

OUROBOROS

FRACTURED PART 3



SEAN O'KEEFE

FRACTURED

Book 3: Ouroboros

By Sean O'Keefe 2021©

Fractured Part 3: Ouroboros

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is published by TrekkieFanFiction.com

Cover by Edelweiss O'Keefe, *Odysseus*-class by James Snaith

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For my Dad,

Who has always been there for me.

Acknowledgements

There are always plenty of constraints on my time, but I need to say a big “Thank you” to two people in particular: my beloved wife, Edelweiss, who has encouraged me, time and again, to get back on the horse and complete this work. Without her, and her endless cups of tea, this wouldn’t have been achieved. (Not to mention her excellent covers).

Also, I’d like to thank Alei. She kindly allowed me to borrow a couple of her characters from her Triangle series, and she’s given me some great help with the dialog concerning them. She’s a better author than she knows. God bless you.

Contents.

FRACTURED.....	2
Acknowledgements.....	5
Contents.	6
Part One	8
Prologue.....	8
Part Two	51
Chapter One	51
Chapter Two.....	61
Chapter Three.....	85
Chapter Four	108
Chapter Five.....	127
Chapter Six	147
Chapter Seven	175
Chapter Eight	198
Chapter Nine	221
Chapter Ten	236
Chapter Eleven.....	252
Chapter Twelve	273
Chapter Thirteen	289
Chapter Fourteen.....	311
Chapter Fifteen.....	329
Chapter Sixteen.....	346

Chapter Seventeen	360
Chapter Eighteen.....	367
Part Three.....	394
Epilogue 1: Revelations	394
2: Full Circle	408
Translations	422

Part One

Prologue

The corridors of the *USS Millennium* seemed tighter these days for some reason. Piper mused that perhaps she was just used to the outdoors. She had just spent a year under the sun both on the late planet Merrijig and her homeworld, Proxima Beta. While she was technically a year older, no time had passed for her on her ship in what was technically her present. The year had been spent in the past where she had been sent by the Guardian of Forever.

It was a year of amazing highs and devastating lows. Friendships had deepened, new friends (and family) had been formed and the Universe was now free of the temporal distortion fields that had recently been wreaking havoc on shipping. Those fields – which had been densest near the Guardian's planet – were the reason she had been drawn here only six weeks prior in this, her normal timeline. While today's date was only a day after she had beamed down to the planet, over a year had passed for her. Reconciling the two sometimes gave her a headache.

In that past she had become part of history by helping Zefram Cochrane ensure the *Phoenix* flew in the 21st Century, then saving the children of Merrijig from a catastrophe that destroyed that world in the 22nd, only to discover one of those children was her own mother!

To top things off, the mission could not have been possible without her alternate, Piper Silayna – another version of

herself from a timeline that had branched off when the future Nero had changed history by travelling into the past and destroying the *USS Kelvin* – nearly killing one James T. Kirk as he was being born whilst his father sacrificed himself to ensure their escape.

Piper almost stopped her usually quick pace as the thought of Piper Silayna brought her to share a glance with her “sister”, as she had come to think of her. They were identical physically – save for a metallic facial prosthetic Piper Silayna wore that repaired a phaser injury sustained years before. Her right eye had been replaced with a synthetic that glowed faintly green when you looked into it.

Their personal and professional lives varied greatly. While both held the rank of Captain, Piper Silayna had been married in her timeline. Many of the adventures that Piper could easily call to mind had never happened in Silayna’s – including the Rittenhouse affair. As such, her circle of friends was different and, as one is partially shaped by the company that is kept, the two had varying outlooks, opinions and even fields of expertise.

While Piper was a passionate historian, Piper Silayna was a better engineer and scientist. Again, Piper was a Master in the Andorian martial art Scheel-Tah, her sister was only a beginner – under her tutelage.

Their differences had sometimes brought them into conflict, yet their similarities had cemented their relationship and mutual affection. Their psychic resonance was so strong they could often sense one another’s thoughts even when they weren’t touching. The talent had come in handy – especially in combat where they could work together as a highly efficient team.

After their time in the past, it seemed almost odd to be home. As she took a moment to glance around the corridor of the

ship she called home, Piper had to remind herself that the *USS Millennium* was not her sister's. In fact, with their destruction of the Nero's ship shortly after it emerged from the temporal fissure and the subsequent salvation of the *USS Kelvin*, Piper Silayna's timeline had collapsed, and her entire universe was gone. In that now lost timeline, she had been Captain of the *Ingram* as that ship had never been stolen as it had in her own.

Now that was all gone. However, the anomalies didn't end there. With the restoration of the original timeline (almost) Piper no longer belonged here either. With no temporal anomalies to investigate she would have no reason to be here at all. She should be off on other business for Starfleet. Yet here she was.

It was an enigma to say the least. The Guardian had explained it – after a fashion. The reason was simple. Only the two of them and their team could complete the job. The cause of the star Hobus going supernova, and the subsequent destruction of ch'Richan and ch'Havran – which were known to the Federation as Romulus and Remus – had still to be discovered and prevented. Only then could the whole cycle be averted.

"It's going to be all right," Piper Silayna said quietly. Piper knew it was more to convince herself than her. Without breaking stride, she reached out and took her sister's hand. The contact brought them together mentally. Their thoughts became enmeshed. Each felt the other's fear and doubts.

"*We are going to make it,*" they thought, determined. "*After all we've been through, there's no way we're going to fail. No way!*"

When they reached the conference room, they found themselves the last to arrive. Two chairs, side-by-side, had been

reserved for them at the head. While those who had not travelled with her into the past couldn't understand it, those who *had* understood things had changed. There was no way Piper Silayna was going to sit on the sidelines.

Both women cast their gaze around the room and took in their crew and guests. With them were: an elderly Spock who was deep in thought, a fresh-faced Sarda, her Vulcan First Officer and dear friend, the Caitian Llash twins who were watching her intently, Judd "Scanner" Sandage, her Chief Engineer, their C.M.O. Doctor Merete AndrusTaurus from Altair Four, Lieutenant Carman Valastro of Alpha Centauri who seemed lost in thought and Lieutenant Commander Caitlin "Ghost" Ryan, her Chief of Pilots who just wanted someone to explain it all to her. Sitting just past her was the time agent from the future, Daniels, who looked annoyed and uncomfortable in his handcuffs.

Most held a cup of their favourite brew as they contemplated their circumstances. For some, their friends had been gone only hours. For others, their loved ones had been absent from their lives for over a year. For them, it was taking some time to get themselves back into the rhythm of life aboard a Federation Starship.

The oddest thing for them all was the presence of a man out of time. The elderly Spock sat quietly contemplating the situation. It was pleasing to him to be among old compatriots, yet disturbing he was not where he expected to be.

As was her habit, Piper tapped the table with a fingernail to draw her crew member's attention. "People, I know it's weird to be home, but it's clear we still have a job to do. As the Guardian said, the future is still in jeopardy." She turned to Spock. "As you're clearly from the future, perhaps you can fill us in."

The wizened old statesman gave a simple nod. "In the year 2387 there was – will be – a supernova that will endanger the whole galaxy. It threatened to create a chain reaction that would have spread to enough star systems, exploding their suns, to destabilise the gravitational forces throughout the Milky Way, as you colourfully call it. It would eventually scatter the solar systems throughout the quadrant, much like the balls deflecting around a billiard table. The loss of life would be catastrophic." He paused for a moment to let the information sink in. "The first to fall were Romulus and Remus." Barely detectable to any but those who knew him well, great sadness passed through his eyes. His voice thickened as he added: "I acted as quickly as I could, but I was unable to prevent their destruction." He adjusted himself and continued. "I was able to release some Red Matter and create a black hole to reverse the effect of the supernova but my ship and that of Nero were caught in its grip." He cleared his throat. "I have to admit I was surprised to find myself transported into the past. However, I am more concerned over the amount of damage that Nero could inflict on the timeline."

A number of faces around the table darkened as they remembered their recent adventure. Piper put her hand on Spock's arm. "We took care of that little problem, Spock."

True to form, Spock raised a curious brow and left it at that. He knew better than second-guess Piper.

Down the table, Daniels raised a finger. He knew he was a pariah to the people present, given his hostile actions regarding their actions towards restoring the timeline, yet he believed he still had something valuable to contribute. "If I may."

Piper turned and gave him a look that suggested she would rather space him than give him the time of day. "You

believe you have something useful to offer, Captain Daniels? Or would you rather shoot me?"

Daniels pursed his lips and thought twice before speaking then threw caution to the wind. "Shooting you might have been the wiser choice! Do you have any idea how much damage you could have done to the timeline?"

The Pipers, Scanner, Manny, Crash and Carman looked at each other in amazement, then burst out laughing. Daniels could only watch them in a mixture of embarrassment and frustration.

"What is so funny?" he asked in a furious stutter.

Piper took a deep breath, splaying her fingers as she settled herself. "Captain Daniels, my crew and I have spent the last year of our lives preparing to make the necessary corrections to the timeline. Captain Silayna here," she laid her right hand on her alternate's left and gave it an affectionate squeeze, "risked everything to save all of reality and sacrificed her entire version of the Universe." She gave him a tight, barely tolerant smile and looked him in the eyes, showing him the pain they both still felt. Their losses along the way had been staggering. Her quiet tone chilled Daniel's veins. "Don't think to presume that we don't understand the gravity of the situation."

Daniels knew he had stepped way over the line and backed up. "My apologies, Captain Piper, Captain Silayna." He looked at the latter and was left wondering. "Although why you're still among us is something of a mystery to me. I would have thought you'd have vanished when your timeline collapsed."

Piper Silayna gave him a lightning quick grin. "Perhaps God loves me," she said sarcastically. "Shouldn't you simply be grateful that something remains of my timeline?"

Next to Daniels, Carman growled: "Exactly. Jason was left fifty years in the past to help set everything right." He scowled at their unwanted guest. "Sacrifices have been made everywhere and all you can do is argue causality."

Daniels put up his hands defensively. "All right. Mea culpa. I'm sorry." He put his hands flat on the table and said: "Look, everything in this universe is cause and effect. Now, we know from temporal mechanics that sometimes effect precedes cause, but the two always exist one with the other." He looked over at Silayna. "I'm looking at an effect without a cause. You shouldn't be here."

Piper Silayna tilted her head to the side. "I think..."

"...therefore, I am," Daniels completed. "I know. It's just that there must be more going on that we're not aware of."

Sarda leaned forward. "I believe I can at least confirm that the cracks in space-time have closed up. We are once more free to travel unobstructed."

"That is good news, Commander," Piper said with a warm smile.

"But there's got to be more going on," Daniels repeated, frustrated.

"Why do you say that?" Piper asked, genuinely curious.

"Perhaps, Captain Daniels," Spock said. "However, I believe that we are not in our original timeline. Something very close perhaps, but not the original." He turned and looked Piper in the eye. "The first domino to fall was the supernova in 2387. It was the event by which all others that followed are defined. Nero still went into the past and left ripples. I am still a man out of time. The destruction of the super-giant resulted in the death

of billions before it was stopped. I suggest that that event should never have happened.”

With her right eye still not functioning due to a recent injury, Piper Silayna turned her attention to Spock with her human one. “You can’t know that for certain. It could have been a natural occurrence.”

Spock nodded his acceptance. “True, Captain Silayna. However, stellar physicists have had millennia to watch the deaths of stars and they have found a number of markers that warn of their imminent destruction. There were none of those present in this case.”

Piper steepled her fingers and tapped her teeth with her nails as she thought. “What is this “Red Matter” that I’ve heard about?”

Spock seemed unsure whether he should tell her. It was highly classified information even in his time.

At the other end of the table Daniels snorted. “Ambassador Spock, you must realise that this timeline will eventually claim this ship and people. Nothing you tell them here will last.”

That caught the attention of all at the table. “What do you mean?” Piper barked.

Daniels scowled at her. “My ship is in your shuttle bay. The *Jolly Roger* is docked alongside. My ship has as part of its shielding a “Causality Bubble” which has been protecting us from the changes in the timeline. If it didn’t have one, every time history changed, I’d find myself somewhere else entirely with no memory of what had taken place.” He rolled his eyes. “It’s a little detrimental to learning if, every time you change history, you lose all memory of the events. Anyhow, sooner or later I’m going to

return my ship to the 31st century and the bubble will disappear – and so will *you*. You no longer belong here.”

Shock rippled through most of the people assembled, with the exception of both Pipers, Crash and Spock. The notion had occurred to all of them.

“I understand that, Captain Daniels,” the black, leonine Captain Krashtallash said quietly in his baritone. “I know there is another me out there who is a new father of four kits and that, because they are still on Cait, my daughter will be fine.” He raised his voice for the benefit of his friends. “We will continue because of our actions, and I am content with that. It is sad that we will forget our adventures on Merrijig, but that is a small price to pay for saving our children’s future.”

Piper took in a breath and said: “Nobody has answered my question.”

Spock raised a brow. Nothing got past Piper. “Red matter, once detonated, can create a singularity with a single drop. I used one to consume the supernova.”

A slow smile crept over Piper’s face. “If we can just get to that star, we can insert the red matter *before* it goes nova. Collapse the star before it becomes a problem.”

“There is a complication.”

Piper shook her head and focussed on her aging friend. “There always is, *Ambassador*.”

Spock sat forward. “The system is populated.”

The usually unflappable Scanner slapped the table in frustration. “Does this get any more convoluted?” he said, his Tennessee accent thickening. He put his hand over his wife, Lieutenant Manny Sandage’s, paw. “Are we even sure we’re even still married in this timeline? What about our kids?”

Nobody had an answer for him – except for his wife. She took his hand and gave it a loving squeeze as she caught his gaze and said with complete conviction: “I know that wherever I am in this universe, I will not only love you but be your wife. I know that Lila and Drallah will be our kits,” she said, referring to their adopted children. She turned her attention to the others. “And I know that we will prevail.” She paused, then hit them with her theory. “I believe the timeline diverged while we were still on Cait. Shortly after the recent revolution I began sensing that something was drastically wrong with the Universe. I even got a taste of it when I momentarily saw in a vision our homeworld looking like it had been devastated by some terrible cataclysm. It was a bit like looking through a window at Hell. I would have put it down to my imagination if Drallah hadn’t complained about the smell that was lingering about me.”

Carman slouched in his chair, depressed. “If we’re going to vanish any time maybe it would have been better if we’d stayed with Jason.” He gave a sheepish grin. “Besides, I was enjoying myself.”

Crash gave his shoulder a friendly squeeze. “We all did, Carman. The dream had to end, though. It was time for us to wake up. There’s a planet out there full of people who will die when their star explodes. We couldn’t save the people of Merrijig. Perhaps we can save these ones.”

“I’m afraid the complications are many, Commander,” Spock continued. “The star in question is Hobus and it exists deep within the Romulan frontier.”

“Meaning we’re not going to get anywhere near it,” Piper said conclusively. “Not now. Tensions between the Federation and the Romulan Star Empire are still high.” Piper pushed herself

back from the table and stood. "People, we have some time to decide our next move. We've only just gotten home from an extended leave, and we need a little time to get our feet beneath us once more." She glanced at the wall chronometer. "It's nearly twelve hundred hours. We'll adjourn for lunch, and whatever else we need to do, and reconvene at sixteen hundred. Bring your best ideas. Dismissed."

