crash's trusty tricorder, he managed to make sense of them.

Without making a sound, Crash flashed his light twice, his signal to his little troupe that everything was set. He took out his communicator and tapped the call button, twice.

At the front door, Earhaht had been sitting, waiting for his call. As ordered, she charged the doors and smashed them open, leaving only splinters.

Startled, the priests regathered to take care of their new nemesis. However, they were totally unprepared to deal with an oversized rock.

Earhaht pushed past the fallen and made for the nearest priest who was frantically firing his arrows at her. Naturally, they simply bounced off. Throwing stars, darts, knives, every weapon in their personal arsenals were ineffective as the Horta continued charging.

Only one of them was equipped with a phaser, and he made the mistake of shooting at her. At the full setting, all it did was chip off a fragment of her outer shell, which consisted partially of neutronium.

The desired effect did not come. Instead, it enraged her and the offending priest was flattened as she charged him. A brief scream was heard as she passed over him, leaving nothing but a charred, flattened corpse still smoking from the acids she had released.

Completely demoralised, the priests bolted for the inner doors, but they underestimated the speed of the angry Horta. Earhaht beat them to it then herded them into the corner.

The seething silicone lifeform swept back and forwards in front of them. "Now, drop your weapons and throw them over here!" she said as forcefully as she could through her voder.

Fearing for their lives, each shed their weapons and tossed them in a heap before Earhaht. Once they finished, Earhaht simply rolled over them and ate them. It took her all of two seconds. She moved back and sighed. "They were tasty."

Elsewhere in the building, the Queen's guards got the signal that their defences had been breached. "It's time to get you out of here," the Lieutenant said, a worried edge in his voice. He checked the outside corridor then closed the door, sealing the three guards plus the Queen inside. He then went over to the secret panel in her quarters that has also hidden behind a mural bearing a depiction of combat. He toggled the secret release and the panel slid aside, revealing five very annoyed felines, all bearing weapons set on stun.

Before the Queen or her guards could react, each was stunned senseless by Crash's troupe and dropped to the floor. As the guard's weapons were collected, and the Queen frisked as well, Crash scanned the room and the halls beyond once more for good measure. They were clear. "I love it when they underestimate us," he said with a grin.

Leaving the guards tied up in the room, Krashtallah slung the Queen over his shoulder and bodily carried her out of the room, down the halls and into the Palace Throne Room. He looked about him, ignoring the craftsmanship of the pillars, carvings and paintings, and decided this was

the best place for what he had in mind because of the technology it had to offer. He glanced up at the cameras mounted in the corners of the room then opened his communicator once more, selecting a general broadcast channel.

“This is Commander Krashtallah calling the news service flitters I know are hovering over the Parliament complex. I would appreciate you organising a royal audience broadcast in fifteen minutes. I have something to show the people of Cait.” Without waiting for a reply, he shut the cover with a snap. He stepped over to a low slung couch against one wall and unceremoniously dumped the Queen onto it. He pointed to Drishtagoth's fellows who had helped them capture her. “Guard her and be careful. Don't let her move a hair.”

The pair nodded then took positions at opposite ends of the couch, not once taking their eyes off her.

Susanna emerged from the back of the throne and walked over to her husband.

Curious, Crash asked: “What were you doing back there?”

His wife simply tossed her head and shrugged. “I always heard the real power was behind the throne. I just wanted to see if it was true.”

Crash's laughter echoed off the walls and brought restoration to his soul.

It turned out that in the hurry to join the fighting at the Parliament complex, someone had been forgotten. Lying on the floor of the Command Centre cells, in the dark, Zif remained bound and furious beyond reason. He had been muttering to himself for some time, cursing the General, his aides, and the entire military for having the affront to incarcerate him at all. Soon after he had regained consciousness, he had quickly discovered that yelling for someone to at least bring him some water had proven completely useless. He had listened intently, and heard absolutely nothing. The complex appeared deserted.

He wanted some medical aid as well. His nose was still causing him the sheerest agony, but he still blew out the blood that had congealed within his nostrils. The pain had brought tears to his eyes, but at least he could breathe – after a fashion.

What added insult to injury was he badly needed to empty his bladder, but he was far too dignified to relieve himself in his robes.

Blane, the technical whiz/priest, sat in his chair in their underground complex located approximately one hundred metres below the Temple. It was the main reason the Temple had a dampening field in place around it lest prying eyes discover their brain centre.

It was a centre with few people left. In fact, with the priesthood helping out with the defence of the Parliament complex and the protection of the Queen, there were only a

handful left to man their posts here. Blane had been left in charge, and, now Zif had disappeared and it was apparent the government had fallen, the usually cheerful Blane felt a very large target painted on his chest. He was under no illusion that, once the truth came out about the black's demise, they would come for them next. Who knows? The people might hurl them into the sun as well.

He tapped the controls that changed the views of the action being beamed out from a number of different news services. They had made it clear that Commander Krashtallah of Starfleet would shortly be making an announcement from the Palace. If anyone other than the Queen was making an announcement, it would not be good for the priesthood.

One of the junior priests looked at Blane, worried and unsure. "What should we do now?" he asked fearfully.

The elder priest simply looked up at him and snorted. "What we're not going to do is wait around here for that mob to come and nail us to the Destiny Tree as well. A revolution is taking place today, and I'm afraid the priesthood's time is over." He waved at the rest of his fellows, about ten in all. "It's time to use our exit plan and get off Cait before we end up like the Queen."

Another priest interjected. "What about Zif?"

Blane's whiskers twitched. While he did not have a fond bone in his body for Zif, there was a certain loyalty amongst the priests. "He seems to have disappeared. If he was all right, he would have contacted us. I can only guess

he's either dead in the fighting, or captured. Either way, he's history." With that said, he got out of his chair and turned off the monitors. "People, it's time to get the hell out of here before we find that hell is our next destination."

Once the remains of the Palace doors had been removed, a large number of Cait had made their way inside, many of them amazed at the opulence around them. Those who could fit inside found themselves observing an amazing scene.

Drishtagoth and his Opposition Party had taken centre stage before the now empty throne. The Queen, now recovered from her stun blast, was sitting on the couch, staring with open hatred at Krashtallah and Susanna, who were standing with Drishtagoth.

Standing before them was the General, unbound, and compliant. He had recognised that the government had fallen, and that Drishtagoth's party would now be assuming legal power. As such, he had sworn loyalty to protect the now official government of Cait.

Even over the murmuring in the hall, the Queen could hear the – in her eyes traitorous – General reporting to Drishtagoth. "You should know that Zif is in custody back at the Command Centre cells. He attacked me earlier and we had to restrain him."

The new Prime Minister smiled. "That is good news, General. We will send someone over to collect him."

Grunatallah stood nearby with Kintabung. He was sullen, resigned to his fate, but willing to assist in the transfer of power. "Krashtallah, perhaps you could simply have your starship beam him over."

The General nodded in agreement. "The power went out over there, so the dampening field we had running would be down. You could do that."

Krashtallah flipped open his communicator. "Krashtallah to *Jolly Roger*."

His answer was not from the *Jolly Roger*. "Commander!" came Piper's familiar voice. "It's good to hear from you! The *Millennium* is in orbit over the Capital and is ready to assist you."

The smile that came over Crash's face lit up his very soul. "Captain, could you please scan the Military Command Centre? There's a single Cait in a cell there. I would appreciate him being beamed directly to our location."

"Will do, Commander," Piper said amiably.

It would take a minute to scan the building, Crash was certain. He turned his attention to the cameras and ordered they be switched on for the public to see and hear. Then he glanced at Feentathat and growled: "Before we do anything else, I want to know what you've done with King Kraltathat."

The former Queen looked at him cheekily and said without blinking an eye: "He's on my bedroom shelf."

Crash stepped forward menacingly. He was in no mood for games. "I was just in there. He wasn't there."

Coyly, Feentathat played with her whiskers before engaging him once more. "Your beloved King is in a jar on the mantle." She shrugged nonchalantly. "At least his ashes are. The vapouriser did a good job on him. At least his ashes can be useful as fertilizer now." She glared at him, daring him to do something about it.

Fists balled, Crash took another step towards her, but he found his wife's hand on his arm, restraining him. "She's baiting you, my dear," she said quietly. "Don't let her win."

The moment was broken as a transporter beam lit up the room in front of Crash and Zif appeared, bound and lying on the floor, and looking very much the worse for wear.

"What is the meaning of this!" Zif began. "I demand you release me *at once!*" he cried.

The comlink was still open. "Let me guess," Piper said with more than a touch of sarcasm. "Zif. Give him my love." Before she cut the link, she added: "By the way, Commander. The *Jolly Roger* picked up someone you might know trying to leave the planet in a private yacht. He wasn't too happy about being beamed out of his ship. I'll have him sent right down to you."

This just got better and better, Crash thought to himself. He glanced at his wife who was beaming with joy. It was starting to look like it was finally over.

Once more a transporter beam coalesced into the form of Cardtasharp, looking fit to be tied. No sooner had he materialised he swung on Krashtallah in fury. "I'll get you for this, if I have to use my last breath. I will have my revenge."

Crash scowled at the one time dictator and growled. "You will be lucky to survive the day, Card. Take some free advice and shut up."

Drishtagoth, glared at his former political rival, and growled loudly. "Officer Graptasan!" he called into the crowd.

The police officer and a number of his people stepped forward. "Take these people into custody," Drishtagoth ordered. "The charge is Genocide, among other things."

The word brought a hush to the crowd. There were few crimes that could bring about a possible death sentence on any Federation world. Chief among them was the one they were being charged with.

Beyond rational reason, Zif exploded: "We had every right to wipe out the Blacks!"

There were even a few supporters in the crowd. They were silenced quickly, and brutally.

Drishtagoth looked over at the sole humanoid in the room. She wore a Starfleet uniform and seemed itching to share something. "Doctor Merete AndrusTaurus of Altair Four has something to share with us regarding the Priesthood's claims regarding the Blacks."

Merete stepped forward into the middle of the Palace floor and addressed the room. "My fellow Cait, some of you know me as Merete AndrusTaurustaBrisk. Adopted by a noble Cait clan, I speak as one of you."