As everyone began moving, Piper grabbed Scanner by the arm. "Could you get someone to fix Suzette's eye?" she asked.

Judd smiled at the slip. Now they were back home she should have referred to her as Captain Silayna, but old habits were hard to break. "I'll get right on it – after I see the kids."

Piper nodded her understanding then turned to Daniels as Judd left. "You'll forgive me, Captain Daniels, if I don't let you go wandering around our ship. I can't afford to have you take off and leave us to vanish."

Daniels rolled his eyes. "Hardly, Captain. If Ambassador Spock is right, then we may be the only ones able to stop this happening all over again."

The Captain put her fists on her hips as she examined the younger man. "Hmmm. You know I can't afford to take you at face value." She turned to the two security guards she had posted to watch him. "Put him in the Brig. Maximum security. I don't want a microbe to be able to get out."

The guards acknowledged the order and marched him out the door. In the now quiet room, Piper turned and found she was not alone. Merete was waiting beside the door.

"Hello stranger," Piper said as she stepped over to give her a hug. "It's been a while."

“Not for me, it hasn’t. We only said goodbye yesterday from my point of view.” The doctor shook her head. “It’s weird. You’ve spent over a year in the past, haven’t you?”

Piper turned and, keeping her arm around her friend’s waist, steered her out the door and down the corridor. “It’s peculiar, alright. I don’t know what to tell people if they asked me how old I am.”

The Doctor’s eyes went wide as she considered the thought. “You’re right. The babies and I have been in stasis for a month. That means their next birthday will actually be a month too soon!”

The Captain grimaced. “It sucks, I know. Mind you, Daniels was right. When this is all over, the other *us* will continue with no memory of any of this.” She brightened. “At least I’ll go back to being a year younger.” She tossed her now burgundy coloured hair which was a slightly untidy bob. “And blonde.”

Merete frowned. “And the babies will be the right age. But my children will cease to exist when Daniels leaves.” The notion caused her to stagger a little and Piper caught her as she nearly fell.

“No, they won’t. You’re out there, and the other you is just as much you as you are.”

Merete looked at her incredulously. “Try saying that ten times faster.” She shook her head. “It’s not much of a consolation.” She looked up at her friend. “I wonder if I should even bother feeding the children. What’s the point?”

Seeing where this was going, Piper dragged her into the next, fortunately empty, room and pulled Merete up straight. “Pull yourself together, doctor! I need you, your children, everyone on this ship working together to make it possible to save

the Universe from going through all this again!" She gave her a gentle shake. "Merete AndrusTaurus and her children will continue; you can be certain of that!"

"But all our memories, who we are right here and now will be lost!" Merete stumbled forward and wept, her tears beginning to soak Piper's uniform jacket.

She let her cry. Merete was simply venting feelings she wished she could. When it was all said and done she, too, would forget everything, but Piper Silayna would cease to exist at all, and she had come to love her copy as the twin she never had, and that was the killer for her. For a little while, Piper simply stroked Merete's hair and let her vent before gently pulling her upright so she could talk to her. "You've got duties, Merete, and children to feed." She turned her towards the door and led her out. "Come on, we've got work to do."

Krashtallash wasted no time returning to the quarters he shared with his wife and family aboard the *Jolly Roger* – the starship he commanded.

Fortunately, the *J.R.* had been docked alongside the *Millennium* so, after a quick turbo-lift ride, a step through an airlock and another turbo-lift trip Crash found himself outside his space-borne home. It had been a year since he had seen his wife, even though they had only been married less than six months.

In all the time he had been locked into the past he had worked hard to keep the memory of his wife's face fresh in his mind. It was easier than recalling his children who were still a long way off being weaned when he left, and yet he struggled to remember their colours. Their names had never left him, as he repeated them every night to himself before he slept.

Before he could touch the control, the door slid open and Susanna Llash, his wife, stood before him. She looked at him in a nonchalant fashion and said: "That wasn't too long, my dear. I gather everything's OK down on the planet?"

Losing all semblance of restraint, Crash gathered her up in his arms and swung her about whilst furiously nuzzling her. "How I've missed you!" he said, a man too long without his family. He set her down, still wide-eyed with amazement, then bounded over and gave his four tiny children a loving lick before bundling them up in his arms and holding them tight.

Susanna stepped over, her fur standing on end and looking a little concerned for her spouse. "I'm glad you're happy to be home, my love, but perhaps you could tone it down a little?"

Crash just looked at her with delight. "My wife, you will understand when I explain where I've been, but for right now, I need to reconnect with my family." With his children still in his arms he stepped over and nuzzled his wife once more. "I've got so much to tell you!"

Still a little incredulous, Susanna closed the door to their quarters and joined her husband wondering what kind of welcome was waiting for his mother.

Like Crash, Manny and Scanner were eager to see their children. Unlike Crash, both parents understood what was going on.

When the door opened to their quarters on the *J.R.*, Pashtallash, Manny's mother, looked up and gave them a welcoming smile. "It's good that you're back," she said. "The children have been asking for you!" She plonked her behind on

the floor then sank down so her head lay supported by her paws. "I'm exhausted!"

As soon as the kits saw their parents they bounded over and jumped on their mother's back, being mindful not to scratch their father with their claws. "Where have you been?" "What did you see?" "What's for dinner?" It all came in a rush.

At that point, Pashtallash's head came up as she noticed something. "Judd, have you lost weight? You look thinner." She turned her attention to her daughter. "Manny, you smell like you've had your fur all singed recently." Her eyes narrowed as she looked at them like errant children. "What have you two been up to since you've been gone?"

Scanner could do nothing but give her a wan smile. "It's a long story, and I'm not sure you'd believe all of it."

Manny rolled her children off her back and played pounce with Lila while she said: "But every word of it will be true, Mother. Believe me, it will be true."

Pashtallash put her head down again. "I'm sure it will be, my children. However, your kits need food more than I need answers. We'll talk about it over lunch, shall we?"

Just then Scanner's stomach growled. "All ah know is I could really go for some catfish and cottage fries. It's been a long time."

His mother-in-law scolded him without moving. "That's what you had for evening meal yesterday, Judd. You need something healthier to eat than all that fried food."

Rather than say anything, Judd and his wife shared aa amused, knowing look.

Piper sat alone in the bar, staring out the window. The Guardian's planet turned below, looking as dead as it always did. She couldn't throw off the feeling the people who built the place destroyed themselves by meddling too much in their own history.

It was really nothing more than a distraction. The real problems of their existence were plaguing her. Although they had tried to keep a lid on their situation, it was already clear that word had gotten out. The sand in their particular hourglass had nearly drained.

A part of her shared their frustration. It seemed almost pointless to save the Universe if you couldn't be a part of it afterward.

She toyed with her fruit juice and wished once more that she wasn't on duty. Something a little stronger would certainly fit the bill. Maybe a strong cup of coffee?

Their bartender, Gillian, an old friend of Piper's, stopped by the table and looked down. "Why so glum, Piper? You've done so much; you should be proud."

The Captain looked up at the pale Argelian with her long, braided black hair and gave her a wan smile. It was the best she could do considering the funk she was in. "Sit down for a moment, Gillian. Let's talk."

The woman before her caught her attention with her sapphire-blue eyes. She could practically compel someone to look at her with nothing more than a glance. "There's really nothing you need to tell me," she said serenely. "I'm aware of our circumstances. However, we still have a job to do. Otherwise, it's all been for nothing."

Her words caught the Captain off guard. How could she know? Of course, she had heard the scuttlebutt. If there was one

person on board who would always know the mind of the crew, it was the ship's bartender. "You know, we could leave it like this and simply let this timeline continue."

Gillian shook her head, her braids flying around her neck. "No," she said firmly. "My father didn't wait fifty years for you so you could stop this close to the end."

Piper was honestly confused. "Your father? What do you mean?"

Gillian gave her a smile that was so genuine and passionate it warmed Piper's soul. "My real full name is Gillian Nunn, Piper. I never told you that I've been going by my mother's name. Gillian is not Argelian – it's human, as I am half human. My father is Jason Nunn."

Piper smacked herself on the forehead. After all that had happened in the previous year, she had forgotten that detail. Crash had learned it from Gillian's father from his future self before he returned to the past, without telling Jason's younger self. She remembered that keeping the knowledge of his fate from Mister Nunn during their year in the past was wearing on them all.

Gillian put a hand over Piper's, suddenly afraid she had done irreversible damage to their relationship. "Don't be angry with me, Piper. My father insisted I keep his name out of my file so there wouldn't be any confusion or possible paradoxes in time." She gave her friend a light grin. "He also told me there might come a day when I can tell you. Today seems as good a day as any."

Again, Piper was speechless. She just stared at Gillian as if she was a complete stranger who had popped into the bar out of the blue. Yes, she had kept a huge secret from them for quite some time. A stray thought came to her, and she blurted: "How could

you have served for so long on this ship and not said anything to me? Especially Mister Nunn? It must have killed you seeing him day in and day out and never being able to tell him who you were.”

“Oddly enough,” Gillian said jauntily, “that’s not the first time I’ve had that question put to me.” When Piper simply tilted her head to the side in query Gillian continued. “My Father asked me the last time I had shore leave on Argelius when I visited him just before we came here. I told him the same thing I’ll tell you. It was hard, but at the same time eye opening. You see, most of us only ever get to know their parents as that – their parents. Large, enigmatic, the people they became *after* they started having kids. While serving on the *Millennium* I got to know who my father was in his youth.” The thought made her giggle a little. “It was quite illuminating.”

Piper had heard enough and collected herself to the point where she could believe and understand. She shook her head in amazement. “Will the wonders of this Universe never cease?” she asked more to herself.

“Look at it from my point of view, Piper,” Gillian said. “I’m a person who, in the natural order of the universe should not exist. My father was a man out of time and fell in love with a woman who should have been too old for him, except she wasn’t. I got to grow up aboard a ship *you* put back in the sky so my family could run cargo between Argelius and Rigel – a ship he eventually turned into a cafe on my homeworld. *None of my life makes sense.* Yet here I am!”

Piper sat back and sipped her pineapple juice while she absorbed what her friend had told her. “It sounds like something

out of a bad sci-fi novel,” she said, trying to wrap her mind around the revelation.

Gillian slid to the side in the booth and stood up. “It might, but the fact is that too high a price has been paid to get us to this point for us to stop. We must go forward, or all could be lost.” She leaned over and gave her friend a peck on the cheek. “I know you’ll make the right decision,” she said, voicing her complete confidence in her friend.

Piper watched her go back to her duties behind the bar and found a whole new layer of respect for the Argelian. Her view was suddenly blocked by a familiar form who was looking down at her with her glowing green eye. “It’s nice to see you’re seeing me again,” she quipped.

Piper Silayna slid into the booth opposite her. Curiously, she had ditched her retro uniform and had replicated a pair of blue jeans, a t-shirt with an arrow pointing upwards with some familiar words beneath it, knee-length leather boots and a leather jacket. In answer to her sister’s unspoken question, she said: “Your crew would be too easily confused if I wore your uniform, and mine suddenly seems woefully out of date. So, I thought civvies would be the best option.” She looked at her sister curiously. “You don’t approve?”

“Hardly!” Piper said with a light laugh. “I just wish I could go the same way.” She tugged down on her red uniform jacket. “After a year in jeans the uniform feels like I’m wearing a medieval suit of armour.”

Gillian passed their table and left Piper Silayna a glass of orange juice. She watched her go and said: “How did she know?”

It would have taken more time than she cared to explain it the old-fashioned way, so Piper leaned forward and took her

sister's hand. After five seconds she let it go again, Silayna now completely aware of who and what their bartender was.

"Wow, what a mind frack," she said. Suddenly serious, she said: "Speaking of mind fracks, we've got a serious morale problem on our hands. If we're not careful the crew might start coming apart at the seams."

Not wanting to be confused, and certainly not wishing to voice her opinions lest they be overheard, both Pipers joined hands once more.

"What do you mean?"

"I've heard people talking. Like they don't know what the point of anything is. If there's another version of themselves out there, why don't we simply shut down the bubble that's keeping us stuck here and just vanish? they're saying."

"Not good. We need this crew working together as one if we're going to pull this off."

"Then you'd better do something – fast."

Piper let go and downed the last of her juice. "I'll meet you in the Conference Room," she said before darting out the door – headed for the Bridge.

Sarda was waiting for her and vacated the Centre Seat. It seemed like a lifetime since she had sat there and yet it still came naturally to occupy it. She turned to her Comms officer: "Put me through to the *Jolly Roger* was well." A nod later, she said: "Attention crew of the *USS Millennium*, this is your Captain speaking."

All over the ship people stopped and listened. By this time most were aware something was wrong and were hoping someone could give them some insight.

Piper took a deep breath, then said as openly and honestly as she could muster: "There have been some rumours going around regarding our current status and I am here to tell you there is *some* truth to the tales." She paused for a second then continued in all seriousness: "Yes, there are two of everyone in the Universe at this time. What you would not be aware of is that we are here purely because of a fluke. The actions of myself and some of the senior staff in the past have resulted in mending the fractures that were forming throughout the entire universe. The fractures you remember brought us here in the first place. The first part of the job is finished.

"What I need you all to know is that we could not have done it without you. The entire crew of the *Millennium* got us where we are. Without you, I wouldn't be speaking to you now." She paused for a beat and took a second to look at the faces of her crew about her. They were hanging on her every word. "I need you to know, to realise without a shadow of a doubt, that there is still work to be done. There is a star that will soon go supernova and not only destroy the inhabitants of its system, but most of the Romulan Star Empire.

"Now, I know that this ship and crew are probably the only ones in the Universe with the tools and the knowledge to avert this catastrophe. Nobody else knows it's going to happen. It will still trigger events that will not only throw a Romulan ship into the past, but Spock as well."

In certain parts of the ship the silence became even deeper. The loss of Spock would be a blow to the entire Federation.

"You know me, and I know you. We cannot allow this to go unchallenged. We cannot just fade away if there's even an

outside chance that we can still make a difference. There are billions of people and a universe that's still out of whack that are relying on us!" She stood; determination etched on her face. "Are you with me?" she asked, her fist beating the air. Some rose to join her crying: "Yes!" Others still seemed unsure.

"Are you with me?" she repeated, a little louder. "ARE YOU WITH ME?" she shouted.

By this time, the entire Bridge crew were on their feet, shouting "YES!" Piper just hoped the fever had reached the crews of *both* ships.

Her enthusiasm was infectious, but there were a few stragglers. Some who just refused to believe her. Some who started seeking each other out. If they were going to start a mutiny, they needed numbers...

At sixteen hundred hours that day the crew came together in the Conference Room and arrayed themselves around the table. Once again, Piper took the head with Piper Silayna to her right and Sarda to her left. At the other end of the table taking the place of honour was Spock looking the worse for wear considering how much he had been through in the previous twenty-four hours in his own timeline.

It was this that Piper wished to highlight. She gazed past her team and into the eyes of the elder statesman. "Ambassador Spock, perhaps you can enlighten us regarding your more recent activities – especially what happened to your ship."