There were derisive growls from the crowd. Thankfully, she had allies in the audience. "This is true!" a friendly voice was heard to say. The owner of it managed to push his way through, followed by Tish. Tisktabrisk bowed to the Doctor. "This female is a brave and honourable person who risked her life in our cafe only days ago to save not only herself and her friends, but a good number of our fellow Cait. Her heart is Cait! She is noble and, because of her deeds, our clan adopted her." He stood by the Doctor's side proudly. "We stand with her and will back whatever she has to say!"

Tish chimed in with her valley girl manner. "Totally!"

All eyes turned to the Doctor. While her friends had been speaking, she had set up a small holographic projector on the floor that was connected to a padd in her hand.

"My friends, hear me!" she said, raising her voice slightly. She didn't have to shout. The acoustics in the room were excellent. "Thanks to the dilligence of Cait's priesthood, we managed to analyse a sample of the Teacher's blood. There have been claims by the priests that the Blacks were somehow involved in his death. Others amongst the Believers insisted there was no mention of the colour of anyone's fur in the scriptures. Our

examination of them, and I'm sure many of you have done the same, have confirmed this."

There were nods of agreement from many, along with a number of positive "Yes" statements. The crowd was generally following her willingly.

"How did you get that?" Zif challenged angrily.

Merete looked a little embarrassed. "We took the sample from the spike you have in your museum."

The statement brought some rumblings of unrest, but they quietened down quickly once Merete started talking again.

"I'm sorry, my friends," she said. "It was the only way to test the blood and verify the priest's claims."

Someone yelled out in the crowd. "The priests have been telling us for generations that the Teacher was white and the Blacks killed him because they hated his message."

There were a number of murmurings of agreement at that.

The Doctor gave them a wan smile. "I personally tested the sample. I managed to date it as approximately two thousand years old, even though it's been in a stasis field almost as long. Then I used the DNA to create a physical representation of the Teacher holographically." Before anyone could object, Merete manipulated the controls. "This is what he would have looked like."

Appearing to stand before them was an apparently solid Caitian male. His eyes were blue and he was of

average height. However, his fur was not white, or even tawny. It was jet black.

The reaction from the crowd was instantaneous. Whilst none of them moved to threaten her, there were many voices of indignation. "Lies!" some cried. "How can this be?" others asked in wonder. While others howled in anguish at the realisation they had lived under a lie all their lives.

There was one in the room who was convinced the whole thing was a bald faced lie. And she wasn't going to stand for it.

Former Queen Feentathat seized the opportunity as the two guarding her turned to look at the hologram. Most underestimated her as she was smaller than the usual female, and that was a fatal mistake for some.

Feentathat leapt to her feet and brought down both of her captors with either her feet or her tail. She gathered up one of their phasers as it fell from their slack grips, quickly reset it to kill, then pointed it at Susanna and pulled the trigger.

The General had noted the commotion coming from the couch and reacted quickly. Seeing the Queen take aim he did the only thing he could do to save someone he was sworn to protect. He got in the way of the phaser bolt.

He was instantly vapourised. Galvanised into motion, the rest of the government figures started moving, spoiling the former Queen's aim. With one last possible chance for revenge, she turned the weapon in the direction

of Gruntallash and fired, hoping to at least kill the traitor before it was her turn to die.

She missed. However, she didn't miss Kintabung, who took the blast squarely in the chest. Without even a chance to say goodbye, Gruntallash watched, shocked, as his mate vanished in a puff of plasma and smoke.

It was at that moment that something extraordinary happened. In the middle of the room, an averaged sized, tawny female stood, effectively blocking the way for either side to shoot each other. She held up her hands, palms outward and cried out: "STOP!"

Such was the power and authority behind that one word that everyone in the room did just that. They stopped.

Having taken the impetus, the young female addressed the crowd again, her every word coming as a command. "There has been enough killing today! Lower your weapons!"

There was something in her voice that just compelled everyone to obey. Even Feentathat lowered her weapon. It was taken from her by one of the police officers and she was restrained by nylon ties.

The female spoke again. "I am Cast of the Shack clan. Some of you know me simply as Faith. As one who is a firm believer in the Teacher's ways, I will remind you all that violence is not his way. Now, what is done is done, and yes, the government was corrupt and needed to be

deposed. God is just as he is loving. Justice needed to prevail, and it has."

The young female had captured the attention of the entire room, and, through the video feeds from the wall mounted cameras, the entire world. No matter where one was, everybody hung on her words.

"Now the rightful government can take its place to guide our people, I pray with the Teacher's leading." She turned and addressed Drishtagoth and his people. "You have spent some time with our people and learned the true ways of the Teacher. Be guided by them and we will find that God will bless our world and we will have a peace that outshines anything we have ever seen before. Let Cait be an example to the entire Federation."

Her words stirred the pride of the people. Many cheered.

Krashtallah and Susanna simply watched her, proud of their young friend. She was throwing the needed bucket of cold water over the people's hot temper.

Faith turned back to the people. All eyes watched, every ear strained to hear what she would say next.

"My brother and sister Cait, our voice has been heard. Our actions have brought us the changes that were necessary, but now it is time to go home and pick up the pieces. Our elders will guide us back to the kind of people we once were. We looked for friends and made them freely, not worried about where the knife might come from.

Let the streets be places of fun and joy once more.” She smiled and the people smiled back at her.

It was time for a serious note. “The former government is now in custody, and will be tried according to our laws. Let us no longer take the law into our own paws. If we don’t respect our lawgivers and enforcers, we may as well not have any. And we certainly won’t deserve them.”

Many nodded agreement, while others looked a little guilty.

Faith finished up with: “Now, my friends, go and be at peace. May the Teacher bless your paths and may you love your fellows – whether tawny, white, black or offworlder.”

She joined Krashtallah and Susanna and watched as the crowds began to disburse. The transporters for miles around worked overtime beaming everyone back to their home towns. It took hours, but eventually, everyone got home.

In the Throne Room, Drishtagoth stepped over and regarded the former Queen with an almost pitying eye. “Feentathat, you are hereby deposed by the lawful government of Cait. You are stripped of title and any authority that you have been granted. It is clear to me now that you only ever ascended to the throne of Cait as a plant from the Priesthood.”

Feentathat gave a low growl as she glared at the Prime Minister. “I don’t care what you say,” she spat. “I

am your rightful sovereign and only God Himself can change that.”

Drishtagoth shook his head, sadly. “I’m afraid you have always overestimated the role of Cait’s sovereign. According to our Constitution, your job was to safeguard our people from possible corruption in our government. You not only allowed it, you were *complicit* in their misdeeds. The position of sovereign is a political appointment, not a birthright.”

Not willing to waste any more time arguing the point with her, he turned and spoke to the officer in charge, Graptasan. “Officer, please escort this lady to the cells to be formally charged with murder and genocide, to start with.” He glanced back at the former Queen and frowned as he considered how many laws she had broken. “I’m sure we’re going to be spending a great deal of time just making a list of the formal charges against her.”

At this point, Faith stepped forward. “Excuse me, sir.”

Drishtagoth turned and smiled at the pint-sized hero of the day. “What can I do for the lady of the hour?” he asked charmingly.

“May I suggest that our former Queen be given psychiatric help? It’s clear she’s deranged.”

“Why such compassion for such an evil being?” he asked, surprised at the request.

Faith simply shrugged. "I just think it's what the Teacher would want us to do. Whatever she's done, we still have to love our fellows – whether friend or foe."

He sighed. "Such a pure heart," he said wistfully. "If only everyone thought like you." As he turned to Graptasan, a thought suddenly popped into his mind. A thought so radical it just might work. Apologising to the officer, he turned and addressed his fellow parliamentarians – all of which were of his party. "My friends, it appears we have a sudden vacuum in our position of sovereign. Even though our government is one-sided at the moment, we must restore some checks and balances to ensure even we don't start making the mistakes of the past. We need someone looking over our shoulder. Someone we can trust to not let the job go to their head." He took Faith gently by the arm and presented them to his friends. "I nominate Faith, or Casttashack as she is known to her clan, to be our new sovereign."

Faith's eyes went wide with amazement at the suggestion. "Are you sure you want me?" she asked, a little fearfully.

Drishtagoth looked down at her and gave her a smile filled with confidence. "I'm certain of it." He turned back to his fellows. "Do I have a second?"

He got not one, but twenty people wanting to second the motion. It was passed unanimously and to the applause of all, excluding their prisoners.

“You can't be serious!” Feentathat snarled, furiously straining against her bonds. “You can't replace me with this pathetic *child!*”

Before anyone could respond, Faith approached her with a look of sadness on her face. “For all you've done, you will be punished. However, Feen of the That clan, I pity you.”

“How *dare* you,” Feentathat spat. She struggled for release, but found the officers holding her more than equal to the task.

Faith sighed. “You had the world in your hand and, instead of helping it grow and mature, you tried to crush it. Your reign will be remembered for all the wrong reasons, and, after you leave this place, you will be forgotten. Whatever time you have left to you by God will be miserable.” She spoke from the heart. “Oh, how great you could have been! But you thought of yourself more than the people you were sworn to serve. Pride is the worst of our failings, and I hope you learn to see past yours before you stand before your Maker and give an account for your life because I can assure you, he won't be the least bit impressed by your record to date.”

With that said, Drishtagoth nodded to the guards and they dragged her from the room, screaming. The sound was insane, like a banshee on cocaine. Feentathat's dreams had come true, and she had witnessed for herself the one who would replace her would not seek to harm her. She couldn't understand it, and it tipped her over the edge.

As the sound diminished, the Prime Minister put his arms around both Susanna and Crash and drew them to himself. "I want to thank you both for all you have done." He paused for a moment as the tension he had felt was finally being released. The joy he felt was threatening to overwhelm him. "Cait is free again, and I have the two of you to thank most of all."

To their credit, neither husband nor wife were willing to take any credit. Crash summed it up by stating: "We were only doing our duty."

Drishtagoth nodded his understanding. "All the same, I want the two of you to be our guests at a state dinner we will hold the night after next, right here in the Palace." He turned and grinned at Faith. "That is, if the Queen doesn't mind."

If Faith could have blushed, she would have. "I would be honoured, sir," she said sheepishly.

Crash looked into the eyes of his wife and saw only agreement, not that he would have expected anything else from her. "We, too, would be honoured, sir. But if I may, I would like to invite some friends along as well."

"Absolutely! Bring along your entire starship crew if you like!" Delighted, he wondered if there was anything that could spoil the rest of his day. Out of the corner of his eye, Drishtagoth saw something he had almost overlooked and realised he still had some unpleasant business to deal with. "I'm sorry, but we almost forgot something." He waved to the officers standing nearby, and they dragged

forward both Cardtasharp and Zif, neither of which was willing to come.

Drishtagoth walked up to Zif and looked him in the eye. He was looking very much the worse for wear with his blood-stained cloak and smashed face. "Zif," he spat angrily, "you are to be charged for your part in the conspiracy to commit genocide."

Defiant to the end, the priest said smoothly. "You have no proof."

Almost forgotten, Doctor AndrusTaurus spoke up from near one of the great stained-glass windows. "Actually, that's not true." She continued as she moved over to join the Llashs. She carried a Caitian computer tablet in her hand. "I was told by Gruntallash that this contains a video recording of Zif confessing to being the leader of this world's Assassin's Guild." She patted the bag slung over her shoulder. "Also, our Lieutenant Brankovian investigated the death of a News Prime reporter and found white hairs from his assailant. I have the evidence bag with me."

Remembering his encounter in the forest with the assassin, Crash took a small plastic bag out of his own equipment and held it up to the light. He spoke up for all to hear. "I, too, had a run-in with an assassin. Before he killed himself and dissolved himself with an acid tablet, which was pretty disgusting to watch if you ask me, I managed to rip some hair from him." He jiggled the baggie. "As you can see, they're white."

The Prime Minister frowned. "What are you saying?"

Crash put it all together for him. "I'm saying the the Preisthood and the Assassin's Guild are the same people, or at least the Preists run them. Either way, they're responsible for them."

Drishtagoth rounded on Zif. "What have you to say for yourself?"

It was one of those rare times that the priest was silent. Susanna said with a touch of mirth: "I think that's what the humans call "pleading the Fifth"."

Something that Crash should have noticed but only just woke up to was the absence of his brother. "Where's Gruntallash?" he asked, annoyed at himself for the oversight.

There was some confusion among the gathering, but he was nowhere to be found among them. And then he answered the question himself as he appeared, sullen and seemingly completely lost, from the doorway Feentathat had left through before. "She took her from me," was the only thing he said, over and over again, as he shuffled over to his brother. He dropped an assassin's bow he had found and fell to the floor in a heap.

Krashtallah moved to help his brother and cradled his head in his hand. "I'm so sorry, brother, about Kintabung," he said, as compassionately as he could. "She was a fine female."

He wasn't sure Gruntallahash heard him. He just kept repeating: "She took her from me," in a semi-delirium.

Unnoticed behind Gruntallahash, the officers who had escorted Feentathat out now carried her in and placed her on a couch. The movement caught the crowd's attention. Protruding from her chest was one of the assassin's poisoned arrows. The truth of the situation dawned on everyone at once. Gruntallahash, by their ancient tradition, had taken revenge for the death of his mate.

Krashtallahash looked down on his brother and silently shed a tear for his loss. He knew, personally, just how devastating it was on the psyche to see your loved one destroyed. He held him for a moment until a medic took over and monitored his condition. "We'll have to take him to hospital," he said. The Commander nodded and watched his brother being escorted from the room.

As soon as she had seen the arrow, the Doctor hurried over to the couch, but she knew from experience there was little hope for the former Queen's survival. Her medscanner only confirmed what she already knew. Feentathat was long gone. As a last act of compassion for a compassionless woman, Merete gently closed Feentathat's eyes.

As all of this was happening, the former Prime Minister decided he could not miss an opportunity to rub salt in a sore wound, so he spat: "If this is your idea of justice, *Prime Minister*, then what chance will *we* have of even getting a fair trial?"

Drishtagoth simply levelled him with an angry glare. "You're forgetting all the people your regime killed, Card. There are a lot of people out there who want revenge for their lost family members, and they just might blame you."

Both Zif and Cardtasharp shared a worried look. They had never considered that their policies might end in their own destruction.

"Officer Graptasan," the Prime Minister called the air.

Eager to ingratiate himself to the planet's new leader, the officer almost ran forward. "Yes, sir?"

Drithagoth waved at the two villains and their cohorts who had remained in a silent huddle against one wall. "Make sure these people are treated with every regard due them under our law. Their rights are to be respected at all times. Treat them with dignity and have them escorted to a secure jail immediately. They will be tried in due course."

Graptasan knew the deal. If he wanted to *stay* in the new Prime Minister's good books, he had to make sure the order was carried out. He bowed respectfully then turned and made a few calls on his communicator. It was going to take some doing to achieve the goal. He looked up at the group he had been entrusted with. There were an awful lot of them.

Behind him, Drishtagoth waved his people together in the middle of the floor and spoke to them as their official leader. "My friends, we have been given a

mandate this day to rebuild our world's government. At heart, we are Cait, and we do not shy from our duty. We will bring prosperity to our world once more. Today, I want everyone to help with sorting out the mess I know we'll find in the Parliament complex. We may be members of Parliament, but we are the *people's servants*, not the other way around. Our lives will be an example to others of how a Cait should act. We should never forget the lives that were lost today to make it possible to make things right. Let's honour their sacrifice, and do it right."

As one, the crowd burst into a deafening roar that nearly shook the rafters.

Off to the side, Merete, Crash, Susanna and Faith now stood and watched. Susanna made a personal observation: "You know, since I met Drishtagoth only a couple of days ago, I've really seen him mature, not only as a person, but as a natural leader."

Crash nodded. "He'll do fine, of that I'm certain." He turned and smiled at his new sovereign. "Your Majesty, I hope we will see you at the dinner the Prime Minister is going to arrange?"

Faith arched her whiskers forward in amusement. "It's going to take some time to get used being called that," she said. She gave him one of her genuine smiles, right from the heart, and rubbed his cheek, fondly, with a paw. "I wouldn't miss it. Perhaps we'll have sheep on the menu?"

The three felines laughed, leaving the doctor wondering what was so funny.

Crash drew Merete and Susanna to his side and flipped open his communicator. "Krashtallah to *Millennium*. Three to beam up."

Chapter Twenty-Six

The next day was a sombre affair in the Capital. As the fallout was felt worldwide, the people stopped to remember their fallen dead.

It took some time for the bodies that littered the fields around the Parliament complex to be removed and prepared for burial. No autopsies were ordered. There seemed no point.

While most were identified and returned to their families so they could organise their funerals, some would never be found. A number of soldiers had been firing into the crowd with phasers set on full. The bodies of some would never be recovered as they had been disintegrated.

The new leaders of Cait helped out. They were a new breed of leader now they had come through this trying time. They were simply people who had fought alongside everybody else.

Including Queen Faith. Whilst her official title was Queen Castashack, her nickname seemed more fitting to the people. Dressed like everyone else, she had shunned any attempt by her guards to protect her and had gone out to honour the warriors on both sides.

Tish had been given a day off from the Starshine Cafe so she could help as well. She found herself working closely with Faith, and together they helped identify the deceased with Cait's version of a tricorder. They would

then print out a small card and place it next to the body to assist the coroner.

Faith had noticed that, following her every step, were a number of floating news cameras. While she had come to accept her new role, she found it difficult to realise her days of anonymity were behind her. She glanced up at them with an almost annoyed look, then turned back to her work.

“I think they should go away and leave you alone,” Tish said, giving the cameras a good scowl as if that would make them leave.

Faith shrugged. “I’m the Queen, now, and fame comes with being a public figure.” She turned her tricorder to the next body and scanned it. She read the screen then dropped it in shock. She looked down at the singed corpse and recognised it.

Suddenly, it was all too much. Faith dropped to her knees, buried her head in the dead male’s chest, and wept bitterly. The pain she felt overwhelmed her as it vented in great, choking sobs.

Concerned for her, Tish dropped down next to her and put her arm around Faith. A nearby guard tensed to assist the Queen then stopped when he realised Tish was only trying to help. Wisely, he left them alone.

“Who is it?” Tish asked gently as she held Faith close.

Faith came up for air. She choked out: “Krestapan, my spiritual leader. He was like a Father to me....” The

last words came out in a painful staccato as she dropped down once more and wept bitterly.

Tish became conscious of the closely hovering cameras and tried to shoo them away. They remained just out of arm's reach and Tish cried out at them: "Can't you just leave her alone?"

For a moment, Tish wondered if the cameras were operated by robots, but she realised they were not when, one by one, they departed to leave the Queen alone in her grief.

Krashtallah gazed out the window in the bar and thought back on the lengthy debriefing he had given the Captain and Commander Sarda. They had asked quite a lot of questions along the way, and it had taken several hours to complete. He sighed, glad it was over. However, he still had a written report to write, and he knew that could take forever.

He took another sip of his catnip and looked back on the ship. He could see a lot of the Engineering section from this portal, and the absence of the *Millennium*'s port nacelle was disturbing. The pylon was there, still sporting its megaphaser emplacement, but the nacelle was long gone.

He was aware that a recovery was under way by the Engineering team to scavenge the *Ingram* for useful parts, including its pair of warp nacelles. To be assured there

would be no sudden trips down artificial wormholes, they were taking the *Ingram's* matched pair.

He suddenly became aware of a presence at his elbow, and, given the fact that the individual had managed to sneak up on him, he realised it had to be his sister. "Hello, Shrallah," he said quietly without looking. His focus shifted to the reflection in the window and he gazed at her shiny, white face.

"Hello, Shrallal," Manny replied. "It's been a big day," she said in an offhand manner.

It was the understatement of the year, and they both knew it.

Crash wiggled his whiskers, a little amused by her comment. "I suppose it's not every day you get to take out an *Ingram-class* starship," he said with a little cheer.

His sister shrugged. "It's not every day you overthrow a planet's government, either." It was spoken as if it was simply small-talk they were engaging in, not matters of global import.