Spock nodded thoughtfully. He knew it would come to this. "Understood, Captain Piper." He looked off into the not-too-distant past. "When I emerged from the rift, I found myself in the year 2253. Fortunately, my arrival went unnoticed, and I

was able to employ my knowledge of Starfleet protocols from the time to avoid detection. I then made my way to the Guardian's planet, the only place I knew where there was a possibility of returning home. Whilst my ship was capable of extreme velocities, it did not have the required mass to survive a slingshot manoeuvre to return me to my time."

The elder Vulcan seemed reluctant to continue so Piper asked him directly. "What did you do with your ship, Spock?"

"It is still on the planet, Captain. My ship has a cloaking device and I used it to hide my ship three miles from the Guardian. I then proceeded on foot to the Guardian itself. I estimated the vessel had enough power stored to maintain the cloak until 2387 when I could retrieve it and the red matter."

Scanner leaned forward and asked: "Why didn't you just send it into the sun and beam down? You took a great risk that the ship would be found."

"The result of such an action would have caused the red matter to detonate and collapse the star, destroying everything in this system and further corrupting this timeline."

Scanner's mouth became a big, silent "O" and he sat back feeling like boy who had asked a truly stupid question of the school principal.

At her end of the table, both Pipers nodded silently. They had discussed the matter and agreed that would have been his most likely course of action. "Ambassador Spock, I will need you to beam down to the surface and retrieve your ship. If all does not go to plan, we may need the red matter as a backup."

Once more, Spock seemed reluctant. "I was entrusted with the red matter, Captain. I cannot leave it with you."

Piper gave her old mentor a small, confident smile. “You won’t have to, Spock. There’s more than one way to travel through time.”

His reply was simply a curiously raised brow.

The Captain turned her attention to Daniels who was doing his best to watch and yet keep his mouth shut. “Captain Daniels, are you able to shift our vessels into the future?”

The answer was a violent shake of the head, no. “Not possible, Captain Piper. The device is only powerful enough to move my ship into the future, not something as big as your ship – and certainly not with the *Jolly Roger* still with us.”

The man seemed almost glad to tell her that, she thought. She didn’t take him at face value, however, but she was aware there was very little chance she would be able to get Daniel’s ship to function without his co-operation. “I expected as much,” Piper said. “However, I am aware of your ship’s ability to keep others in stasis for extended periods of time.”

Daniels looked at her with a renewed respect. It was clear she was capable of thinking outside the box. “Yes, it can. You’re suggesting we bring Spock’s ship into your landing bay then freeze us all for one hundred years?”

Sarda spoke up. “Just until 2387, Captain Daniels.”

Daniels gave him a sideways look that spoke much of the Vulcan’s sense of humour. “Not possible, Captain Piper. There’s no way your ship would go unnoticed here for that long.”

Once more Daniels had underestimated Piper. This time, her double spoke, levelling the smart-alecky time traveller. “Nobody said anything about staying here, Daniels. We can hide the *Millennium* either in a nebula or even outside the galaxy itself.”

Daniels almost cackled. “It would take too long to get that far,” he said snidely.

Piper looked at her sister in amazement. “Why does everyone think that you have to fly to the *edge* of the galaxy to leave it?” She turned her attention to Daniels. “There’s always perpendicular to the ecliptic, you know! It’s only fifty light years away.”

It was Daniels’ turn to be chastened. “Of course,” he said, embarrassed. He gave her a grudging nod. “Okay then, Captain Piper. It’s clear you’ve thought this out extensively. There’s just one little flaw to your plan. I can’t put my ship in stasis as well, you know, otherwise we’d never be able to shut it off. Someone would have to stay at the controls of my ship to monitor the situation. That someone would lose a whole lot of years sitting around waiting to wake us up.”

Piper eyed him suspiciously. “I was given the impression that your ship has an A.I. computer on board. Surely it would be capable of monitoring things and bringing you out of stasis if the need arose.”

While Daniels was fond of his A.I. he was not the sort to put his life in the hands of a mere machine. As he debated the virtue – or not – of Piper’s plan she added: “Need I remind you of the stakes here?”

Daniels gave her a dirty look. He was fast learning she did not always play fair. “No, you don’t, *Captain Piper*,” he almost spat. “However, I can tell you straight away that we need to cut the *Jolly Roger* loose. Trying to protect both ships is too risky and, frankly, overkill.”

The point was made and won. Piper nodded. “I agree. We’ll have to move her crew over here before we go,” she said

thoughtfully. Before she continued, she noticed Lieutenant Sandage – she was having to train herself to think of her that way again – touch her ear as a message came in. She knew it was trouble straight away as Manny’s hair stood on end. Instead of saying something, the telepath caught Piper’s eye and shot a thought straight at her. “*We have a mutiny on our hands.*”

“*Where?*”

“*The main shuttlebay. There’s a bunch of people trying to steal the Cork.*”

Piper Silayna, who had been listening in, leaned over and added: “*I’ve got an idea.*”

At that, Piper stood. “Captain Daniels, please return to your vessel and begin making the arrangements. Captain Krashtallash, please see to the immediate evacuation of the *Jolly Roger*. Spock, could you beam down and ready your ship? It seems time is working against us.”

The thing that worried Piper the most when she reached the main hangar bay was how many people were gathered, trying to take the *Cork*. A number of Manny’s people were stationed around the *Runabout*-class vessel, each with phasers drawn. The few people on the floor who had been stunned senseless were testimony to the crowd’s determination.

All the same, when she approached them from the rear people noticed her and still moved aside respectfully. She wasn’t sure it was her or the angry white Cait at her side who was growling the whole way through.

When she reached the *Cork*, she stepped up onto the warp nacelle so she could see and address the crowd which hushed as she engaged them. At a rough count she saw thirty. Out of a ship

with five-hundred-odd crewmembers it was not a good measure of her people's worries.

"I'd like to say: "good afternoon", but I'm afraid you wouldn't agree with me," she said with a touch of acid. "I'll give you all this single opportunity to leave and return to your stations. No mention of this will appear on your records."

To her dismay, nobody moved.

An ensign from Stellar Cartography, a young man Piper knew as Anderson, spoke for the crowd. "We don't want any trouble, Captain, but we don't want to wait around here for the Guardian to vanish us."

Piper heard his fear and his determination. All the same, she knew he had his facts upside-down. "What makes you think the Guardian is going to "vanish you", as you put it?"

The tall, blonde human spoke up and said: "Word is if we leave this planet, we will all "disappear". We don't believe it! We know you have a mission, Captain, and we don't want to stop you, but this nonsense that we're already out there somehow can't be true! We know who we are! We're real and *nobody* is going to rob us of our futures!"

Piper pursed her lips. A little knowledge was a dangerous thing, especially when your facts were full of holes. "Suppose you're right, Ensign. If Starfleet finds you, you will be tried for desertion and sent to a penal colony for a *very long time*. Are you sure you want that stain on your career?"

The answer she expected to come didn't disappoint her. "We're willing to take our chances." There was steel in the man's tone.

“And what if I said you can’t have the *Cork*? That I need it to complete this mission?” She knew he would challenge, she just wanted to test his resolve.

“Then we will have to take it by force,” Anderson said with a mixture of fear and determination.

Piper looked about her at the faces before her and saw mainly fear. She was disappointed that so many would lose their faith in her so quickly, but time was not on her side at the present. It was only so long they could stay here before they were noticed – if they hadn’t been already. She wished she had more time to convince them, but there wasn’t any.

She put her hands on her hips and said: “Alright, then. You can’t have the *Cork*, but I’ve ordered the *Jolly Roger* be cleared of all crew and offered them the same thing I’m giving you. Leave peacefully and I won’t stop you. Alright?”

The group, a mix of beings from a number of races, all looked at one another with a mixture of relief and suspicion. Unwilling to decide for themselves, they eventually turned their attention to Anderson who seemed to relish the authority they had given him. The man fairly swelled with pride. “You have a deal, Captain.”

Piper wondered to herself if he would insist on running the *J.R.* himself, that as soon as he was on board, he would declare himself captain. It made no difference, she told herself. The result would be the same.

Without shifting her gaze, she fired a thought at Manny. “*Make the arrangements, will you?*”

The Lieutenant acknowledged without an outward sign and began waving them towards the exit.

Piper turned and gazed around their expansive hangar and watched as Daniels, escorted by a pair of armed guards, entered his vessel. A thought came to her, and she headed in his direction. As she did so she tried to put the disappointment she felt out of her mind. The betrayal cut deep, but she reminded herself there were more important things to deal with.

As she approached the vessel she broke into a run when she realised the security people were not following Daniels into the ship. Before she could raise her voice, the door slid shut and the ship's running lights came on.

"Stop him!" she cried, fearing it was already too late. Were they all about to wink out of existence? Would she feel anything if it happened?

The ship shimmered before her and vanished before she could reach it, and just as quickly reappeared. Panicked, she slid to a stop and patted herself down just to be sure she was still here. Within the blink of an eye, she went from frightened to furious. She stormed over to Daniel's vessel and thumped the door with the edge of her fist.

"You'd better open this bloody door, Daniels, before I have my people rip it off!" she shouted.

As if in response it opened, but instead of Daniels another being exited. Piper stepped back in surprise as a tall, black Caitian stepped out sporting a tight fitting, charcoal jumpsuit reminiscent of lycra. It seemed tailor-made for the wearer whose every step reeked of confidence and whose physique was athletic. The female greeted Piper with a smile and extended her paw. "Greetings, Captain Piper. My name is Captain Sustasandage." She pronounced it *sooz-ta-sandage*. "I am *very* pleased to meet you."

Several thoughts passed through her mind as Piper considered the new arrival. Trust was far from her considering Daniels' duplicity. Her experience had taught her to think the Time Agents couldn't get a pizza order right.

However, the name gave her pause. A Cait with the name Sandage could only be a descendant of Drallah – Lila would likely have lost hers upon marriage. Her colour added to her claim. Black Caits were rare enough.

Piper chose to trust and extended her hand in welcome. The psychic shock was profound but not painful. There was an instantaneous meeting of minds.

"I wanted to greet you this way because I wanted you to see me unguarded," the new arrival thought in friendly tones.

Piper found herself seeing the person behind the fur. She was fiercely loyal and proud of her heritage, especially her family's link to her people's revolution during the previous year – on Piper's calendar. She was also keen to work to resolve this situation. Piper also picked up a sense of idol worship of herself. Upon that discovery Sustasandage blushed with embarrassment. She hadn't intended to reveal that.

"Thank you, Sus," Piper replied. *"I appreciate your honesty."* She added a relieved: *"It's quite refreshing."*

Piper felt her laugh. *"I replaced Daniels after his return. Our superiors were unimpressed with his attempts at corrections – especially when it became clear it had become personal to him. His alternate from the other timeline gave you some troubles, I hear."*

The thought brought back the memory afresh to Piper and Sus saw it through her eyes. She started when she realised that their actions had been necessary to launch the *Phoenix*.

"The more I do this job, the more I become amazed how past, present and future keep overlapping to bring out a preferred result." She let go of Piper's hand and gave her a nod. "Captain, I'm here to assist you in any way possible to complete your mission. We did some work before I returned to try to isolate the causal factor for Hobus' destruction and couldn't find it." She beckoned her inside her vessel. "I was hoping you might be able to help me out."

As Piper stepped into the ship, she waved off her security people. "Resume your stations," she ordered. With a scowl she added darkly: "We'll talk about this later."

She didn't bother to watch them go, knowing they were feeling shame for their failure. Like Daniels' ship, she passed through a short corridor before entering an open space behind its cockpit. Before she could act, Sus turned as Piper asked: "You didn't get your talent from Manny, did you?"

Captain Sandage purred. "No. He doesn't know it yet, but Drallah will develop his just before he becomes an adult. "Manny" will teach him to use it." Her whiskers arched forward in amusement. "It's funny to think of one's ancestors using their first names." She fairly radiated pride. "We owe Drallah a lot."

Remembering the young Cait's letter that drew the Federation's attention to the plight of the repressed Black Cait, Piper nodded. "That we do."

Sus spoke up for her ship's computer. "Scanner, could you activate the Continuum Viewer please?"

"Sure thing."

Piper started when she recognised the voice. It was Judd's.

“How are y’all, Piper?” it continued. “It’s nice to meet you.”

While she was used to ordering computers to perform tasks, Piper was far from familiar with conversing with one. “You, too, Scanner,” she said formally. She shot Sus a look and the Cait simply smiled back at her. To Piper she seemed to be the sort of person who easily took delight in things.

“I programmed it,” she said cheekily. “You know how I feel about them.”

Piper suddenly found herself surrounded by a three-dimensional representation of history. The two of them stood in a storm of colour with threads of time swirling around them. Images she was familiar with appeared, including First Contact. She glimpsed Suzette as she watched it happen, not realising that it was impossible. She turned and elsewhere saw a flash of the Cetacean probe leaving Earth after Jim’s rescue.

“Scanner, bring the focus on Hobus and its system. Look for any anomalies.” Her voice betrayed her, however. It was clear she had done this before. She looked over at Piper. “Keep your eyes open, Captain. I’m hoping you will see something others have missed.”

Not quite sure how that was possible considering she had no real idea how to interpret what she was seeing, Piper determined to keep her mind open. She watched in wonder as the images swirled around her and she almost felt pulled along by them as they shifted and focussed on a single star: the massive Hobus. The blue giant burned before her and the planets around it turned. It definitely wasn’t in real time as the planets zoomed around the star as if they were mad comets.

“How are we supposed to see something at this rate of speed?” Piper quietly complained.

“We’re not,” Sus said. “I just wanted you to see what will happen if we fail.” The sadness reflected in her voice was profound.

Piper watched as the star suddenly shrank before exploding outward violently, vaporising the system in seconds. The shockwave extended outward at what Piper wondered was warp speed. It was only a matter of days before it reached the nearest star: that of the home of Romulus and Remus. The huge ball of fire continued unabated until a singularity opened up within it.

“Slow,” Sus ordered. “Focus on the singularity.”

Piper watched in amazement as the newly formed black hole sucked in not only a good portion of the shockwave, but also two starships, both of which she was familiar with. However, she quickly noted the whole nova was not consumed and that a large portion of it continued on its destructive path.

“Pause,” Sus ordered. She turned to Piper; her tone grim. “I’m going to speed up the playback for the next two millennia. I warn you; it is disturbing.” As she turned back to the viewer she added: “It scares the willies out of me. Continue.”

Piper watched aghast as the shockwave consumed more stars, causing them to collapse or go nova themselves. While the wave had slowed, it refused to show signs of abating. Over centuries system after system fell under its influence. Piper was alarmed to note it was headed towards the centre of the galaxy. The stars there were so tightly packed that they would fall like dominoes, which they did. Within a short period, the stars at the galaxy’s core had all gone nova, shattering the gravitational forces

within it. What remained of the once mighty Milky Way began separating from the bulk of it and spinning off into intergalactic space, shedding star systems as it went.

The Captain was shaken to the core. She had just witnessed the death of their whole galaxy – and that only in the space of two thousand years. She turned to her host in wonder. “What happens to the Federation?” she asked.

“Andromeda,” Sus said with a sigh. “We created a fleet of multigenerational starships – the largest one in history and migrated there. Using quantum slipstream drive, among others, we were able to make the journey quicker, but it still took about ten years each way. Once we harnessed time, we were able to make the trip back in no time at all – pardon the pun – as we’re no longer held back by the warp limit.” She stepped forward and took Piper’s hands. The link was instantaneous and not unwelcome.