Crash nodded. "You're right about that. I'm sure it'll look interesting in my resume." With that said, he turned and affectionately rubbed noses with his sister. "It's so good to see you again. After all I've been through today, it's just good to touch base with a living family member."

Manny looked at him quizzically. "What do you mean?"

Krashtallah sighed. He knew he had to break the news to her. She needed to know. "Shrallah, our parents are dead at Zif's hand."

His sister's eyes went wide in surprise. Knowing he'd had a traumatic day, she fought the temptation to giggle. "Ahh, no they're not," she said, a little embarrassed for him. "Mother's in my quarters minding Drallah. I think Father's beamed down to collect his things from our family home. He's decided to move out."

"What?!" Crash spluttered. "Gruntallah told me they were dead."

It was Manny's turn to be surprised. "You talked to Grun?" She shook her head, trying to assimilate his statement. "Let's sit down." She guided Crash to an empty table and looked him in the eye. "Where's Grun?" she asked, concerned.

Someone had to go first, he realised. Both of them had tales to tell. He told his sister a quick version of his story, and especially the time he spent with their brother. As he told her of Kintabung's demise his sister shed a tear.

"Poor Grun," she said sadly. "He's been alone for so long."

Crash knew that was not about to change, whether he still had Kintabung or not. His actions in assisting the government's cause had probably reduced his possible sentence for his crimes, but he was still going to prison for an awfully long time. "Yes, he has," he found himself saying, feeling a long forgotten empathy for Grun. "I think

the shock was too much for him. I think he's going to be spending some time in mental rehab before going to a Federation penal colony.”

“I hope he gets some good help,” Manny said. She then went into her tale, including her adventures in an asteroid, its origins, and the rescue of their parents. She finished, quite proudly, with the details of their victory over the *Ingram*.

Her brother turned his glass in his hand, his thoughts seeming to dwell on the liquid it contained. Manny wondered for a moment whether he had heard her at all.

“Congratulations,” he said after pause. “I see your gift is coming in handy.” Her mental abilities were still something that amazed him.

Manny nodded. “I wouldn't be here without it.” She tried to sound cheerful, hoping the mood would be infectious. “What is the matter?” she asked when he again remained quiet. “You've gone from being a global fugitive to being its number one hero. You're no longer part of a second class. In fact, I heard that it's quite the opposite.”

Crash rolled his eyes. “I wonder if our people have truly learned anything from this escapade,” he said, his gaze inward. He looked up into his sister's eyes. “I wonder if, now the word is out that the Teacher was actually black, that the tables will be turned and the *whites* will be persecuted.”

His sister shook her head. “I don't think we can shrug off the programming of a millennia quite so easily.”

Crash shot her a look. "You did."

Manny took his paws in her own and gave her brother a loving smile. "I had a good teacher."

The compliment finally chipped away some of his foul mood and he gave her a small smile. "Thank you." He sighed. "What I'm worried about is that all the whites are being associated with the priesthood, whether they were a part of it or not. There has been word of a few lynchings in the last day."

Amantasandage looked shocked. "No! I thought our people were finally past that."

"There's a lot of bad feelings at the moment. I think the people are just mad they were fooled into following Zif's lead and now they don't know how to direct that anger effectively."

"Ah." Manny downed the last of her glass of catnip by throwing it down her throat. "Come with me. I've got something I want to show you."

Crash left his now empty glass on the table and followed her out the door and down the hall. They walked in silence down two decks until they reached the Sandage's cabin. Manny opened the door and ushered her brother inside.

What he saw gave him hope that his people were finally going to grow up. There, sitting on the couch, were his mother and the young kit Crash knew to be Drallah, whose letter had brought them home. They were watching an ancient video file on the wall, one he was familiar with.

Mister Nunn had a fondness for twentieth century cartoons. A little yellow bird with a peculiarly oversized head was pulling the fingers of a cat off a wire, causing him to fall into a ship's funnel and into its engines. The absurdity was not lost on him, and Crash let out a soul restoring laugh.

Distracted by the sound, Pashtallah and Drallah respectfully stood and welcomed them.

Still disappointed with his parent's behaviour, Crash didn't know how to address her other than: "Mother." The part of him that was just glad to see her alive won out and he added with a smile: "It's good to see you well. I had feared Zif had extinguished your light."

Overwhelmed by his generosity, Pash's eyes glistened with tears of joy. "Your sister has introduced me to a human custom called hugging. Can I give you one, please?"

Feeling a little guilty, Crash arched his whiskers forward and sighed. "You are my mother. You needn't see so formal." He opened his arms wide and gratefully accepted his mother's love.

"I'm so sorry, son," Pash said between sobs. "I've been a terrible mother."

Generously, her son told her gently: "Actually, you did a wonderful job considering the circumstances." He steered her back to the couch, Manny and Drallah following, and he sat her down without letting her go. He then started sharing with her what they had discovered during the course of their investigations previously. How

most families even denied they had a black member. He purposefully avoided mentioning the incident with Drallah's parents. "And here you are, the one being who fought for me and made sure I had a decent education." He looked her in the eyes with feeling. "You're a hero to me."

His words made Pash cry even harder. He sat there for some time holding her while she let it all out.

After about five minutes, Manny decided it was time to bring her mother back. "While I've got the two of you here, I've got an announcement."

Drallah looked up at Manny expectantly, grinning from ear to ear. He knew what was coming.

Now Pash had collected herself, Manny continued. "I've enquired of Drallah's parents, and, even though things have changed for the better on Cait, they have decided to relinquish their parental rights to Drallah."

Crash thought about that. It was probably due to guilt, he surmised.

"I've spoken with Judd, and we've decided to adopt Drallah and one other orphan before we leave orbit." She was obviously delighted with the situation as she seemed to be in a contest with Drallah to see which of them could smile the most. The young lad crawled into her lap and rubbed his head on the underside of Manny's chin.

The stark differences in looks aside, the pair of them were clearly loving being together.

Drallah looked up at Crash, who looked just like a grown up version of himself, his black fur was showing

through already, and said: "Your sister's going to be my mother. I suppose that will make you my uncle."

Crash's eyes opened wider as the realisation hit him. His family seemed to be growing by the day. "Let's see. In the last week I've gained a brother-in-law and a wife. I suppose it completes the set having a nephew as well." He reached over and patted Drallah's head in a decidedly uncle-like fashion.

Changing the subject, Manny asked: "When does Susanna get back?"

Crash shrugged. "She's working with the new Government in her role as Federation Ambassador – for a change." He checked the wall chronometer. "She should be back soon."

Manny grinned. "Excellent. Scanner will have returned shortly from his trip to the *Ingram*. We'll let him get freshened up, then we're all going to have dinner together tonight. Our treat. And you'll never guess where."

Captain Piper shifted her weight in the centre seat. It had been some time since she had had a break, and her cheeks were starting to ache. She considered sparring with Sarda after shift, but scrubbed that thought when she realised he would be working overtime on the *Millennium's* repairs. Never mind the fact her knee was still in a splint, her crutches lying next to her chair.

Not that there was a hurry. They had received word from Starfleet to remain here until the political situation stabilised. Not that they had a whole lot of choice in the matter. Scanner had insisted that they use the moon's space dock for the *Millennium's* repairs, and that, to do the job right, they would be stuck here for at least two weeks.

"It's not an easy thang attaching warp nacelles, you know," he'd said in his southern drawl that always got more pronounced when he was trying to assert himself. "We've gotta get it absoooolutely right!"

Piper had simply held her hands up in mock defence. "Hey, you get not argument out of me! Take as much time as you need."

The pleased look on Scanner's face had been something Piper made a note of remembering. She pictured it now, and smiled again. It was only fair to let him win occasionally.

The officer on the communications board turned and addressed her. "Captain, we're getting a signal from the surface." He relaxed in his seat. "It's the Ambassador, she's ready for beam up."

"Let her know I want to speak to her in my ready room when she's aboard." Piper watched, then turned to the Helm when the comms officer had confirmed Susanna had returned with a knowing nod. "Break orbit, and prepare for docking in Cait's moon." She sat back and watched as the planet slid out from underneath them. They eased by the *Jolly Roger*, that was keeping on station, and

Piper noticed the engineering crew were working on repainting her. With the new government's approval, and with Starfleet's blessing, the vessel had been given an official commission. *NCC-3052 U.S.S. Jolly Roger*. Piper gave a wry grin at what her new captain would think of the name.

Shortly after, the moon filled the view and the Captain knew it would only take minutes before they would be ready to dock. At this point, the Ambassador stepped out of the turbolift, and Piper decided to take her leave. She'd had more than her fill of spacedocks in her career.

She hopped over and tapped the helm officer, Jason Nunn, back from the *Cork*, on the shoulder. "Mister Nunn, you have the Conn." She added for him personally, "It's more your thing anyway."

As Jason gleefully took over, Piper collected her crutches and moved over to her door and found Susanna waiting for her. As always, the Ambassador waited respectfully for her before entering.

Once the door was closed, Piper took her seat on the couch and patted the cushion beside her. "I thought this would be a good time to talk about your future."

A little suspicious, but more tired than anything, Susanna took the seat next to her and tucked her feet under her, cat fashion. She leaned back in the soft sofa and let her tail curl next to her. "I thought it was pretty clear. I'm an Ambassador for the Federation and I go where they

send me. Crash and I knew going into our marriage that we'd probably be spending a great deal of time apart." There was no hiding the fact that she did not relish the idea as she pawed the seat.

Piper nodded then got up and hopped over to the food replicator. "Would you like a coffee?" she asked as she ordered a glass of pineapple juice for herself.

Susanna sighed. "I'm not really in the mood for caffeine," she said, then changed her mind. "However, I'm so tired I could use a fix to pick me up. Black, two sugars."

The Captain made of point of ordering the coffee with a solid straw. She was quite familiar with the feline's drinking habits. A moment later, she handed Susanna her mug, sat down, and faced Susanna. She took a sip of her glass, contemplating just how to put what she was going to suggest. What the hell, she thought, and jumped right in. "How would you like to be attached to the *Millennium*?"

"Sorry?" She looked at the Captain quizzically.

Piper gestured about her. "This is Starfleet's flagship, and although I have studied politics, it's not necessarily my strong point."

At that, Susanna laughed. "Yes, your reputation precedes you, I'm afraid. You've been known to solve a problem by shoving a phaser up your foe's nose. To be fair, though, your actions at Galorndon Core were pretty spectacular."

Piper was a pragmatic sort. She took no offence at the Ambassador's comments, and she knew none was meant. "Thank you," she said, recognising the compliment. "Anyhow, the last thing I want to do is drag my Third Officer away from his wife, and I know we could benefit from having a roving Ambassador on board."

"Hmmmm." The suggestion had its merits. However, there were still holes in her plan. "What would I do the rest of the time? You won't always be needing a diplomat's services."

"True." Piper took another sip of the juice, relishing its slightly tart flavour. "If there's one thing on this ship that's faster than her warp engines, it's scuttlebutt. I've heard you originally planned on being a school teacher."

Susanna was surprised. "How do you know that?"

Piper shrugged. "It really doesn't matter. I was just thinking that Merete's children will soon need a teacher, and I know the Sandage's kits will definitely."

Now it was surprise piled on surprise. "The *Sandage's* kits?" she asked, stunned.

Up this close, Susanna's eyes seemed to fill half her face when she was startled, Piper thought. "Oops." She reddened a little at that. "I've stolen Manny's thunder," she said. "Well, now the cat's out of the bag," she chuckled a little at the double entendre, "Manny and Judd are adopting Drallah and a female kit that was a friend of his from the mines."

“Ha!” Susanna said, admiring the irony. “She beat me to it.”

The Captain almost missed the subtle undertone to her statement. “What do you mean by that?”

Susanna took a long draw on her straw and swallowed the strong, hot brew. “Well, we've only been together once, but there are some things a girl knows, and I'm pretty sure I'm pregnant.” She stiffened a little, embarrassed. “I haven't told Crash yet, and I thought I should check with Doctor AndrusTaurus first.”

Piper sighed. “This might complicate things. I had to fight to get Merete's kids to stay on board, and I managed to get Manny's kits in under the same umbrella. Starfleet might think it's getting too crowded on board and insist we remove the lot of them.”

Her tail twitching, Susanna pawed the couch even more, her tension clear. “There is no way I'll give up this litter,” she said with absolute certainty.

Feeling like she had just missed something, Piper spluttered: “Nobody's suggesting that, Ambassador. There's no way I would suggest that. Our charter is to seek out new life, not destroy it.” She reached out and put a friendly hand on Susanna's arm, reassuring her. “What you and Krashtallah are doing is something spectacular. You're not only creating a whole new batch of lives, these children will be the first of their kind. I'm not aware of any Persian/Caitian hybrids out among the stars.”

Susanna began to purr as she relaxed. Her fur flattened out and she smiled at Piper. "Thank you, Captain. I appreciate the sentiment, and no, there are no other hybrids. As far as I know, the Cait haven't bred with any other species, and neither have mine."

"I'm sure they'll be delightful anyway," Piper said with a smile. "There's something about kittens that's just wonderful." She took another swig of her glass. "I would suggest that we keep Starfleet in the dark for the time being. What's your people's gestation period?"

"Four months, but that could be off considering they're part Cait."

Piper nodded. Hybrid pregnancies were often unpredictable. "Go and see Merete. She'll keep it to herself if I ask her to. It's against regulations, but if there's one person on this ship who'll know how you feel, it's her."

Following the Captain's lead, Susanna took a long draw on her mug and finished off her coffee with a slurp. "I'll do that right now, Captain." She set down the mug on the coffee table before them and, without asking, gave the Captain a hug.

A little surprised, Piper accepted the offering and returned it. "Don't worry, we'll make this work," she said confidently.

Ten minutes later, Susanna had her confirmation. In her private office, Merete ran a medical tricorder over her lower abdomen and nodded to herself. "You've definitely

got some kits in there. It's very early on and I can't tell the sex without more invasive scans, which I'm not about to do."

The Ambassador lay on the examination table on her back. She stared up at the ceiling and wondered at the way of things. "Can you show me the scans?" she asked, curious.

Merete held back on showing her the datapadd straight away. "If I show you, you'll know how many there are. Do you want to know so soon?"

"I'll know soon enough when they grow bigger. I'll be able to feel them myself." She demonstrated by running her paws down her stomach.

The Doctor took a deep breath. "Okay," she said, letting it out. "There are four, and they appear to be growing quite normally."

Susanna chuckled. "That's the feline genome for you," she said. "No matter where you find us, we seem to be made out of the same stuff."

Merete wondered about that. There was plenty of evidence that there had once been a race of beings loosely referred to as the "Preservers" who had seeded not only humanity throughout the stars, but other humanoid and felinoid species. The thinking was that the Preservers were concerned that, if left to their own devices, some of them could be lost once they discovered atomic energy. A good example was humanity, which had teetered on the atomic precipice more than once in its history. She brought her

thoughts back to the present. "Anyhow, I want you to come by my office for a weekly scan. If there's any problem, you come straight to me. And, as Piper asked, we're going to keep it to ourselves for now. Just be careful who you tell. Otherwise, word will spread through this ship like a Tribble plague, and it just might get back to Starfleet."

The Ambassador shifted on the table. It was almost overwhelming. A week ago, she was a roving diplomat, one of the Federation's best, going from here to there putting out political fires. A solo act.

Now, she was not only married, but expecting a litter of four! And to top it off, she was being asked to consider a career change as well. Her tail thrashed to and fro as the emotions churned within her.

She felt a warm touch on her arm. Merete was looking down on her, a knowing smile on her lips. "What you're feeling is perfectly natural," she said. "When I was pregnant, my hormones often told me things that weren't true." She helped Susanna sit up on the table then she took her chin in her hand, bringing them both to eye level. "You're going to be fine. An old friend of mine once told me: Life is what happens to you while you're busy making plans." Her eyes sparkled. "Life is happening to you in new and amazing ways. Seize the opportunity to explore new ways of living!"

Susanna looked about her, feeling lost. "I'm not sure I'll be a good mother...." she started.

She got a “tut, tut” from Merete for that one. “You’re going to be a fine mother. And you won’t be doing it alone. You have a husband that adores you, and Manny and I for support in things motherly.” She gave her a supportive smile as she tried to cheer her patient. “You see, it’ll all be fine.”

“They say that a starship is no place to raise a family,” Susanna said, her concern evident in the quake in her voice.

The Doctor chuckled. “If I thought this wasn’t a good place for my children, I would leave. Besides, we have the best Captain in Starfleet looking out for us, and a starship made out of sterner stuff than most.” She caught Susanna’s wandering gaze. “I’ll tell you one thing I know. I’ve always been safer on the ship than I ever have been on a planet. The hostage thing happened in a planetside cafe, not here. I lost my husband,” her throat still tightened talking about it, “on an away mission. Welcome to fortress *Millennium*. ”

That comment finally brought a smile to Susanna’s lips.

Merete put the icing on the cake. “And you have one thing on this starship you won’t have any place else.”

Curious, Susanna’s whiskers arched forward as she looked into Merete’s eyes. “What?”

“Family,” the Doctor said with a confident smile. “You’ve just married into Starfleet’s finest family. On the starship *Millennium*, we look out for each other more than

any other starship I've ever served on." She rubbed Susanna's arms. "Now, go and find that husband of yours and tell him he's going to be a daddy. It'll tickle him pink."

The smile on Susanna's face could have brought light to a black hole. She looked forward to seeing the look on his face when she broke the news. "Thank you, Doctor, for helping me put things in perspective." She got up to leave and paused in the doorway. "And I'll be keeping those appointments," she said as she left.

Her last words told the Doctor more than she initially thought and, as realisation of what Susanna had really said sunk in, she sat down in her chair, grinning broadly. Her children were going to have plenty of playmates at this rate.

With the *Millennium* stuck in spacedock for two weeks, the crew were busy either helping out with the repairs, catching up on paperwork, or taking some well deserved shore leave. For those in the latter group, there were two ways of doing so.

The *Cork* was running an hourly service from the docks to the capital city, or, for those who didn't mind transporters, you could transport from the dock transporter, through a buffer relay on the moon's surface, via the buffers on the *Jolly Roger* which maintained an orbit roughly halfway between the planet and it's moon, and down to the surface via any one of the public transporters in the worldwide network.

It was a little disconcerting for those who tried it, but both Lieutenants Nunn and Valastro insisted it was safe. They were planning on spending a great deal of time climbing Cait's mountain peaks on the southern continent.

Crash hadn't pushed when Susanna had insisted on riding the *Cork* down to the capital. He still didn't ask any questions when she also asked that they walk the two kilometres from the landing site to their destination. He considered that she simply needed the exercise.

His mother had come along with them, with Drallah riding on her back, clinging onto her thick fur. She had noted the unusual behaviour, but said nothing.

Manny and Scanner had gone on ahead for something, they didn't say what. They had just told them they would meet them there.

Leaving Crash with more questions than he had answers. It wasn't a situation he was unfamiliar with, just one he was uncomfortable with.

As they walked, Crash's communicator chirped. Annoyed, he ripped it off his belt and flipped it open. "Commander Krashtallah," he said shortly.

Captain Piper's distinctive voice could be heard over the commlink. "Sorry to bother you, Commander, but I thought you should know. It appeared we underestimated Zif. He's escaped."

Crash pulled up short. "How?"

Piper was as annoyed as he was. "It appears he had some sympathisers on the inside. If he's smart, he'll lay

low for a while and leave the planet when things quieten down."

"I've never known Zif to do the smart thing," Crash countered. "We'll keep an eye out for him. Krashtallah out." He replaced the communicator on his belt and fingered the mini phaser attached there. I paid to be prepared.

All eyes were on him. They all knew that, with Zif on the loose, he could cause a lot of trouble.

"I'm sure he won't be coming after us," he said confidently. He put his arm around his wife's shoulders lovingly. "Nothing and nobody is going to wreck our evening together." He steered them back in the right direction and started off once more.

When they finally reached their destination, it was getting dark. So they wouldn't trudge all the way back to the landing site, Crash had taken the liberty of asking the pilot to stop by later and collect them. Being the hero of the hour, the pilot had happily complied.