Piper saw Cait’s new home, a lush world not unlike their original. Its trees were more like eucalypts than pines and oaks, but it was clear to her the Cait were just glad to be able to call it home.

“As much as I love our new home, Piper, I want you to help me save us from having to move at all. The Milky Way should never have died.”

Piper not only saw the world that was, she felt the immense loss of the original. It was as if a piece of their soul was missing, lost for all time. She found herself involuntarily shedding a tear in sympathy. It reminded her what it must feel like to lose a parent. It was something you could survive but it never left you the same.

"Thank you for your sympathies, Captain Piper. They always said you were a marshmallow at heart." Piper felt her warm chuckle and heard the voices of Sus' parents repeating the same story that must have been passed down from Scanner himself. Only he would have been irreverent enough to say that.

Sustasandage let go of her hands and stepped back once more. "Scanner," she said, addressing the computer. "Reset to the week before Hobus detonated and play at one hundred times speed."

Again, they watched as time passed. Nothing untoward happened to the star and once more it detonated suddenly – violently.

Piper tipped her head to the side. The erroneous assumption was clear to her, but she had no time to voice it before her communicator chirped. Annoyed, she ripped it off her belt and flipped it open. "Piper."

Sarda spoke and, as he did so, she felt the echo of his thoughts in her mind. "The transfer is complete, Captain. We are preparing to release the *Jolly Roger*."

As much as she wanted to finish what they had started, there was no way Piper was going to let Sarda watch over this alone. "I'll be there in a minute." She looked over at Sus and said simply: "Come with me."

True to her word, Piper appeared on the Bridge, flanked by their new guest. There were a few starts and intakes of breath, and none more so than from Crash and Manny, who were manning their old posts. Both of them were curious about the new arrival but were too professional to consider talking to her now.

“Captain,” Crash stated, then continued with a touch of derision. “Anderson is demanding their ship’s release.” He hated the futility of their actions and the fact he could do little to prevent it. Krashtallash understood the implications of the Captain’s decisions and supported them, even though it grated on him to let it happen. The *Jolly Roger* had been his first command and, even though they had already agreed to loose the ship, to have it go out this way seemed unworthy.

Piper simply nodded absently; her gaze focussed on the viewscreen. She was looking past the outer edge of the *J.R.* “If they’re determined to do this let them go. We’re better off without them.” She couldn’t help but let the sadness she felt be heard.

Crash cleared them and the tractor holding the ships together was released. The whale-shaped, former Caitian warship slid to the side then accelerated forward, turning starboard away from the planet. The red glow from the impulse engines could be seen momentarily as the *J.R.* continued in Anderson’s mad dash for freedom. The ship shrank to a speck as it went to full impulse.

From the comms speaker overhead Piper heard Anderson’s victorious words. “I told you, Captain nothing...”

With a startling suddenness the *Jolly Roger* vanished along with its mutinous crew. The deck was hushed and only broken by Crash’s: “At least their alternates have a chance to do better.”

A dark chuckle was heard from a few, but the rest kept staring at the viewscreen for a moment before they turned back to their duties.

“Hmmm.” Piper put the sad waste out of her mind as she kept her gaze on the speck she had been watching in the corner of the viewscreen that was getting bigger. “Let’s hope you’re right.”

She turned and addressed Ghost. "Prepare to receive Spock's ship."

As usual, the plucky Irish woman was on top of things. From her place at the rear of the Bridge she ordered: "Ambassador Spock, please dock in Shuttle Bay Two. The doors are open, and the beer is on tap."

"Altair Water will do, Lieutenant," the elder Vulcan replied with a touch of warmth.

At the science station Sarda raised an eyebrow. Was that humour? He shook his head. No, it couldn't possibly be.

Within moments the *Jellyfish* was secured below, and Piper rose to her feet. "Helm, lay in a course at ninety degrees vertical to the plane of the galactic ecliptic. Take us out of the galaxy at maximum warp. Cloak the ship. I don't want us bumping into anyone on our way."

As the stars shifted on the viewscreen Piper turned her attention to her visitor. "Mister Sandage, Captain Krashtallash, please join me in my ready room. You're going to love this."

Late that night both Pipers woke with a start. Once more they were sharing a bed, the Cait from the *J.R.* were using up all the spare bunks. Besides, they liked it better when they were together. They may have grown up apart in different timelines, but now they were as inseparable as identical twins.

"Lights," they said in unison. The computer complied and brought a dim glow to the room.

Without thought or consultation, the two of them leaned forward and held one another. The dream had seemed so real and now they had full contact they were able to examine it in their thoughts.

"It seemed as real as the vision of the Narada."

"To me, too. I could actually taste the air."

"Let's start from the beginning and play it over so we won't forget."

They laughed. They could still recall their previous vision in graphic detail.

Piper was on the bridge of her starship. It resembled the *Millennium*, but wasn't quite the same. There was a sense of fear for something, but they didn't know what. The crew about her were frantically punching in commands on their consoles but it appeared to no avail.

A huge, blue star resolved on the screen. Silhouetted against it was the tiny form of a starship. It reminded them of a Romulan Bird of Prey, and it was clear they were falling into the sun. The words: "Need assistance," were heard through the overhead speaker.

"Intercept course!" Piper had ordered.

"There's no time!" they heard.

Moments later the ship was lost to them as it was engulfed in brilliant blue fire.

Both women were confused that the Piper whose eyes they were seeing through was not as sorry as she should have been – and they got a sense that, for whatever reason – she had hesitated to come to the Romulan's assistance.

"That was creepy."

"No argument here. I wonder why I/we/she hesitated."

"Perhaps they had attacked us?"

"Who knows? It was all so quick."

"Are we sure it was a vision?"

"Too much like the Narada for it not to be."

“Agreed.”

“The star was familiar. It looked like Hobus.”

“Is this another of those weird messages? A clue?”

Both women shivered. Once more it felt like they were being played with. Marionettes dancing on a string.

“There is a way of confirming it.”

Suzette saw it and understood. Together, they slid out of bed and padded over to the door but stopped just short of it. They looked down. “Perhaps we should get dressed first,” she said.

Dressed in jeans and t-shirts – it was still late at night from their point of view – both Pipers sat on the time ship’s warp nacelle as they waited for Sustasandage to arrive.

“You know, there were times I missed this,” Piper said quietly so their voices didn’t carry.

“Missed what?”

Piper gestured around her. “I used to jog down here every day. Often with Manny at my side. It was one of the few places on the ship where I could get some peace and quiet.” A memory surfaced. “And I also got to see Ghost’s ship, the *Spectre*.” She gave a slightly evil grin. “Now there’s a fighter that can kick butt.”

Suzette’s eyebrow shot up. “You’ll have to show it to me some time.”

“I will. Just as soon as this is over.”

Her words had just finished echoing when Sustasandage came bounding out of the turbo-lift, followed by Manny. They ran side-by-side, with Manny taking a slight lead. Piper surmised that, even though Sus outranked her, the future Cait still deferred to her great to the nth power grandmother.

Manny gave them both a quick smile. “Did you pair have another one of your dreams? I seem to remember flying into a *star*.” Her whiskers quivered in disgust. “Not something I want to dwell on.”

To their surprise Sus agreed. “I woke up from one just like that, too. I thought it was my imagination.”

The Pipers shared a knowing look. “Er, no. It wasn’t,” Suzette said, feeling slightly embarrassed. “The last time we had a dream like that it led us to an encounter with Nero. It gave us just what we needed to find him.”

Captain Sandage looked sceptical. “My people have no faith in prophecies, Captain...s.”

Manny spoke up, her fur bristling. Her statement wasn’t going without a challenge. “And yet the previous one led us *right* to Nero. Without it, we wouldn’t have known the location *or* the stardate. Explain that one?” She hadn’t meant to speak out of turn, and both Pipers didn’t mind considering she was reacting from her people’s cultural leanings. Sus was technically Manny’s offspring, her kin, where she was the elder. No matter what the differences in time were.

Piper had to credit her that Sus recognised her place and didn’t argue with her. She simply sat back and watched the two of them in mild amusement. Only in their galaxy could two family members separated by a *millennium* get into an argument on her ship.

Sus yielded. “What do you suggest, Grandmother?” she asked. At Suzette’s raised eyebrow, she added with a touch of sarcasm: “I can’t exactly call her Great-grandmother to the hundredth power now, can I?”

Piper grinned. “She’s got you there, Sis.”

“It’s obvious,” Manny said as she sat on the floor, her tail swishing behind her. Sus joined her, their tails intertwining playfully. “We go over our memories of the vision and see what we can learn.”

At that the Pipers smirked. There wasn’t much to tell. “All I remember was being on a ship that was *like* the *Millennium*,” Piper said, “but not quite.”

Suzette continued. “There was something wrong. As if for some reason we couldn’t save the Romulan ship – and didn’t really want to.”

“There was something else,” Piper added, feeling a little uncomfortable. She looked at her sister. “Did you get the sense that we were older?”

The question gave the woman pause. She cast her mind back to the vivid vision and nodded to herself. “I don’t know. It could have just been a long day and I was tired.”

Sus listened to the two of them talk and found the switch from singular to plurals baffling. She looked at her kin and asked: “Do they always talk like that? It’d make my head spin.”

Manny shrugged nonchalantly. “You get used to it.”

“Okay, then,” Piper said, suddenly rising off her seat. “The only course available to us is the obvious one.” She turned and fixed Sustasandage with an unwavering stare. “You have to tell us about our future.”

It was an idea that the Time Agent clearly balked at. “I can’t do that. We’ve already got enough problems with time paradoxes. For you to have foreknowledge of your life would obviously be too great a temptation to mess with it and create *another* new timeline.” She shook her head. “No, I can’t do that.”

“What if the star we remember in the dream is Hobus?” Suzette said plaintively. “*We* could be the cause of the star’s collapse in the first place! If that’s the case, it’s obvious that we need to avoid that happening at all costs.”

“What if it *isn’t*?” Sus said easily. “The dream you had could have been nothing more than a manifestation of your deepest fears. The loss of a shipload of people under circumstances beyond your control. It is every commander’s worst nightmare.”

Manny’s ears flattened out in annoyance. “Need I remind you that the last time they had a dream it was entirely accurate?” she said testily. “Right down to the time and spacial coordinates.”

Sus’ made a conscious effort to calm herself and her fur began to flatten out. “I know, I know, Grandmother. However, the Temporal Prime Directive is clear. I cannot violate it.”

Piper chuckled. “Your presence here violates it on so many levels.” She put her hands in her jeans pockets and smiled. “Never mind. I’ll let you off the hook. I’m not looking for information regarding *my* future.”

The Time Agent visibly relaxed. “Good,” she said, relieved.

“We’re asking for the Piper from *this* timeline’s future,” Suzette completed, knowing her sister’s thoughts. “Our futures and ultimate destinies remain a mystery. As far as we know, as soon as you leave the ship, we’ll go the way of the *Jolly Roger* and her misguided crew.”

Sustasandage seemed visibly torn. It was clear Piper’s argument had swayed her. However, she still had doubts. “What if you use the information to change the other Piper’s destiny?”

“We’ll only act if we have to,” Piper said, doing her best to put the feline at ease. “If she is the one who destroys Hobus, then by God, we *will* stop it from happening if for no other reason that the fate of this galaxy hangs in the balance.”

Part Two

Chapter One

Thousands of years of history. That's what the Senate building on ch'Rihan represented. A chequered history, to say the very least. Founded by renegades from a society that would no longer tolerate them, the Declared had set out for the stars and eventually found the twin worlds where they had settled. It wasn't long before they fell into old habits, so they turned their natural aggression into dominating their habitat. When they ran out of space, they founded their empire. Unlike the United Federation of Planets, the Rihannsu were not interested in sharing their space with others. Only the Rihannsu and their cousins on ch'Havran lived here, and the undesirables who lived *there* were not allowed a voice in the Senate.

As Ael sat in her ornate chair overlooking the senate floor, flanked by the beautiful and ancient S'harien sword that had come to signify their society, she pondered the state of things. As her mind wandered to ch'Havran and those who dwelled there she wondered for a moment why it was they were not given a voice. Surely it wouldn't be the end of civilisation to let them have a say in things.

She considered the origin of such thoughts. Seated on the far side of the floor was Senator Arrhae i-Khellian t'llhweiir, a voice of sanity in a room full of overgrown children. Her way of seeing things reminded her of one of the most annoying and magnetic aliens she had ever met: James Tiberias Kirk, who, unfortunately, had been returned to the elements. Although she

often muttered to herself that it was all his fault she was Empress, she had to admit she had been grateful for the chance to make a difference in her culture.

As she cast a baleful glare across the decorative flooring, she noted the great houses still refused to look beyond the end of their selfish noses. It seemed a senatorial position here was inherited, not earned. Those lovely, brightly coloured, silken robes seemed to reflect nothing more than personal ambition. Each wore a different colour, signifying the House they represented.

Her gaze returned once more to the only anomaly in the room: Arrhae. As she examined her from her elevated position, she became concerned that the woman seemed to be ageing before her time. The creases next to her eyes seemed to deepen every day. Perhaps the stresses of her position were taking their toll on her physically. She would have to speak to her and see how she was doing. She considered Arrhae more than a compatriot, but she had to keep herself from thinking her a friend. There was no room in an Empress's life for *friends*.

Ael shifted in the chair and considered whether it would be a sign of weakness if she insisted the cushion be replaced. If she was going to have to endure hours of this kind of drudgery, with Senators arguing over the taxation of certain trade routes, then she would like to be able to do so without her backside going numb.

The current motion was passed and finally the business of the day moved on to what had drawn her here. The new Klingon Ambassador to ch'Rihan was being introduced – after he had been carefully scanned for weapons. It was well known that they usually carried at least fifteen on their person.

It had been decades since they actually *had* sent an ambassador here. The last one had been returned to Q'onos in a cardboard box after being caught trying to secrete a recording device on the Senate floor.

Even though the Empress was aware of the identity of the “dignitary”, she wanted to see him for herself. This was a being she would never even come *close* to trusting. That the accursed Klingons had chosen to send him at all was peculiar. He was a known subversive among his own people. It was well known that his family had a long history of placing their own needs ahead of those of the empire. Perhaps the Klingon “Emperor” had had enough of him as well and given him this posting as some kind of punishment?

Ael rolled her eyes. If it was, it was a fitting one. The man might die of boredom here.

The Announcer stepped forward, himself wearing an emerald cloak that showed his sole allegiance was to the Senate. The elderly gent raised his eyes and looked up at his Empress. In a strong voice that belied his great age he announced: “May I present the Ambassador from the Klingon Empire, Duras.”

Ael felt her cheeks darken as she fought to suppress the anger she felt just having to look at the man. Duras had meddled in the affairs of all three of the great Alpha Quadrant powers in his mad quest for temporal dominance. The Tal Shiar had reported his involvement in many escapades, including the incident at Galorndon Core that had nearly resulted in all-out war with the Federation some fifteen years before. During that time, his people had been responsible for the death of the crew of the Warbird *Falcon's Claw*, something she could never forgive him

for. The man was vile and would need to be watched. Just having him here put her on edge.