Crash hadn't even noticed the pilot's deference he was so distracted.

Standing here once more, a flood of memories came back to him as he looked up at the door. So much had happened since that first day, and, in a way, things had really started happening right here. Since then, they had made some friends, a number of enemies, and survived an ordeal.

However, the changes he had witnessed since landing had been worth it all. The people were out on the street again. He had walked through more than one street party, with whole families enjoying the company of their neighbours once more. So he wouldn't be mobbed, as he knew he would be if anyone recognised him, he wore a cloak similar to the one Susanna had gone incognito in. He smirked. It was his turn now.

He looked at his bride and marvelled at her. This night she simply wore her fur, knowing that on this world no-one would think twice. Crash was grateful. It gave him a chance to admire her unhindered. He noticed her mottled colouring attracted attention, but most simply watched her go by without any bother. They simply weren't registering that this was the Federation Ambassador, as if they considered whether she would be seen walking the streets of the Capital and decided against the possibility.

He turned once more and led them up the ramp and into the building. The lights were muted this night, for the sake of the visitors. Usually, the Starshine Cafe was still open at this time, but they had closed as a favour to their honoured guests.

The staff had gone to the trouble of decorating the place with vases of flowers here and there, and, instead of tables spread about, they had put them all together to form a long one in the middle of the floor.

Burning candles dotted the table, and even the odd knife and fork were strategically placed for their guests.

“Welcome!” boomed Tisktabrisk. He stepped forward and shook their hands, one by one. He took special effort to welcome Drallah, who was now riding on Pashtallah's shoulders. “Hello, young one!”

“Hello to you, too!” Drallah shouted back, delighted with all the attention.

Their host offered them all a place to sit, with Crash being given the honour of the head of the table. For a moment, he tried to beg off the offer, but Tisktabrisk insisted. “This night is for you and your family,” he said with a friendly air, only gently pressing. “It is the least we can do for you.”

As they took their places, the door banged open again as Scanner appeared, his wife in tow. Clinging to *her* back was a young, black, female kit who seemed very much overwhelmed by all the goings on. She looked about the room and was overjoyed to see a familiar face: Drallah. The kit jumped down from Manny's shoulders and ran towards Drallah, who was running towards her. They met in the middle and playfully rolled around on the floor for a moment with the adults watching with knowing grins on their faces.

Tisktabrisk stepped forward and welcomed them to his place with a beaming smile. Nobody noticed the datachip that Scanner slipped him before he retreated to the kitchen.

The adults around the table rose to greet their family, and hugs and handshakes were shared.

When Susanna greeted Manny, she opened her arms and gave her a hug. As she did so, something peculiar happened. Manny suddenly let go and stepped back, mouth agape, still holding Susanna's paws. Her gaze dropped to Susanna's navel, and she knew she was right.

In an outburst that would have made Tish proud, she said: "Awesome! How long have you known?"

Susanna's eyes went wide and dilated in shock. "I haven't told *anyone* yet!" she hissed, with a glance at Crash.

Even though Amantasandage got the message, it was far too late as everyone started asking: "What is it?" and "Known what?"

Pashtallah had a knowing look in her eye, but Krashtallah remained totally clueless.

Susanna just gaped at him. The Ambassador for once was totally lost for words. "I....I just found out."

Concerned, Crash brought her in close. "Found out what?"

Letting loose an amused laugh, his mother said: "For a brilliant strategist and warrior, sometimes you're just too *male*. Your wife is *with child*, my son."

Crash's response was delayed as the sound of a transporter beam interrupted them. It coalesced into the forms of Tish and Faith. The latter could be heard saying: "Is this how you make it work?"

All eyes were on the new Queen, who just wilted at the interest. "Sorry for barging in," she said. "I was just

giving Tish a ride back to work with my new personal transporter control," which she held up proudly. It looked like a remote control covered in colourful buttons. "This thing is *amazing*. I can dial up any co-ordinates on the planet and the transporter network will beam me right there."

Together, the people in the restaurant dropped to one knee, except Tish, of course. Faith would have none of it. She wrung her paws and said: "People, please, don't. I may be Queen, but to me, it's just a job."

Krashtallah solemnly spoke for his clan. "No, my Queen. You deserve the title, and the honour." He stood up and offered her his place at the table.

Once again, there was the sound of a transporter beam in the centre of the room. It expanded to reveal the form of the planet's one-time spiritual leader, Zif. And he was *mad*.

"Don't anybody move!" he shouted. The look in his eyes was beyond maniacal. It was insane. He held up a small control unit in his right paw and glared at Krashtallah. "I'm here to revenge myself on the Llash clan for taking away everything that is decent on this world," he said in a barely controlled shreik. Out of the corner of his eye he spotted Faith. "Ah, God has been good to me. You're an unexpected bonus!" He lifted his paw higher, his thumb hanging over the trigger. As he did so his coat opened wide to reveal a crude bomb strapped to his chest.

The Commander realised in that moment if they didn't act, they would die. A glance at his sister was all she needed to know what he intended.

Pandemonium erupted in the cafe as everybody started to move. Pashtallah and Tish moved to protect the kits while Manny went for the control unit. Although Zif was taller and stronger, Manny was fighting fit and she held his hand in a vice grip while Scanner held his left arm and kept him from striking his wife. The three struggled as Crash acted.

He quickly moved over to Faith and took the transporter control from her, quickly dialled in a destination, then attached it to the back of Zif's coat. He stabbed the activation button and cried: "Clear!"

Scanner and Manny let go of Zif as the transporter beam took hold of him. He tried to press the detonator button, but was frozen as he was demolecularised and sent on to his destination.

Manny scowled at the space he had vacated. "Nobody messes with *my* family," she growled ferociously.

Faith stepped forward and looked up at Crash. "Where did you send him? He'll blow up whatever he materialises in!" she said fearfully.

A cruel grin came over Crash's mouth as he held his Queen's gaze. "I sent him straight to Hell."

His mother scolded him with her tone. "I know that's where he's going, but where did you send him?"

Crash shook his head, then pointed straight down. "I overrode the safety protocols and beamed him as far into the centre of our planet as I could send him. He'll rematerialise in solid rock."

Scanner gave a dark laugh. "So you'all did send him straight to Hell," he said.

Faith shivered. "What a way to die," she lamented.

Enough, Crash thought. He guided the Queen back to the table and offered her his seat once more. As he did so, he said: "You didn't see the bomb strapped to his chest. It was either him or us."

Understanding lit Faith's eyes as she smiled up at him. "It seems our people owe you – again."

Crash took the seat next to her as Susanna slid in next to him. "Just doing my duty, your Highness. And, by the way," he said with a knowing smirk, "you can tell that to your bodyguard when they find you." He took out his communicator, flipped it open and reported in. "Captain, please inform the authorities that the Zif problem has been taken care of – permanently."

"Will do, Commander," Piper said with full insight. "Enjoy your dinner."

Once everyone was seated, they finally had a chance to be introduced to the newest member of their clan. Drallah's new sister was a one year old kit named Lila. Like her brother, her name was shortened as her family had refused her their clan affiliation. Now, according to the official Cait records, she was Lilatasandage.

While she had very little time to get to know her new parents, it was clear she was liking the positive attention. Having a familiar face to play with was an added bonus, one her parents were keenly aware of. She wasn't saying much yet, but they knew she would open up in time.

Next to Crash, Susanna was eyeing her husband out of the corner of her eye. With the drama surrounding Zif's sudden appearance – not to mention the Queen's – her revelation had been forgotten. She glanced over at her mother-in-law, who was also watching her son closely. It took a few minutes, then Crash's eyes suddenly went wide as he remembered.

Turning to his bride, he took her paws in his and smiled sheepishly. "I am so sorry, my love. I forgot! Mother said you are pregnant! Is that right?" He seemed amazed, ecstatic, and frightened all at the same time.

Silence fell in the cafe as all eyes turned to the Ambassador. "Yes, my love, it is."

Lila spoke up from across the table. "What does pregnant mean?" she asked in a small voice.

Her new mother spoke up. "It means that your Aunt Susanna is going to have kits like you."

The little lady's eyes widened in amazement. "Wow! How did that happen?"

Drallah chipped in: "Yeah, how?"

Somehow, the attention turned to Judd, who simply blushed. "I'll tell you later," he said, embarrassed.

Pash was curious about the details. “How many?” she asked. The average Cait litter was two.

“Four.”

The word gobsmacked everyone at the table. Large litters were not entirely unusual to the Cait. After all, the Llash siblings were of a litter of three. Four, however, a different matter altogether.

“When?” Pash asked. She knew a Cait’s gestation period, but had no idea if it was any different for Persians.

“Usually four months,” she said. “But it’s anyone’s guess as they’re part Cait.”

Lila said it for all when she repeated herself in her child-like fashion. “Wow.”

Scanner sat back and put his hands behind his head, a cheeky grin on his face. His eyes twinkled as he delivered a friendly jibe: “Talk about instant families. Brother, you’re going to nearly have a baseball team of kids!”

That drew blank stares from all. They had no idea what he was on about.

Crash demonstrated unusual verbal prowess. “I don’t care how many there are. If they look like their mother, they’ll be blessed.”

Scanner rolled his eyes. “You know what side of the bread to butter, don’t you?”

Manny dug him in the ribs with her elbow. “I happen to think they’re gorgeous.”

The engineer just stuck his fingers in his mouth, feigning the need to vomit. "You can lay it on a little too thick, I think," he said not unkindly.

Manny wasn't about to let that go, either. They started squabbling right there and then and Pash just watched them with an amused look in her eye. "They're already like an old, married couple," she said with a sigh.

Crash looked over at his mother. "Have you heard from father?"

Like the elephant in the room, all became quiet once more. Slashtallah was a touchy subject.

Their mother shrugged. "You know your father. He could be anywhere. All I know is that he told me he was going back home to pack some things and go and live with his brother."

They knew from experience that it would not necessarily work out that way. Their father was notorious for changing his mind.

Badly wanting to change the subject, she looked at the Queen. "Your Highness, may I enquire about things political? How are things going?"

Faith sighed. "Slowly. Prime Minister Drishtagoth has already brought me some paperwork to sign off on. On the good side, the government has already signed into law the dissolution of both the Ministry of Homeworld Security and the Ministry of Information. And King Kraltathat's executive order offering blacks protection from persecution under the law has been ratified."

Susanna seemed cheered. "That's good news, Your Highness" - she got an annoyed look from her for her formality - "Faith," she said after an embarrassed pause.

The Queen continued. "What bothers me is the travesty that the Temple really is. The police went in and checked it out. The equipment they had in there was very high tech. And they were watching everybody and everything. I asked Drishtagoth to destroy it all, however there seems to be a little reluctance there."

The Ambassador's eyes narrowed in annoyance. "I'll take that up with him first thing tomorrow." She smirked as she glanced at her husband. "Mind you, it wouldn't be necessary if there was an "accident" arranged to finish it off."

Scanner's mind churned that over for a moment. "An energy pulse should take care of that," he said thoughtfully.

Crash scowled. The anger simmered just under the boil and he shook his head. "No. I've got a better idea." He flipped open his communicator and called the *Millennium*. If he hurried, they just might pull it off.

As he sat there and waited for a call back, the family chatted about family stuff. It wasn't long before dinner was served, the staff having already shrugged off the drama with Zif. Things had been so busy recently that it was hardly the most traumatic thing to happen to them.

Each feline sniffed the meat on their plate and eyed it curiously. They had no idea what it was. It smelled tasty, but it wasn't the same as their usual replicated meat.

“What is it?” Crash asked, speaking for the family who were all itching to know.

Tisktabrisk deferred to Scanner whose face was beaming like the sun. He laughed out loud and told them simply: “Sheep.”

Their host smiled and gestured at Judd. “The Commander was kind enough to organise the replicator pattern for young sheep,” he looked at Scanner for verification. “I believe your people call it “lamb”.”

Scanner grinning like a Cheshire Cat, slapped him on the arm and laughed. The rest of his extended family joined in before enjoying the fresh slabs of replicated meat. Looks of pleasant surprise bordering on sheer delight were shared as, for the first time in living memory, Caits ate a sheep.

Just as Crash finished his meal his communicator chirped. He picked it up off the table by his plate and answered the call.

“It's done,” came the voice of Lieutenant Briers.

“Thank you,” Crash said, then simply flipped it shut.

The next day, the Ambassador sat in the Prime Minister's office. She tried to keep her head clear of the mild euphoria that was typical of her people during pregnancy. She used the feeling to keep a small smile on her face, a suggestion to the Prime Minister that she knew something he did not.

“I understand from the Queen that you found something interesting under the Temple,” Susanna said in a conversational tone.

Drishtagoth's left eye twitched as she said it. She was certain. “I'm sure she would have told you what our people found,” he countered.

Susanna didn't let on a thing as she said: “Perhaps Captain Piper's engineering people can help you dissect it. It could give us leads about where the rest of the “Priests” are.”

The Prime Minister put down his light pen and sat back in his seat. He didn't like where this conversation was going. “That won't be necessary,” he said coolly.

“Oh?”

For the first time since he met her, Drishtagoth felt like the Ambassador was playing him. It was sad, he reflected, but the way of politics.

“There was an explosion in the facility. It was totally destroyed. The equipment unsalvageable.”

Susanna finally let her face change as she wore a smirk. “Perhaps it's for the better. It's not good to have equipment like that lying around. It could fall into the wrong hands.”

Just two days into his leadership of the Cait, and Drishtagoth already felt like he was being put on notice. The Federation was watching them, and would be for a while, he thought. He sighed. And they had every right to.

Drishtagoth nodded his honest agreement. "It would be a shame if it did. It's still early days, and our people have got a lot of bad habits to unlearn. Perhaps it is a good thing your husband beamed Zif into their complex when he tried to blow himself up."

An accomplished Poker player, as all Ambassadors had to be, Susanna deadpanned: "I think so."

Not about to let the subject drop just yet, he added: "There seems to be some discrepancy with the timing. It seems to be off by about ten minutes between Zif's attack and his demise."

"Really?" Susanna feigned surprise. "Perhaps we got the time wrong. It all happened so fast."

Knowing he wasn't going to get a straight answer out of his guest on the subject, he decided to drop it. He knew her people had destroyed the bunker. It had been fortunate that there had been no-one inside when it blew. It was being guarded from the exterior. Investigating the cause of the explosion was moot as well as it had happened so far underground and the ceiling had collapsed in. It was far too risky to send anyone down.

It was time to put his guest at ease. His people had a long way to go before they convinced the Federation they were ready to be let once more off the leash. It was the price they had to pay. "Of course, if there any further installations are found, we would be happy to have Starfleet's assistance in dealing with it. Perhaps we are out

of practice working with our Federation brothers in such matters.”

“It's not beyond understanding, my friend,” Susanna said, letting her true feelings out for the sun to see. “As you said, some things are hard to unlearn.”

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Indeed, some things were hard to unlearn. During the following weeks, skirmishes broke out here and there between groups who still followed the teachings of the priesthood and denied the evidence, and those who followed their new Queen's lead.

Starfleet security forces were augmenting the local police force, and the two groups managed to work together, with a minimum of friction, to quell the violence.

Queen Faith, personally, had recommended one of her group's elders, Linstarunk, to take over the daily running of the Temple, and everybody agreed he was doing a good job. Things had changed in that, instead of people sitting about simply believing whatever the leader had to say, he encouraged them to get their own, personal copy of the scriptures and led them in studies of it. "Knowledge is freedom," became his tag line.

Another thing that changed was that Linstarunk absolutely refused to be either paid to lead their services, or be called "priest". It would be some generations before that word would lose its negative connotations.

On the political side, many of the politicians who had been arrested on the "Day of Reckoning", as it had been come to be known, were let go without charge. There was little evidence that they contributed anything more than bad judgement in following Cardtasharp's lead. Most of

them came from the uninvolved ministries like Education and Conservation. They returned to government in opposition and reformed their party. With a new leader, they managed to keep themselves from being relegated to history at the next election and maintain a reasonable minority when they returned.

A week after the “Day”, Kraltathat's ashes were laid to rest. In a world that was fairly heavily populated, the Cait had long ago forgone the notion that their people had to be buried whole in the ground. There simply wasn't enough space for it, and the Cait would rather a tree grow out of the land than monuments to forgotten corpses. That is how they perceived it, that the body was nothing more than a temporary residence for the soul, and, once it had departed, there was no longer any need for it.

So Kraltathat's ashes were scattered over the ocean by the Queen herself. It was done from a ship – some traditions would last forever – with Faith leaning over the back railing and letting the former King's ashes flow out of the jar and into the water. It was a lovely scene, with thoughtful messages from those who had loved him.

Before they turned for home, nobody noticed when a minor functionary stepped up to the railing and tipped another jar into the waters. There would be no-one to mourn Feentathat as her ashes sank into the waves. Even the fish spat out what originally looked like tasty morsels.

Piper watched as the engineering crew, in what was quickly becoming known as Starbase Cait, manoeuvred the new starboard warp nacelle into place. They were fortunate that the "workshop" was outfitted with equipment that made their task that much easier. Tractor emitters lined the walls, making the painstaking task of aligning the nacelle a simple job. As they held the *Millennium* in place, so they also held the nacelles.

She mused that, only a kilometre away, the last of the *Ingram's* usable components were being stripped from the hulk. Nothing of intrinsic value was to be left. It had been decided, fittingly, to tow her to Cait's starship graveyard once they were finished with her. She smiled to herself. That wouldn't be much.

Noticing a stray lock of her blonde hair, she took out the loop that usually held her pony tail in place and let it drape over her shoulders. In her Ready Room, she had the luxury of just being herself. It was a place not only for decisions, but for solace and healing.

There was a tiny shift in the *Millennium's* plating as the nacelle came into contact with the pylon. Soon, Scanner's people would start welding the two together. With the port nacelle already attached and undergoing tests, she knew it was now only a matter of time until they could rejoin the stars.

Piper was drawn back to the present by a knock at the door. Only one person on this ship ever knocked instead of

using the door chime. "Come in, Merete," she said with a grin.

The Captain usually guarded her private time fiercely, but the Doctor was on a very short list of people who were always welcome. "What can I do for you?"

Merete went directly to the earth coloured couch leaning against the wall and sat down on it, her daughter on her knee, her son by her side. Each child immediately headed for the floor to crawl around. Their mother let them go, and Piper took delight in watching them explore their surroundings to find things to put in their mouths.

A look at her friend's face brought Piper's attention to the full. Now out of her splint, she dragged over a chair, straddled it, and caught her friend's eye. "What's the matter?" she asked.

The Doctor was uncomfortable, but in this room they had no secrets. "I've done the Ambassador's second prenatal check-up and the babies are doing fine."

Piper frowned. It was hardly bad news. "So, what's the problem?" It was only then did she realise what it was.

"I'm duty bound to report her pregnancy to Starfleet. I've already held off on it longer than I should have." She wrung her hands, her fear of letting her friends down twisting her gut.

The Captain's gaze softened. "I'm sorry, Merete," she said quietly. "I shouldn't have put you in that position."

Her friend smiled. "I know you've only ever got your friend's best wishes at heart, Piper. You were forgiven a long time ago. I just find the situation untenable."

Piper Jr and Rogen found Piper's legs and started pulling on her trouser legs. She ignored them and focussed on Merete. "I've had some success with the Admiralty getting formal approval for your children to stay on permanently, but I'm finding real reluctance to go beyond that. I know I've got my work cut out for me to get the Sandage kits and Susanna's children accepted as well."

Merete looked out the window at the activity outside. She saw humans, Vulcans, Cait and a smattering of other species in environment suits working together as a team on the ship's repairs. It bode well for the future for Cait remaining in the Federation. "Perhaps," she said, her thoughts returning to the Queen, "we need to have a little faith." She caught Piper's eye. "We know that Starfleet is examining the notion of returning families to space. After all, they did it for the first hundred years before the NX-01 *Enterprise* changed everything. Space freighters spent long months in space. Generations lived and had families out here. They were happier that way, and I know Starfleet will come to realise that. We just need to work on them a little more, I think. Maybe the Llashs and the Sandages will help speed things along."