Tall, broad-shouldered and imposing, Duras strode onto the Senate floor as if he owned it. His ambassador's attire, which was really nothing more than a softening of his normal warrior's armour, shone. Another "look-at-me-I'm-important" gesture, Ael thought.

Duras cast his gaze about the chamber, catching the eye of many, including Arrhae. Ael carefully watched their reactions, certain there were Klingon sympathisers seated in this very chamber. Most of the senators looked at him coolly or didn't bother looking at him at all. Of them all, only Arrhae broke the mould. She displayed open contempt.

Ael allowed herself the luxury of a quiet chuckle. At least one always knew where they stood with Arrhae i-Khellian t'llhweiir. Although Ael was aware of who the Senator was – a Starfleet plant – the Empress knew her heart was of ch'Rihan. The woman who had once served on a Federation starship before being surgically altered to appear Romulan and spirited onto this world had proven herself trustworthy. Perhaps that's what sets her apart, Ael thought. She hadn't had millennia of Rihannsu intrigue to colour her thinking. Her heart may be for the Rihannsu people, but her core was still human. She had a heightened sense of right and wrong which decades of politics had yet to dull.

All the same, the years were starting to take their toll on the human and perhaps it was time for her to return before questions were asked. She had started her own house here on ch'Rihan. Others would continue the work she had begun, taking care of the more "common" folk and educating them, a project Ael supported. She could see how it would make for a stronger

Empire. However, there were many present who resented her efforts. In their eyes, it was like empowering the enemy so that one day they could be overthrown. The great Houses had ruled for so long they had come to believe they had a sovereign right to.

It was an attitude she had hoped to change but, as she considered once more those about her, she realised she still had a long way to go.

Her gaze returned to Arrhae/Teresa, and she wondered. If she – one woman – could make such an impact on her own, then perhaps bringing more of her kind here would help bring about the changes she hoped for. The Earthers weren't perfect by any stretch of the imagination, but at least they knew how to make peace work. The vast array of cultures and species in their sphere was a testament to that.

The hairs on the back of Ael's neck prickled and she realised she was being observed. Duras was gazing up at her from his place in the centre of the star map on the floor. Actually, it was not quite the centre. She looked and realised the man was impudently standing on the sector that belonged to the Galorndon Core. He was baiting her.

There was no way Ael was going to give this man a victory in this life or the next. Even though it was clear that he had registered her recognition of his stance, she was determined to give him nothing more than that.

Silence fell as the Empress rose from her seat. Her hand played over the hilt of the S'harien sword, as if she was considering using it. There had been times when she had personally wielded it. The people here knew that. They also knew just how formidable a warrior she was. Wrapping her

fingers around the ornate hilt, she carried it as if it was an extension of her own arm. Those nearby leaned back just a little, wishing to put some distance between them and walking death.

She was never the kind to adorn herself with fancy robes to tell others who she was. Ael i-Mhiessan t'Rllailieu, Empress of the Rihannsu Empire, let her actions speak for her. Her form-fitting, emerald outfit still reminded those present of her former Commander's uniform during her time in the Imperial Navy. To her, anything else was not only superfluous, but possibly a hazard to her health. It was hard to fight while tangled in a robe.

Svelte and light on her feet, the diminutive woman with the tiny, silver streaks through her hair stepped down to the Senate floor as if she weighed nothing at all. Her steps were graceful and designed to make one think her a feline creature seeking prey, which wasn't far from the truth.

Ael came to a stop a few metres from Duras, her feet placed firmly on the images of ch'Rihan and ch'Havran. The message was clear. She knew where she was standing, on the very seat of an Alpha Quadrant giant. Duras was nowhere.

"Ambassador Duras," she began, her tone a mixture of disdain and mirth. "The Klingon Chancellor has chosen you to represent his interests to the mighty Rihannsu Empire. You are welcome to do so. We will find it amusing to hear what you have to offer. I'd like to say we have found your people to be honourable and trustworthy. However, I have served on one of the ships your government sold us, and its construction left me with *grave* doubts."

It was common knowledge that the deal struck years ago to provide the Rihannsu with ships in exchange for their cloaking technology had been a bad one. The Klingons had gained a huge

tactical advantage and all the Rihannsu had to show for it was a number of inferior D-7 class cruisers that had been mothballed within a matter of years. The instigator of the exchange had been examined and summarily executed for their gross incompetence.

To his credit, Duras simply stood his ground and said nothing. His eyes scanned Ael as if he was evaluating her.

In no way was the Empress impressed. Although she was a clear half metre shorter than the Klingon, she somehow seemed so much greater. “As you are aware, Klingon, we won’t be giving you a free reign whilst on our soil like the Federation does. We don’t believe in giving *others* any foothold on our land. You will be watched. If you behave yourself, you might even return to your people one day.” A dry, gallows laugh rippled through the room. It deepened with her next statement: “You might even be in one piece.”

Once more, Duras remained still, watching her. He reminded Ael of a Krelleess, a local serpent that gave itself away as it rustled through its native grasses but fell silent just before it struck. Its venom was deadly and Ael knew it was only a matter of time before this snake would do the same, if given the chance. After a full twenty seconds, he simply inclined his head to the side and turned to leave.

As he left, Ael felt a tiny shiver. There was something very dead about those eyes. They seemed to beckon to her to join in his oblivion of soul.

Without letting anything show, the Empress turned dismissively and returned to her seat, every footfall full of confidence. She turned and sat, placing the S’harrien back where it belonged, at her side.

For some reason she could never fathom, the sword slipped out of its place and clattered down the steps and onto the marble floor. The noise was horrendous, as was the astonishment from all present. Everyone had witnessed the Empress take her place and carefully place the sword in its niche. How it slipped out was anyone's guess, but the effect it had on the senators was electric.

Ael's eyes shot to the only true ally she had in the room. Arrhae's return was the same mixture of amazed/shocked/mortified as hers. There were many present who would take the simple slip as a sign.

Deciding that her enemies would not get a chance to capitalise on the incident, Ael stood, retrieved the sword and replaced it, before dismissing the assembly for the day.

From the far side of the room Duras watched and smiled to himself before turning on his heel and striding out.

Leaving the S'harien where it was, at the seat of power, Ael felt the sands of time slipping through her fingers. On some level she could only guess at, she knew time was running out. While she was only middle aged for her people and she could rule as long as she was fit – which could be another hundred years if she looked after herself – she felt compelled to act quickly. She called over the Announcer who looked at her without quite meeting her eyes. It was a gesture of respect as he kept his gaze slightly lowered – one Ael appreciated. “Have Senator i-Khellian t'llhweiir meet me on my estate at the sixteenth hour,” she said.

The Announcer bowed. “Of course, Empress. I will inform her of your wishes immediately.” He turned to leave and Ael wondered where even his true loyalties lay. She shook her

head slightly in annoyance. She wondered if she was becoming truly paranoid.

She turned to leave and her ever-present guardian, Aidoann, fell into step one pace back as she passed the ornate, metal doors that led out and off the senate floor. If there was someone on this planet she could trust implicitly, it was Aidoann t'Khnialmnae. They went way back, having served as commander and second on the original *Bloodwing*.

Under her breath, Ael said: "Have the catches on the chair checked. I have no idea how the sword fell, but if someone tampered with them, I'll have them hung from the nearest tree by their entrails."

Aidoann chuckled darkly. "Colourful," she said cheekily. The Empress raised a curious brow. "You doubt me?" she asked.

Aidoann replied: "Not at all, my Empress. I'm just in awe of your imaginative ways."

Ael knew then that her friend was having a little joke with her. Their years together gave her that licence. She listened as Aidoann barked orders into her sleeve mic and listened as they were repeated.

The security specialist commented: "If it was the Tal Shiar, there probably won't be any evidence to find."

She was right, of course. The Empire's department of dirty tricks that the Earthers liked to call the "Romulan Big Brother" was completely professional. They could make it look like Ael took the Sword and chopped her own head off with it and nobody would dispute their findings. The truly annoying thing with the organisation was that their loyalties were clear – to themselves alone. Like any bureaucracy, its first priority was to

protect its own existence. All other considerations were secondary – including their obedience to the Empress. “Look anyway.”

“Of course, Empress. I will have a report for you by sunset.”

Ael didn't doubt it. Aidoann had yet to let her down. She just wondered if the service would be completely pointless.

However, there was one thing she was absolutely certain of. She hadn't dropped it.

Chapter Two

As surveillance societies went there were few that could hold a candle to ch'Rihan. There were cameras everywhere on the streets, their 360° view eyes never moved and never missed a thing.

At least, that's what the Tal Shiar wanted everyone to believe. Their motto: "Ensuring the Loyalty of the Empire" was colloquially followed more crudely with "through voyeurism". As usual, something was always lost in translation, but the extension often brought a subversive smile to the "little people".

The cameras were operated by sophisticated computer systems that were programmed by some of the most paranoid people in history. They were constantly on the lookout for anything or anyone looking or doing something suspicious, ready to report their findings in an instant to an ever-vigilant agent of the feared organisation.

The flaw in the system was that it usually missed the obvious. If one appeared to be going about their daily, innocuous routine, it was hardly interested.

Knowing the system wasn't perfect, Duras knew even given his proximity to his local "allies" he would still find it difficult to make any kind of arrangements with them. That's where his personal holomask came in handy.

There was no way the people of ch'Rihan were going to allow him to have Klingon aides. If this was an embassy in the Federation, he would have had a decent sized staff – people hand-picked that would take care of his personal security. They would do hourly sweeps of the buildings and surrounds for monitoring

devices. He had spent a little time in one on Andoria and found the place was more secure than anything he could have had on Q'onos.

However, this was the home of those who lived under the Raptor's Wings. He was lucky to be on the planet in the first place. Staff was out the question. So, the cleaners were all no doubt in the employ of the security forces, reporting back everything he did. He was certain even his personal evacuations were logged somewhere.

All the same, the Tal Shiar had actually done him a favour. He had taken note of one worker who was of a similar size and shape as he and simply taken a 3D image of his face. His holomask did the rest. So, while the cleaner was busy at work, Duras would slip outside wearing the local garb and, to the casual observer, he was simply a lower caste worker going about his job.

That's all the video surveillance system would see and that was all right with him. Each time the cleaner came he took two hours to complete his task. Duras had made certain that the place was messy enough to keep the staff *very* busy.

Never one to take too many chances – with his *own* life – Duras chose a local park bench for their meeting. He wasn't going to risk scrutiny of his face as people of this world were naturally suspicious of everything and everyone, so they avoided eye contact with strangers. He knew that as long as he sat in the centre of the metre-and-a-half-long bench nobody would venture to share it.

He checked his chronometer and wondered again where the Senator was. It was unlike a Romulan to be late. There were too many people out there to cheat.

Duras had no time for Romulans personally. Like the majority of his people, they had nothing but bad experiences with the duplicitous p'tachs. At least this senator was useful. However, if this meeting was on a D-7 battle cruiser he would still have to resist the temptation to ram a d'k tagh through his heart and throw his lifeless corpse out an airlock.

After making him wait five minutes, Senator Hathness finally walked his way. Duras was amazed that the man did not even try to cover the arrogant swagger someone of his bearing adopted over time. He was wearing civilian clothing to "blend in" but he needed to adjust his mannerisms if he was going to complete the ruse. Indeed, this man had been born into his Great House and Duras was certain he had been schooled how to walk like an overbearing fool. Surely his gait would make him stand out to anyone watching. He cast a furtive glance about him without turning his head and noted nobody was looking their way at all. Paranoid people.

Hathness finally sat down slowly, as if the movement itself spoke some great import. Right then, Duras wished he had his d'k tagh.

"Fancy finding you here," the Senator said, as if he owned the world and was welcoming a long-lost associate to it. His attempt at humour simply irritated the ruthless Klingon. Time existed as a resource to make the subjection of others possible. Wasting it was a crime against nature.

All the same, this pawn had to be played properly. He had to be assuaged. "Indeed, Senator. It was a good day for it."

In his time *waiting* he had taken the time to appreciate the gardens. If there was one thing the cursed Romulans were good at, it was landscaping. The many tiers of grasses, hanging vines,

trees, ornaments and such had been expertly arranged to create a wondrous vista. Perhaps he could find and kidnap the gardener and have him recreate this back on Q'onos.

"The Empress' time is coming to a close," Hathness said quietly. "Our patience with her "reforms" is running out."

The Senator was wasting more time stating the obvious. It was well known that the Romulan warrior did not make a very good politician. Indeed, she had never understood that politics would never change the heart of the Romulan people.

"I gather your people tampered with the sword's mounting," Duras stated, trying to sound congratulatory. "Nice touch."

Hathness smiled. "Yes, I thought so. We are going to destabilise the mines on ch'Havran next."

Duras was aware of this as well. It was an obvious target, but a useful one. The dilithium mines on that hellish world were needed for their growing economy.

"When do you need my people to move?" Duras asked. That part of the plan was not yet set in stone.

Hathness smiled as he pretended to enjoy the view. The gardens on his private estate put this rambling mess to shame. "Soon. We must get the..." at this point the senator began a string of local expletives that impressed the Klingon. He had no idea they could be so inventive with their cursing. "... *woman* off planet. Then your people can take care of the matter."

Duras had no illusions about their contract. This was an alliance for mutual benefit alone. Nothing more. He had not missed the slipped inflection in Hathness's utterance of "people". The slur was clear. He had as little time for Klingons as they had for him. So be it.

The business was over, and it was time to go. Duras got to his feet – a soldier moving like a well-greased tool. “I will be back in two days, Senator,” he simply stated as he walked off. He had to make certain he got back before his cleaner was done.

Ael was home, on her private grounds, practicing her fencing, when she got word that Arrhae had finally arrived. Something had delayed the usually punctual senator and Ael knew her well enough to know it must have been relevant for her to do so. With another it would have been a clear insult.

It had taken her years, but Ael had finally tracked down another of the now extremely rare S’harien swords that had been brought with the Rihannsu when their people had left Vulcan so long ago. Her time handling the Sword had left her wishing she could have another for her personal use. It had taken her staff some time, and a rather large pile of credits, to procure one. As Empress, she could have simply decided it was her prerogative to take it from its previous owner for the “good of the Empire”. However, if the Rihannsu were ever to have a change of heart it would have to start with her example. She had paid a fair price for it.

With the blade sharpened to perfection, Ael whirled in place, the blade neatly slicing through the air as she fought imaginary Klingons. She had not only studied their fighting arts, she had opportunity to observe them in action – with her on the receiving end. Their mistake had always been the same: overconfidence. Most Klingon warriors had been trained to bludgeon their opponents to death, to overcome them through superior force.

However, in close combat Ael had always proven herself the victor simply by making sure she was faster and more agile. More often than not, the Klingons she had bested found themselves bleeding out on the floor wondering where the blow that had killed them had come from.

It was through constant training that she kept the same edge as the sword. Considering she was on the latter end of a Romulan's idea of middle age, she was still more than a match for most of her people. She had even proven it from time to time in recent days.

"I don't ever want to find myself on the wrong side of *that* sword." Arrhae's human sense of humour had not been completely lost during her time on ch'Rihan.

Ael turned and saw the senator standing in the bright sun with a slight upturn to one corner of her mouth. Ael wished she could call her friend, but ally would have to do. Even though her heart was of this world, her blood was still human. She could only be trusted so far.

She noted Arrhae had eschewed the usual trappings of a Rihannsu senator and dressed simply in her house's colours in a silk shirt and pants. Some things were still expected, even if you were dressing down.

Ael had heard her coming, even as she was walking on the grass. She had observed her movements and noted Arrhae was not quite as agile as she used to be. It solidified her decision.

She also noted the senator was alone. Her secretary was probably back in her personal flitter, along with her bodyguard. Both would be annoyed at being left behind, but they were not needed here. Arrhae's mind was still sharp and Aidoann's security people needed no help. Not when their commander

personally liked to keep an eye on their revered leader. It was well known that Aidoann had served under the then Commander Ael when she had served in the Imperial Fleet and, since then, she had never left her side. Speculation was rife over what drove the warrior woman's devotion to the Empress. Friendship, or something much deeper?

Aidoann respectfully stopped a mere ten paces away to allow the women to speak privately. Whatever her feelings for Ael, she knew her place. A mere security officer had no business eavesdropping on official Imperial business.

The Empress sheathed the sword with well-practised ease. To Arrhae's eyes it was if she was literally one with the weapon, that it was simply an extension of herself.

"Does Starfleet train it's officers in hand-to-hand combat?" Ael asked, already knowing the answer.

Arrhae was mildly surprised at the bald question given their vulnerable status. One could never be too careful who might be listening on ch'Rihan. The Tal Shiar was everywhere.

Except here, she thought. The Empress would never allow their eavesdropping on her. It was heard that she had already personally slain a few operatives who had been stupid enough to try.

Her eyes dropped to the sword, and she considered whether their green blood had stained its edge. Probably.

In as offhand a manner as she could muster, Arrhae said: "The Empress knows they do. Yet, not so much with blades. Mainly phasers and directed energy weapons." Even given their level of privacy, Arrhae remained on her guard.

Ael raised a brow, aware of the senator's discomfort. There were things to discuss, and it was clear Arrhae did not feel

able to do that here with the freedom she required. “Come with me,” she said simply.

As soon as the Empress started moving Aidoann understood her intent. She raised her cuff mic to her lips and said quietly, “Moving to the basement.”

Stepping around the side of the Empress’ large domicile – she wouldn’t call it home as only the *Bloodwing* had ever felt like that – Ael led them to a stairway that brought them to a wooden door.

Arrhae was surprised when the Empress reached into her neckline and drew out a key on a chain which she used to open it. She then returned it and pushed open the weighty door. She stepped through, followed by Arrhae with Aidoann following close behind, pulling the door closed behind them.

For a moment the senator felt a rising panic as she was enclosed by darkness. Then, to her amazement, the room was lit by a candle. Ael and Aidoann then moved around the room with practised ease, lighting a number of thick candles on standing candelabras. As the gloom was pushed back Arrhae found herself wondering at the line of pictures that adorned the walls. Some were faces that were familiar, others not. Most were of ch’Rihan, while a select few were of ch’Havran, Q’onos and even Earth! Some had a black mark in the top, right-hand corner and she wondered about that. The clue came when she saw the portrait of James Kirk, looking as he did when he captained the late *USS Enterprise* during its first five-year mission. She was aware of his passing and so she attributed the mark to mean they were deceased.

Her eyes drifted down the line of images and she recognised Duras, whom she had seen earlier in the day. Next to

him was Admiral Piper of Starfleet, then a young Rihannha male whose likeness to Ael left her wondering if there was a familial association. His portrait was also marked black.

The Empress waited while Arrhae familiarised herself with her surroundings. She watched as she took in the images, mounted on the bluestone walls which made the room much cooler and humid than the surface. In the centre of the room was a simple, but beautiful, carved wooden table with six chairs placed about it. Aside from the candelabras, they were the only pieces of furniture in the room.

When Arrhae's attention returned to Ael, the Empress offered her a seat. She knew she could have done the same for Aidoann, but the security chief would never have taken it. Not only would she have considered herself out of place, but one does not protect the Empress sitting down.

The Senator looked at her Empress, wondering what all the theatrics were about. Surely the business of the Empire could have been spoken about on the surface.

Ael disappointed her. "We can speak freely down here, Terise," she said. She glanced at her aide and said: "Aidoann knows who and what you are, so don't worry. She thinks more highly of you than most of those you serve with on the Senate floor."

A small, amused snort from the solid warrior woman was her only confirmation.

"I wanted to talk to you about a number of issues that deal either with you directly, or at least the Federation. I want your opinion as a xenosociologist." Ael spoke with the casual air of someone who was used to having people listen to her.

The use of her real, human first name brought that side of her nature to the fore. Terise Haleakala-LoBrutto looked out from her Romulan veneer and put on her academic's hat. "What can I do for you?" she asked in Federation Standard. It came out a little roughly, as if it had become a poor second language to the tongue of the world she now considered home.

Ael's mouth twitched up a little as she saw just a little more of the woman she had come to know and "trust". "I want to tell you a story."

The day before, the Empress and her retinue had chosen to inspect a school of higher education for those who had demonstrated gifted IQs. Ael had done her level best to not appear bored as the school's "dean" had prattled on about the wonderful strides forward they had made teaching the students to think outside the box.

To start with, she had to admit the building itself gleamed as if it had been built mere days before, instead of a decade ago. The computer interfaces appeared to be of high quality and the work she saw the students performing often left her wondering as the math was way above her level of achievement.

Walking down a corridor, with vid cameras hovering about them recording the visit from their "glorious Empress" – Ael hated this kind of PR – she found her party outside a large room that was clearly used to train their students in self-defence and the martial arts. From inside could be heard the sounds of exertion, grunts of people straining and the occasional slap as someone hit the floor. Intrigued, she ignored the school master as he tried to steer her away and stepped towards the door. Without being asked, Aidoann moved forward and slid the metal door

aside, giving them a much better view of what was going on inside.

The Empress entered the room, followed by her retinue of staff and official toadies – which she loathed but knew one could never rid themselves of them entirely. Oddly, some toadies were actually quite good at what they did.

At first, only a few students noticed, but the atmosphere abruptly changed when someone let out a surprised sharp intake of breath followed by a muttered expletive.

Mildly amused, Ael let the comment pass. Naval men and women of all kinds tended to be made out of rougher material and she was no exception. As all eyes were focused on her she took a moment to consider those present. She put out of her mind the hovering cameras and those standing behind her trying to make sure their face was seen by the vids and *looked* at the class members. What she saw shocked her. Nine out of ten of them were wearing colours of the Rihannsu great houses.

Fortunately for her, her time on the Senate floor had taught her a perfect poker face and she showed no emotion. She simply stepped forward and considered the room while she thought of what she might do next.

Her feelings warred within her as she realised her great experiment in education was a glaring failure. This school was set up to teach the brightest pupils from all over the Empire, yet it was clearly evident that the elite families had already subverted its ideals and turned it into just another school for privileged kids.

She turned her attention from the high windows painted with stylised images from the Sundering and considered one of the two students in the room who did not have colours on his shoulders. She stepped over to the clearly terrified student, a tall,

slender young man who seemed to be from one of the outer colony worlds. She had seen how the varying gravity and less healthy diet affected the growth of her distant kin. “What’s your name?” she asked.

To his credit, the youth found his voice, although he respectfully kept his gaze at the floor. “Straven, my Empress,” he said.

Ael nodded. “What skillset did you demonstrate to bring you to this school?” she asked, curious.

Obediently, the youth answered: “I’m good at Stellar Cartography, Empress.”

“Oh?” Ael said, leading. “How will your talents in this area aid the expansion of the Rihannsu Empire?” Her question was honest, but she could swear she heard one of the students behind her snicker.

Straven’s gaze lifted from her boots to her navel. “I won a scholarship here by showing how a passing singularity was going to effect the orbits of the outer planets in the Hugaris system.”

Definitely a derisive snort this time. Ael thought she had a fair idea of the direction of the offender. Rather than engage the individual, she considered the youth before her. He seemed to be a success story in a roomful of failures. “I’m glad you are here, Straven,” she said meaningfully. “It’s talents like yours that often go undervalued in our society. You see the dangers before they become a problem and bring disaster. *Jolan tru.*”

For the briefest of moments, Straven looked the Empress in the eye, and she saw his gratefulness. However, she could swear there was something else as he turned away. His eye caught

one of his classmates and something changed in his demeanour. The sparkle that had briefly shone was gone.

Now, Ael had a target as she found the object of her interest. The student who was so vocal during her questioning was a member of house Asterii, one of the oldest and richest of the clans. His crimson and blue scarf made that clear. This boy was about six feet tall and reasonably fit and there was a look in his eye Ael did not like. It was genetic, she thought. The boy was as big a waste of space as his father – a man who had a seat in the Senate chamber but did little but repeat the useless statements of the opposition leader.

The Empress took her leave of Straven and stepped through the parting crowd towards the cheeky boy. “What’s your name, son?” she asked, not letting him see the disdain she already fostered towards him.

“Vorah,” he answered, proudly looking her in the eye. “Of the clan Asterii.”

“Vorah,” Ael repeated, nodding to herself. He seemed to think she should be impressed by his clan affiliation. She looked up at him and gave him a gallows smile. “What House do I come from?” she asked.

The young man, who couldn’t have been more than twenty, she thought, drew his eyebrows together in thought. After several seconds of awkward silence, he answered: “I don’t know.”

The Empress glanced over at Straven who averted his eyes once more. “Straven, what clan do I belong to?”

“My Empress, while you were distantly related to our former Emperor Shiarkiek, you come from a line of military warriors who have brought much honour to the Rihannsu, including your father.”

Ael wasn't entirely certain the young man wasn't trying to ingratiate himself to her. She decided that it shouldn't really surprise her either way considering her position in the Empire. She turned back to Vorah and once more looked him in the eye.

"Vorah of the clan Asterii," she said evenly. "How is it that Straven, a fellow student who doesn't wear the colours of an esteemed House, knows more about your Empress' family history than you do?"

His eyes betrayed him. Like his father, he wasn't a quick thinker and so he took too long to formulate a convincing lie. What Ael saw was the contempt he had for her family line. "I don't know, Empress," he said after too long a pause.

"I do," Ael said, turning her back on Vorah and stepping over to the wall. "Follow me," she ordered, clearly giving the man no choice.

Obediently, he followed and found himself standing next to a selection of swords that were modelled on the S'harien that sat in the Empty Chair. Each was razor sharp and were on display more for a heritage display than for use. There were other wooden staffs nearby that were used for training.

Ael hefted one of the swords and tossed it into Vorah's hand. "A soldier like myself lives by the code of *mnhei'sahe* and it is a way of life that I have tried to encourage our people to embrace once more. It defines who we are and how we should treat one another."

Her words weren't just for Vorah, they were for anyone watching, including those present and anyone watching the feed from the floating recording devices.

"You have violated those rules with your complete lack of respect not only for myself and my rank, but even with your

lack of regard to Straven, a man who is clearly your superior in intellect and deed. Now, even though you have shamed yourself and your clan with your behaviour, I am going to give you a chance to redeem yourself.” She paused for a moment to note that Vorah was holding the hilt of his sword and taken a defensive stance. He was taking her words seriously. She then reached out and took the hilt of the other sword on the wall and tested its weight. It was a little heavier than the one she was used to, but she was nothing if not flexible.

Ael stepped back and swung the blade up and took a posture that declared her intentions. “If you kill me, Vorah, you will live. It’s that simple.”

There was a silent pause in the room as everyone had stopped breathing, except for Ael. She was drawing energising lungfuls of air and readying herself for battle.

Vorah seemed unsure of himself, his eyes darting about him, seeking any avenue of escape. With the students, teachers and politicians in the room, there was little room left. Indeed, they had all stepped back several paces, not willing to be on the receiving end of an errant swing. He steeled himself and decided he was going all in. He raised his sword and made to swing at the Empress’ head, aiming for her neck in the hopes of decapitating her.

Instead of parrying, Ael dropped by bending her front leg forward and simply swung the tip of her sword down and lunged forward in the same motion, the sharp tip passing through his clothing, flesh, and ribs as if they weren’t there while Vorah’s blade passed harmlessly over her head. His cleaved heart gave out instantly and Vorah dropped to the floor like a rock, his eyes wide, unbelieving, unseeing.

The Empress, her point made, gave the sword a gentle tug and wiped the green blood off on Vorah's pant leg before restoring it to its cradle on the wall. She turned and this time found there was not a single person in the room who sought to meet her eyes. Better.

Arrhae had listened to Ael's story and wondered why she stopped. Was there more to it?

Ael saw her questioning eyes and said: "I set up that school to bring the brightest minds from all over the Empire to ch'Rihan to show that the true successes are of those of achievement and success, not bloodlines and family history. The next generation needs to find its own way without riding on the slipstream of yesterday. I go to visit it and I find it a complete failure where people of lower castes are still being treated as underlings."

Terise sighed. "May I speak freely, Empress?" she asked.

Ael looked at her with her eyes slightly widened. She thought she had made that clear by bringing Arrhae down here in the first place. "Of course."

The xenosociologist took a deep breath and went all in. "The changes you seek, to restore a sense of *mnhei'sahe* to the people is a project that will require *generations*. The mindset of a people cannot be changed in a matter of years, or sometimes even decades. There have been many examples of peoples who have taken *centuries* to set right the wrongs in their societies as those who still revere those qualities refuse to let them go. It's a whole lot easier to corrupt a society than to make it moral again."

Surprisingly, Aidoann came to Ael's defence. "The Empress has made new laws that enforce many of the ways of *mnhei'sahe*."

Terise nodded. "I know. I was there." She turned to Ael and gave her a wan smile. "All the rules in the world won't change a man's heart. In fact, history has shown that the more laws that govern a society the more likely people are going to violate them – wilfully. Nobody wants to live in a cage, even a gilded one."

Ael balked at that. "How can a people be governed without laws?"

Shaking her head, Terise said: "I didn't say no laws at all – that leads to anarchy. They just need to be simple and something the people are willing to follow. Usually, that requires someone of charisma, a personal example that others are willing to follow. On Earth, it was one man, Jesus Christ, who showed the world that it was much better to follow the law of love and brotherly charity than to lord it over others. Indeed, his leadership style was different from others for the fact that his example was to encourage his followers to *serve* others.

"His example lives on today in the tenets of Starfleet. Its people live by the notion of not only excellence, but the idea that we can make a better life for all of us by working *together* for the benefit for all – but especially in the notion of self-sacrifice. Time and time again, the members of Starfleet have put their lives on the line – and often lost them – to save people they don't even know. Starfleet exists to serve and care for others, not just look after itself."

"She paused and drew in a breath. "On Cait, it was their Teacher, who followed a similar path, and paid a similar price.

His legacy lived on in successive generations. Surak taught the Vulcans logic and spared them annihilation by demonstrating it in his way of life. People need a shining example to follow to encourage them to change.”

Ael tried to take it all in, but it warred against the military warrior she was ingrained to be. She had lived her life by codes, written and cultural. “How could we do that for the Rihannsu?”

Terise had an idea, but it was so radical she wondered whether she should even voice it. However, when she caught Ael’s eye again, she realised the Empress had seen. “What is it?” she asked.