The Captain sighed. She was a positive thinker, but she also knew the bureaucratic mind. Change was as slow as Pluto's orbit. "Maybe," she said, but without much

enthusiasm. "I'll have a talk with Crash." She stood up and picked up her tiny namesake. "You, young lady, are going to grow up to be a fine young woman," she said with a grin. She turned back to Merete. "You report Susanna's pregnancy and we'll let the chips fall where they lay, okay?"

Merete rose from the couch and scooped up Rogen. "I'm going to go and give this pair a feed then I'll get right on it. Thanks," she said, then stood on her toes and pecked her friend on the cheek. "I appreciate it." And she did, Piper could see it in her eyes.

As the door opened, the two of them were surprised to see that the subjects of their attention were waiting outside. With a quick grin, Merete slipped by them and headed for a turbolift, a tot under each arm.

"I'm popular today," the Captain said, ushering them inside. By the looks on her guest's faces, she knew it wasn't a social call. As each took a chair, her eyes narrowed, a little worried. "What's up?"

The small troupe looked from one to the other, as if their courage had suddenly left them. Whether an old friend, like Scanner or a trusted ally like Susanna, they seemed to suddenly lose their voices. Krashtallah spoke up first.

"Captain, we have come, collectively, to seek a leave of absence from Starfleet." The grimace on his face belied the severity of his query. He, none of them, were taking this lightly.

Shocked, Piper's brows shot up, eyes wide, mouth open. She stood there for a moment, not knowing what to say. "Why?" she finally uttered.

Scanner spoke up. "Because we need time out, Piper." He smiled, glad he'd finally voiced what he really felt. He gave a sad smile. "I know for myself, I'm not as young as I used to be." He patted his chest and ran his hand over his weathered face. "This 'ol bod needs some time off. You know, I can't remember the last time I went fishing? Besides, I need a little time to spend with my wife and kids. I just got me an instant family, and we need time to settle into that, you know?"

Next to him, Manny placed a loving paw on her husband's arm. "Besides, we won't be out of the action altogether," she said with a contented purr. "Queen Faith has asked us to help out in the reconciliation of our people. It's going to take some time for the wounds to heal."

Susanna nodded. "That's right," she said, her Persian eyes sparkling. "I've got hands on experience now, and, since I'm now an honorary Cait, I can help out, too. I think it's good for the people to be reminded of the principles of IDIC. One look at the four of us is enough for most."

At that, the Captain laughed. "You're right, and I can also see you're determined."

Of the group, Krashtallah had the most to lose, career-wise. "Captain Piper, I want you to know that it has been an honour serving with you and I need you to know I don't take the services you've done for me, personally, for

granted.” He spread out his arms to encompass their small group. “It’s still our hope that, in six months, we might be able to return to the *Millennium* – with our families. It just wouldn’t be the same without the rest of our family to help us raise our own, but you need to know that we’re all decided. If we can’t travel with our families, we will have to leave Starfleet because we won’t be separated from them.”

The honest ultimatum chilled Piper’s heart because she knew there were no guarantees. She looked from one face to the other and found determination in every one. They were decided. She gave them a heartfelt smile of encouragement. “It has also been a privilege serving with you all as well. I want you to know that I’m going to keep fighting to get Starfleet to allow families on board. I know my reasons are selfish, but it stands to reason. We’re losing far too many good people because of a stupid regulation.”

“I’m going to miss you all,” she said, her voice cracking a little. Teary eyed, she stepped over and gave Scanner a hug. “Especially you, you old surfie. You’re probably looking forward to digging that old Hawaiian shirt out of the closet the moment you’re off the ship.”

As she looked into his eyes, flashes of memories of their adventures that went back twenty plus years went through her mind. She felt like she was saying goodbye to a beloved family member. From the Rittenhouse scandal all the way through to this most recent adventure, she knew

she wouldn't have made it through it all without a friend like him. "Good luck, my friend," she said painfully. She let him go and took in the rest of them. "Good luck to you all."

Scanner and Krashtallah stayed on to help with the rest of the *Millennium*'s repairs whilst their wives set up home in the Llash family residence. It was going to be tight for a while, but they knew they would manage. Besides, they enjoyed each other's company.

Pashtallah took great delight in having children in the house again, with Lila and Drallah tearing around the home and neighbourhood. She was already noticing changes in their society as she could now venture out with the kits and draw only a few scowls. Most, however, lavished attention on the kits as it was well known who these children belonged to. It helped that their parents were considered heroes of the Cait.

To top it off, the kits who lived nearby were starting to unlearn the lessons taught them since they were born, and began to accept them in their play.

Whenever the kits were naughty, their father would give them a talking to and remind them that they needed to respect their "grandma". Pashtallah was unfamiliar with the term, but, when Manny explained it to her, she took on the title with relish. It was a nice change to be respected.

Susanna was finding the break good for her. As was typical for her people, she was spending a lot of her

pregnancy taking breaks and getting sleep. It seemed her babies were taking all her energy and putting it into growing.

Realising this, the Queen tried to limit her requests for the family's help. Faith was a compassionate, and politically astute operative. Given her behaviour in the Palace on the "Day", many had flagged her as a soft touch. They soon discovered Faith knew that it was sometimes necessary to be "cruel" to be kind.

It was a good thing for Cait, as well. While the new government's heart was in the right place, Susanna had been right. They were making some of their old mistakes that fortunately didn't get past Queen Faith – or her advisory group of four Starfleet members on sabbatical.

When the time came for the *Millennium* to finally warp out of orbit, looking pristine after what some would have considered a thorough overhaul, the four stood on the bridge of the *Jolly Roger* to see them off. Piper had played a clever paperwork game for the four of them. Instead of them being on "sabbatical", they were assigned to the *Jolly Roger* for her "running in" period. Now a mixture of Cait and Starfleet technology, the craft had been converted into something that could travel the stars as a science vessel, but also packed enough punch to more than protect itself. And it had one capability that most starships were lacking – the ability to land. Left with a full crew made up of volunteers from the *Millennium* and Cait on loan from the former "Homeworld Security", which had been folded into

an extension of the police force, the *Jolly Roger* was ready for anything that might come their way. With Krashtallah in command, Manny his second in command and Scanner its chief engineer, the ship was left for Cait's defence. Not that it needed much. The *Jolly Roger* was about to spend most of its next six months parked outside the capital in Cait's spaceport.

A spaceport that was starting to get traffic once more from starliners bringing back the tourists.

So, each day Crash, Manny and Scanner would spend some time overseeing the running of the ship, but generally they let the junior officers have the run of things while they helped with the world's problems – and their own.

Before any of that, the Llash clan stood on the bridge of the little starship and watched as their mother ship disappeared in a rainbow of light. They all felt a piece of them warped off with her, but the best part of each other was right where they stood. First of all, they were a family.

For all their travels in space, they had begun embarking on the greatest adventure of them all. Raising a family.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

The parcel sat on the new Queen's desk, looking innocuous with its Starfleet insignia emblazoned on its side. Faith has made it known that she was not going to be the sort of monarch who expected to be waited on paw and tail. Among the other more menial tasks in her day, she insisted on opening her own mail. She also answered it herself, whether in the old-fashioned paper form, or the modern electronic. Given that Cait had had modern technology for over two millennia, some anachronisms still remained. Like the mail.

Faith sat down on the floor in her office in the Palace, a room that hadn't seen much use during the previous Queen's short reign. Like any person, curiosity pushed her to open the parcel first. She noted the seal that showed that it had been scanned for explosives and pathogens and it had been deemed safe.

She extended a claw and prised open the sealed lid and took a look inside. Within, she found it contained the iron spike used to nail the Teacher to the Destiny Tree contained in a small stasis box. Next to it she found a data crystal and a paper letter.

Leaving the spike, she took out the crystal and set it aside while she read the letter.

She noted it was from Doctor AndrusTaurustabrisk.
It read:

Dear Faith,

I know how much you hate standing on ceremony, and I call upon our friendship as I take the unusual step in delivering the spike in this manner.

I took some extra time re-examining the blood on it. You saw the hologram of the Teacher I was able to generate on the "Day". I want to let you know that everything I did was in good faith, pardon the pun, and that the image was genuine. The Teacher did look like that.

I wanted to leave you with this data crystal which contains all my research on the blood. If you decide to give it to your own people for analysis, you should be aware of what they'll find.

Not only was the blood two thousand years old, it contains some anomalies. Individuals and species change only when there is a change to their DNA. This usually happens when DNA is damaged and information is lost, or when gene therapy is used and information is added.

However, each successive generation is weakened a little as more damaged DNA is added to the gene pool.

I found the blood on the spike contained *no* damaged DNA. If there was a perfect model for the Caitian genome, you have it right there. The factors that involved aging are *absent*. This person *would not have aged*. He would have remained young and strong forever.

Also, I found that it completely refuses to be either replicated or cloned.

In a universe governed by the law of entropy – that all things wear out and go from order to chaos – this person's DNA doesn't belong. He was literally *perfect*.

I know that this may come as a shock to you, and, as your world's sovereign and, I believe, spiritual leader, I thought it best to leave you with this information and the choice of what to do with it. While I was adopted by one of your clans, I don't profess to know your complete mindset.

Faith, I hope you don't think me a coward by dealing with this matter in this way. I just thought it was best to let you deal with it.

Take care of yourself.

Your friend,

Merete.

Faith put down the letter and picked up the crystal. A lot of things were going through her mind as she stared into its many facets, but one thing she was not feeling was shocked, or in the least bit surprised. In fact, the knowledge brought a smile to her face.

Epilogue

Dear Mister President,

Thank you for sending Starfleet and giving me a new family. Things are getting better on Cait now, and everyone seems more friendly. Most of the other kits will play with me now.

We're living with my Grandma, as Dad calls her, and she's great!

My new mum loves me a lot, but I'm worried about her. She gets this funny face every now and then, and I heard her tell Dad something's wrong. I know it's not about me or Lila, but she's really worried. I hope you can help her like you helped me.

Thank you again, sir.

Drallahtasandage