Terise drew in a deep breath. “I know the people of the Federation don’t exactly adhere to the tenets of *mnhei’sahe*, but they have demonstrated a willingness to put aside differences and work together without racial biases. In Starfleet, for instance, there are strict rules regarding any kind of discrimination. One can be dishonourably discharged for breaking that law.”

The Empress sat back and drew down on her shirt, suddenly uncomfortable. While she respected the Federation, and under her leadership they had begun leaving their neighbour alone, it was another thing to propose a peace treaty. “Such a notion is ...” Ael felt lost for words.

Aidoann, her eyes wide, filled in: “Terrifying.”

While it was the word she was looking for, the dark humour the Empress was known for caused her to turn to her compatriot and chuckle. “Exactly.” She had to admit to herself there was fear in her heart even contemplating such a notion, but it was a possible way forward. As Empress, she had to consider all the alternatives, even the ones that left her a bad taste in her mouth.

Terise added: "At the very least it could open the door back to Vulcan for every Rihannha. It could lead to reunification." She was beginning to warm to her idea, even though it could lead to a fundamental shift in the fabric of Romulan society. "With trade between the Empire and the Federation, we could show the Rihannsu that they don't have to follow the old ways of the caste system, that everyone has a chance to reach their potential. They would learn this from the people they interact with. For instance, the Federation has strict rules regarding intellectual property. One man's invention cannot simply be stolen by another and profited from. It remains theirs and, if they believe someone has violated that rule, we have courts that can decide the matter. The notion of fairness is behind everything the Federation stands for. It could rub off on the Rihannsu, given time."

There was a certain amount of impatience about Ael, and she knew it in herself. The thing that bothered her was she felt in her heart that she was running out of time. Something had to give soon before the last grain of sand dropped through the hourglass. "I will give your idea some thought, Arrhae," she said honestly. Before the Senator could add another word, she said: "There is something else I wanted to discuss with you while I have you here."

Always wanting to serve her adopted people, Arrhae looked up willingly. "Anything, Empress."

Ael sighed. "I want you to go home."

That evening Ael sat in her private dining room and sipped her soup, lost in her thoughts. She had seen numerous examples in the last few weeks that the reforms she had put into

law were spectacular failures. No matter how hard she had tried to make a change in the Senate those there had done their utmost to push back on her. She should have cleared out the entire Senate, executed the lot of them, she thought.

While the notion did bring her a small, dark smile as she fantasised about dealing with the members of that staid pavilion one, final blow she knew that they were symptoms of a much bigger disease that pervaded her society. The elitism that was such a part of their culture, the notion that the members of the Great Houses were somehow better than others simply by the fact of their birthright, wasn't the only problem they had. She realised that, even after serving with Arrhae for years in the Senate and knowing that she was probably the hardest working individual for the people, she still harboured a modicum of resentment for her knowing that she wasn't really a Rihannha.

She chided herself for her bigotry and saw in herself the seeds of her own culture's failures. The Romulan sense of superiority betrayed every part of their lifestyle. They were not only superior to one another; they were superior to everyone else. She realised the mindset was fractious and, even though she was technically at the apex of such a culture, she was looked down upon because of her family lineage.

She glanced over at Aidoann, who was standing nearby in a position where she could leap to her defence at the first sign of trouble. She was keenly aware that she had even scanned her meal, looking for poisons as she did every day. She took her devotion to Ael to extremes, but she had to admit that it gave her some comfort the former Centurion had her back.

All the same, Ael was aware that Aidoann's family connections were better than her own. She could call upon some

powerful family members if the situation demanded it. Given the caste system in the Empire, Aidoann was in a better position to hold the position of Empress than she was.

Always aware, her guardian asked: “Are you needing something, my Empress?”

Ael sighed. Even that statement made her realise just how much they were given to their personal notions of elitism. “Nothing, my friend. I was just wondering what kind of Empress you would have made.”

That made the woman snort. “Me? Empress? No, I don’t think so.”

“Why not?” Ael’s question was genuinely curious.

“I don’t have your patience. I would have killed all the Senators on the first day.”

Ael laughed at the humour but there was a touch of bitterness to the sound. She wondered if Aidoann was more Rihannsu than she was with her bent for bloodlust. After a moment she asked: “You never had any notion of entering politics?”

Aidoann shook her head, no. “I am a warrior, sworn to serve the Empire. I live to serve, not be served.”

Her simple statement demonstrated the simple difference between the Great Houses with their constant political wrangling and their devotion to climbing the cliff-face of success, not caring that they were making their way over the corpses of their fellows – even those of their own houses at times. Ael had served in the Imperial Navy where loyalty to one’s immediate superiors and fellows was more important than politics.

Yet, considering the notion, she had to admit that there were plenty of people she had served with who were more

inclined to think of their own position in relation to the Senate and the seat of power than their oath and loyalty to the Service. Her own son was numbered among them.

Ael sought and caught her most loyal friend's eyes. "I, too, serve the Empire and I know that we need to grow. We're stuck in a loop of tearing one another down to lift ourselves up. I think we're slowly sinking into a swamp while trying to stay above water by standing on the remains of our fellows."

Aidoann was not a philosopher. She could not see the endgame of Ael's thought. "The strong survive," she said confidently.

The Empress tilted her head to the side as she considered. "If our society was completely given to militarism, I would agree that, perhaps, that might be the better way to be. However, the Rihannsu have a rich history of art, culture and even philosophy that has no bearing in warfare. We can also be a people of peace."

Her protector recalled a saying from the Academy. "If we are the stronger, is it not the call for war?"

Ael sighed. She, too, remembered the same instructor giving her the identical instruction. Perhaps she needed to review how her people in the Navy were being trained as well. She thought of the Senate floor and realised just how far their martial system pervaded every walk of life. "If war is a way of life, it must eventually end in total destruction. Either one group stands alone in the end, or we all wind up memories..."

The notion was foreign to Aidoann, and the woman took a moment to try and grasp the notion. It didn't quite gel for her. "If war is not the way, what else is there?"

The Empress suddenly realised what was bothering her about the idea of reaching out to the Federation. Their way of life

was literally the antithesis of her own. Trust and mutual cooperation were what made them successful. They were a large group of differing species and cultures that had managed to find a middle ground and work together for their mutual advantage. They were stronger together and their differing strengths and weaknesses complemented one another.

“We have no friends,” she said solemnly.

Aidoann looked at her blankly. “The Rihannsu need no friends.”

Ael sighed, a sound coming from the depths of a tired soul. “If friendship wasn’t important to us, why are we still together after all these years?” She looked up at her, searching, hoping for the light of understanding to dawn.

The Centurion was conflicted. Her loyalty to the Empress was solid and they were privy to more of one another’s secrets than most Romulans would normally allow in their paranoid culture. They were certain of each other’s discretion. They had to be. She looked about her, searching for the answer to her conflict. The Empress was right, they were friends, and she knew without blinking an eye that she would die for her without hesitation. They were stronger together. “Are you saying that the Rihannsu would be stronger with friends from the outside? Are we not the stronger? Wouldn’t we be carrying the others?”

Ael gave her a wan smile. “We don’t know everything, Aidoann. Who knows? Sooner or later, we might run into a force that even we can’t deal with.” She quietened for a moment then continued. “When that day comes, we need some good friends to help us.”

While Aidoann’s confidence in the Imperial Navy was strong, she had already weathered some storms that had

threatened to overcome them if it hadn't been for the help of outsiders – especially those in Starfleet. “Understood, Empress. Do you have orders?”

The path ahead was clear. It was time for the Rihannsu to grow up and put their warring nature behind them. “We need to send a subspace transmission. It's time to open up negotiations with the Federation.”

Chapter Three

Desk jockey. Piper had sworn she would never be one, but the destruction of the *USS Millennium* six months ago had left her with little choice.

The annoying thing right now was that for the next half hour she was left alone in her office with nothing to keep her company but her thoughts – and right now it was the last thing she needed. As she sat behind her ornate, wooden desk – she refused to have a metal one – she cradled her glass of pineapple juice in her lap and pondered why she had given up coffee. Right now, she could do with one – or something stronger. Perhaps it was a good thing she had never found alcohol really appealing. She wished she could go out and get roaring drunk.

She closed her eyes for a moment and once more the images came unbidden. The flickering light of fires, the acrid smell of burning opticable, the wrenching cries of the wounded, the haunting silence of the dead. The bridge of the *Millennium* had been a wasteland after that fateful battle with the Cardassians. One small part of her was pleased that the impressive ship had bested four of their finest warships, but when it was clear the ship was dying, she gave the order every commander fears.

“Abandon ship.”

Most of the crew had managed to get to the relative safety of the escape pods and shuttle craft. That was one of the beauties of the ship. She was never short of shuttles. She often carried up to one hundred of them. The remaining fighters – still led by Ghost who had remained loyal to her and her command for the

last how many years – had given them the protection they needed to avoid any further loss of life as they fled the combat zone.

Sarda had been in the Engineering Section helping Chief Engineer Commander Rapid hold the ship together during the fight. The secondary hull had taken a lot of damage in their section, and he had been sorely needed.

Piper still hated herself that she had not been the last to leave the ship. As Commander Valastro had been organising the evacuation she had known, through her telepathic link with Sarda, that he had been injured. In fact, he had been trapped under a fallen beam.

In her recollection, she could still feel the weight of it across her chest. Their mental link was so solid that she had felt his pain as if it was her very own.

The computer had issued its dire warning. Core breach was imminent. Sixty seconds remained before the ship tore itself apart from the inside out.

“I’m coming!” she had shouted to him in her mind as she scrambled for the turbolift, only to find they were down.

“No, Piper!” His voice was a veritable command. *“You must leave before it’s too late! You cannot help me!”*

The indecision had left her frozen to the spot, incapable of moving. She knew, on some level, that he was right. There was no way she could reach him in time. Yet she felt it impossible to leave him behind. They had become a part of each other, and she had no idea how to go on without him.

The question had become moot when a hypospray had been applied to her neck. From that point on her recollections became hazy – like they were happening to someone else. She remembered being dragged by a number of hands into an escape

pod. She vaguely remembered the g-forces of their escape as the pod was ejected. She had felt the jolt from the shockwave as the *Millennium's* warp core exploded, but the pod's pilot had wisely ridden the wave like a surfer and used it to propel them to safety.

As for Sarda, she had an impression he was glad she had escaped before his thoughts disappeared from her mind forever. Just before he died, she believed he had wanted to say something to her, but the core had robbed him as it exploded prematurely.

She knew what it was. Yet, somehow, knowing just made it all that much harder.

Two hours later the *USS Yorktown*, the backup she had requested, finally warped into the system and picked up the survivors, including herself. By that time, she was dirty that one of her own people had drugged her, but none of them were willing to point the finger. Indeed, all of them had said it was them. She half expected them all to declare: "I'm Spartacus!"

She was also furious with the captain of the *Yorktown* for being late. He had given her some lame excuse about pushing his engines too hard, but she wasn't interested. She had taken a select few and piloted the *Cork*, the *Millennium's* prototype runabout, back home herself. The vessel's top speed of warp four had given their return voyage a substantial delay, yet there was no way she was going to ride with the captain who had failed to save Sarda, Jenny Rapid and the others of her crew who had been left to die due to his incompetence.

The old anger had flared again in her soul. It had burned like the sun that day and, over time, had remained a smouldering ember, ready to relight in the presence of *any* inducement.

All of this came back to Piper in the seconds she had closed her eyes. Grieved once more, she opened and rubbed them

again. The bags under her eyes were becoming suitcases. She wasn't sleeping well these days; her dreams were full of nightmares. The REM state inhibitors didn't always work so she had relived that day over and over. Sometimes she saw it through Sarda's eyes, but most of the time through her own.

She tried in vain to push the thoughts from her mind by focusing on the vista outside. The now Rear Admiral Piper had been given temporary command of Starfleet Academy during her downtime. She had reminded Fleet Admiral Smillie of her determination to never remain chained to a desk lest she retire and, God bless him, he had believed and respected that.

An *Odysseus*-class ship, an upgraded variant of the *Ingram*, had recently been commissioned yet, at the time of the *Millennium*'s destruction, was far from ready. Smillie had offered it to her, and she had made some personal modifications to the design that would take some time to complete. In the meantime, the position of Commandant of Starfleet Academy had become vacant, and he had asked her to take over until another could be found to fill it.

Knowing that her old mentor, Jim Kirk, had once held the position had made it easier for her to say yes and she had hoped the time would help her heal.

On that point she was beginning to wonder.

Today was her last day at the Academy. Today was the new *Millennium*'s launch day.

Piper was surprised by the knock at the door. She hadn't been expecting anyone. Her secretary was out on an errand, leaving her to pack the few things she carried with her. Given the years she had commanded the original *Millennium*, she hadn't

accumulated many possessions and had no time to retrieve any of them anyhow.

“Come in,” she said, curious. She swung her legs off the corner of the desk and stood to greet whoever it was, self-consciously smoothing her uniform jacket.

The door swung open and three familiar people stepped into the room, all smiles. One of them broke from the trio and ran over to Piper, wrapping her arms around her. The young woman of the Palkeo Est looked up into her eyes with a huge smile and said: “Hello, Aunty Piper!”

Here was one of the few people who could bring her some cheer these days. “Hello, Junior,” she said, returning the embrace. She was always delighted to see her Goddaughter, Piper AndrusVerandi, daughter of her friend, Merete.

Piper Jr had grown into a fine young woman who was open with her affections and didn’t have a mean bone in her body. In fact, as she had grown up on the *Millennium* Piper had often wondered if one of her favourite places to be was cuddling the ship’s Captain with her head between her breasts, listening to her heart.

Piper had never chosen to have children, yet Merete’s had been like her own and almost filled the gap. She had been content to watch them grow and become a part of them as every family does. When the time came for Junior and her brother, Rogen, to further their studies, they had returned to Altair Four and stayed with their extended families while they finished their education at that world’s universities. Piper had become a botanist, her brother a stellar cartographer. It surprised her that neither of them had chosen to follow their parent’s vocation, but Merete had never said a word about it. She had always just been glad to raise them

considering the loss of their father under tragic circumstances while the children were in utero.

Admiral Piper ran a hand through the young woman's short, platinum coloured hair and pulled back a little to see her eyes. She was the spitting image of her mother, that was certain, and she had Merete's gentle spirit. However, she had learned the woman had an edge of steel to her that the good Doctor had often blamed her for. "It's so good to see you here!" she said, truly happy for the first time in months.

Junior grinned broadly and said: "There wasn't a chance I would miss it. Like the veritable Phoenix from the ashes, the *Millennium* flies again!" Her youthful enthusiasm was *almost* infectious.

Unfortunately, she just reminded her of the original's demise and the price they had paid. The Admiral turned her attention to her other guests and waved them over. "Hello, Manny, Commander Hopetallash." She tilted her head to the side as she looked at Hope. "I expected to see you at the commissioning ceremony." She turned to Manny and added: "But you're a complete surprise. Is the *T'Plana-Hath* in system?"

The Executive Officer of Starfleet's first ship dedicated to making First Contact with new and emerging species gave her a respectful smile and stepped over to give her old commander and friend a hug. "It's good to see you, Piper," Manny said. Like the Admiral's oldest friends, she had become part of the first names club.

The Admiral returned the embrace warmly and gave Hope a welcoming nod. Like Junior, she had grown up on their old ship before leaving with her parents. Her father, Captain Krashtallash, had left the *Millennium* five years before, taking

with him his wife, Ambassador Susanna Llash, Manny, and her husband, Scanner.

A stray thought once more wended its way through Piper's mind that perhaps she wouldn't have lost Sarda if Scanner had remained with them. No, she told herself, she probably would have been mourning Judd as well.

Still touching Manny, she had temporarily forgotten just how good a telepath the Caitian had become – especially when she had physical contact with someone. She could not help hear her thoughts and feel her turmoil.

Without outwardly showing it, Piper recoiled, realising all too late she had shown her old friend her deepest soul.

"Don't be ashamed, Piper," Manny shared with her silently. *"I felt your pain in orbit. I miss them all, too, and I know how much Sarda meant to you."*

Piper knew she wasn't exaggerating. It had been a blessing to have the Cait on board with her very rare gift when the Federation first reached out to Betazed. They had been surprised that anyone outside their own could be such a powerful telepath and they found the peoples of the UFP to be kindred spirits.

Torn, the Admiral wanted to tear herself away, but refused to embarrass her friend by doing so. Bringing her emotions once more under tight control, she pulled back a little but kept holding Manny's paw. *"I'm not ashamed, I think,"* she admitted. *"I just don't know how to keep going without him."*

Manny filled her head with images from their past. *"You've still got a large family that loves you, Piper,"* she shared tenderly. *"Don't ever forget that. They know you're hurting, and they don't expect you to be above pain. It's OK to let it out."*

In turn, Piper gave her one simple image. That of her new command. “*I’m just too busy to deal with it right now. I’ve got a new ship and people who need me.*” As she gently let go of Manny’s paw the Cait gave it a final squeeze.

“*Take care of your soul, Piper. If you don’t, you won’t have anything to give.*” Manny stepped back and said enigmatically: “Let’s go to the launch. Everyone’s waiting for you.”

Piper wondered if this was the place where all starships got christened. The space station they stood in had launched many ships in recent times – including the *Enterprise-B*. It had been around for over a century and some of the early NX-class starships had been built here. It had been modified and expanded over the years, but the original structure was the same.

They stood in the observation deck overlooking the bow of the new ship. It held no surprises for her, even though there were a few wide eyes about her. From their vantage point they could see the top of the saucer section where the ship’s call letters stated: *USS Millennium*, NCC-2001-A.

The differences between this ship and the *Millennium* were subtle. She was a little sleeker, with upgraded warp nacelles with orange Bussard Collectors glowing at their tips, unlike the previous vessel which rarely had much in the way of decent energy reserves once she came out of high warp. She was glad that problem had been overcome.

The saucer was vast and dwarfed not only the original *Enterprise*, but also the *Excelsior*. It housed a range of science departments including stellar cartography. The Main Hangar deck still stretched along half the top of the secondary hull and

Piper knew improvements had been made to the interior, including a zero-grav shaft between all three of the vessel's shuttle bays.

The photon torpedo launchers had been improved with three firing forward and two aft.

Overall, the ship resembled the *Excelsior*, barring the truncated dorsal section and the huge hangar.

"A fitting tribute to the original." Piper turned, knowing the voice and respecting the speaker. Captain John Harriman shook her hand and turned back to gaze upon the ship that mirrored his own. "I'm sure you'll make this one as much your home as the last."

Admiral Piper simply stared blankly at the ship before her and wished she could agree with him. "She's not the same, but she'll do."

Harriman pointed off to the ship's nacelle pylons. The *Odysseus*-class had dropped the megaphaser installations of the earlier vessels, but Piper had insisted they be installed. "I heard the engineers weren't happy about those."

Piper gave him a sarcastic smile. With a touch of acid, she stated: "If those engineers had spent as much time defending themselves as *I* have then they wouldn't have dropped them in the first place."

The *Enterprise* captain wasn't offended. He actually agreed with her. He would have loved having them fitted to his ship. However, Starfleet's flagship's calling was different to the *Millennium*. His ship was used for exploration and diplomacy. They needed to appear ready, but non-threatening. The *Millennium*, however, was called upon to go into the worst places

and win the day by being the most well defended and powerful ship in the fight.

At that moment Harriman wondered how many people the Admiral had lost over the years. Perhaps the death toll was becoming too great. Especially with the loss of Commander Sarda. "They *would* come in handy," he stated as he sipped his champagne. "It would help make certain I'll make it to retirement."

Now in her sixties, Piper felt the years as a burden that she was beginning to wonder she still wished to carry. Yet, through it all, Starfleet had to admit she was the best at what she did. If the Federation was handed a lemon, she was the one who was most likely to turn it into lemonade. Piper's sense of duty was incredibly strong. "I'll retire when I'm dead," she said baldly.

Before Harriman could contribute further, Admiral Smillie stood and waited for a moment as those present fell into silence. Piper noted there was very little in the way of press here. She supposed this sort of thing had become old hat to them.

"Welcome, guests," the elderly Admiral said with a knowing smile. It was an open secret the man was going to retire after the launch. He propped himself up on his walking stick and continued with a voice still strong: "Today we launch the successor to Starfleet's greatest defender, the *USS Millennium*."

He continued on for a few minutes, reminding those present of the previous ship's adventures and how he hoped this new ship might even outshine her predecessor. Piper had already tuned out. Her gaze was cast over the dignitaries, officers and family present. She saw, to her delight, the entire senior staff of the *T'Plana-Hath* was present. Krashtallash caught her gaze and gave her a friendly smile and nod, as did Scanner. She noted their

children were all now grown and stood with them – some in uniform and some not. The group included two who were now a part of her crew.

As she looked at Crash, Susanna, Manny and Scanner she realised just how much she missed them. Sure, they had a whole new job, and they were doing it wonderfully and she was immensely proud of them. All the same, she wished her family was still complete.

Merete sidled up next to her and followed her gaze. She knew what her friend was thinking. “I understand how you’re feeling. I miss them, too,” she said sincerely.

Piper was about to say something acerbic when she realised she actually *did* understand. Merete was a widow whose children had grown and moved on. She was the definition of an empty nester. She knew all about loss. “We go on because the job still needs to be done.”

The Doctor shrugged and shared: “I’m just not so sure it needs me to do it anymore. Perhaps it’s time to retire.”

Piper started. Not only did she feel it was too soon for her middle-aged friend but the last thing she needed was to lose the last of her closest confidants. “Nah,” she said, offhandedly, trying to deflect her from the notion. “You’re still too young.”

Merete looked up at her with eyes surrounded by wrinkles and with platinum blonde hair that was now more silver than anything else. “No, seriously, Piper.” Her gaze returned to the ship outside the window, and she pointed. “We were lucky to survive the *Millennium*’s destruction, and not just that one time. We’ve survived scrape after scrape, and I just don’t think our luck is going to hold out forever.” Her voice dropped to a whisper. “I’d like to see my grandchildren grow up.”

Piper drew her over to a corner. “Why didn’t you tell me this before?”

Merete shrugged, a tear forming in her eye. “I suppose I just didn’t want to let you down. Since we lost Sarda....”

Before she could say anything else Piper suddenly noticed it was very quiet in the room. She looked about her and realised everyone was looking at her. She heard Manny’s voice in her head say: “*Admiral Smillie is waiting for you!*”

Her cheeks flushed in embarrassment, she stepped forward through the crowd and stood next to her old commander. “Sorry, Bill,” she whispered out of the side of her mouth.

The old man simply shrugged. Over the years of their association – he would never call it friendship – he had come to expect all kinds of bizarre behaviour from her. However, he had learned to give her a certain amount of latitude. Regardless of her attitude, he knew Piper could get the job done.

Piper looked over the crowd at friends, old and new, and started when she saw Spock standing at the back of the crowd. Their eyes met for a second and she gave him a respectful nod. His presence reminded her of his message of condolence after Sarda’s death and she got the impression he was here to honour his Vulcan comrade in arms.

The Ambassador was joined by his protégé, Sa’avik, who stood at his elbow. Piper gave the Lieutenant Commander a brief smile before addressing those present.

“Thank you, one and all, for being here. Your presence speaks more than I ever could with mere words, so I’ll simply ask we take a moment to remember our friends who couldn’t join us.” Piper took a step back and respectfully lowered her eyes, and she was joined by all those present, even the reporter. During that

moment, Piper found Sarda's voice ringing in her mind from a conversation they'd had years before. "It is illogical to waste your talents on negative feelings, Piper. All things must end."

In the quiet of her thoughts, she replied: "*But our friendship shouldn't have. Not so soon.*"

After their moment's reflection, Piper raised her head and announced: "We christen thee the *USS Millennium*." With a tight chest Piper reached forward and hit the button that released the tiny bottle of champagne that quickly spun its way across from the station towards the side of the ship's secondary hull. The audience caught the reflection of the sun as it sparkled off the bottle before it shattered into a million frozen fragments when it encountered the hull plating.

The task was complete. The new *USS Millennium* had been christened and was ready for duty.

Piper turned to go and, as she cast a final glance over the crowd, she thought she caught a glimpse of a woman with a pile of cherry red hair on her head. Surely, she hadn't followed her here...

Her quarters didn't look right. Piper's room was typically bland in colouring, with the usual desk and amenities. Boring. She would have to ask the Quartermaster to paint it lilac, like her old room.

She threw her duffel bag on the bed and unclipped her Vin'tah from its place in her hip before reverently placing it on the desk. She pondered it for a moment and thought that it reflected her ship and mission in many ways. From the outside it looked innocuous, like most Federation starships. Like the *Millennium*, it was ready for anything and held a number of

surprises. Within, it contained not only an effective staff, but also an optional razor-sharp blade that had drawn a lot of blood over the years. The ship, too, held many surprises, including triple shielding, weapons a-plenty and even a cloaking device.

The last item had been contentious. Starfleet was not given to subterfuge, but Piper had seen the necessity – on occasion. Indeed, it had saved their lives more than once.

There had been many who had been vocal in their opposition, but always behind closed doors and only within the Admiralty. Indeed, the cloaking device's installation on the *Millennium* wasn't known by all who served on her, either. Need-to-know extended to the ship's most secret component.

On board, it had been maintained by a select few who included the Chief Engineer, her second, and Sarda.

Thinking about him once more brought the same hollow feeling she always felt when she was again reminded of his absence. It was like a vital piece of her was missing and she had no idea how to fix it. She was beginning to understand what it was like for an amputee to live on without their missing limb. You just make do and keep going.

Piper reached up and released the clip on her jacket, allowing it to fall open. She was reaching for her belt when the door chimed.

The sound took her back to the launch of the original *Millennium* when her settling-in time aboard that vessel had been unceremoniously cut short due to an emergency situation. She hoped history wasn't repeating itself.

“Enter.”

The door opened to admit Ambassador Spock, who never seemed to age, and Sa'avik, who retained her youthful beauty

even though she was only a decade younger than Piper. She stepped forward and honoured them with the Vulcan salute. “What can I do for you, Ambassador?” she asked, suddenly on her guard. A visit from the ageing Vulcan would never be frivolous.

Spock waited for the door to close behind them, affording them privacy, before saying: “We have received an important communique from Romulus, Admiral. An opportunity has opened, and it must be seized.”

To Piper’s experienced ears Spock was almost excited, even given his stoic delivery. It was a curious statement as it had been years since they had heard a peep from the Rihannsu. Since Empress Ael had closed their borders, the place had become a black hole of information. “Don’t tell me,” she said sarcastically. “They want to declare peace and celebrate it with a BBQ.”

Spock shifted slightly, the only sign that he was annoyed. Sa’avik was less reserved and readily displayed her embarrassment.

“I am not certain of the means of celebration, but peace would be worth celebrating.” Spock’s eyebrows drew together as he gazed at Piper.

The Admiral wondered if he was looking into her very soul. He didn’t need to be a telepath. He was simply wise beyond his years. Piper realised her tone was insulting and pulled her head in. “My apologies, Ambassador.” Her cheeks flushed a little. “You deserve better than my petulance.”

Sa’avik spoke for Spock to console her old friend. “We grieve with thee, Admiral. We are aware of your particular source of discomfort. It is not a simple thing to survive the passing of one’s bond mate.”

Piper's sense of being incomplete returned with a vengeance. The pain in her soul practically cried out, as if it was a barely contained creature roaring to be let loose from the tightly shut cage within her. Yet the Admiral had become so adept at wearing a mask that the only visible sign was a slight moistening of her eyes.

However, the Vulcans would not be fooled. Even though the two were touch telepaths, Piper's abilities in that area were stronger and her emotions practically broadcast. Both Spock and Sa'avik took an involuntary step back as if they were somehow giving her room.

Nearby, on the *T'Plana-Hath*, Amantasandage was just about to sit down to eat her lunch meal when she felt Piper's cry of pain. It shot through her like an arrow, and she dropped her steak, her eyes wide. "Oh, my..." she said, almost choking on the words.

Scanner, who had been sipping his coffee, looked at his wife with alarm. "What's the matter, hon?"

Instead of saying anything, the Cait wrapped her prehensile tail around Scanner's wrist, giving them the contact she needed to form a psychic link. She needed privacy – and the ability to communicate effectively. She gave him the memory of the pain she had felt and added: *"I'm worried about Piper. She's not herself since we lost Sarda and I'm not sure she's ever going to be again"*.

Scanner sighed. He showed her the concern he felt. *"Since they joined in their minds, I've been worried what would happen to either of them if they lost the other. With their thoughts*

being shared for so long they literally would have become part of one another."

"Exactly," Manny thought. "I'm just worried that she doesn't know how to let him go and become whole again. She needs to heal."

Confused, Scanner interjected: *"What do you mean exactly by "let him go"?"* He had felt the connotation to her thought. It was one of the beauties of telepathic conversation. You heard the words and felt their meaning.

"If you have someone's thoughts inside your mind for so long – as Piper and Sarda did – they not only become interconnected, but a part of him is still living in her mind. If she is ever going to move on in this life, she needs to..." At that point she was lost for an appropriate notion.

Fortunately, Scanner understood where she was going. *"Be exorcised of him. How can you do that? Is it possible?"*

His wife agreed with the concept. *"Yes. I hear Vulcans have a ritual for that. Perhaps it's something Ambassador Spock can help her with. We should suggest it to him."*

At that, Scanner had reservations. It would be a breach of Piper's privacy, to say the very least. *"Not without speaking to her first."*

"Agreed." Manny sighed and snacked on her steak. *"I just hope we can talk to her soon. I'm worried about her, my love. Really worried."*

Spock had finished briefing Piper on their mission and was walking down the corridor with Sa'avik. There were no secrets between them. "I am concerned for the Admiral's mental

state,” he said quietly, making sure he would not be overheard. “She is not dealing well with Sarda’s passing.”

Sa’avik nodded slightly, her thoughts not purely logical. The Romulan emotions within her waged to be heard. “The pain she feels is real and understandable.”

“All the same, perhaps it would be better if we were assigned a different escort for this mission. It is too important to risk being derailed by Piper’s grief.”

The younger officer paused in her stride as inspiration struck her, jostling loose a lock of her long, curly dark hair. “What if it is more than grief?” she asked, her dark eyes wide at the possible revelation.

Spock stopped and waited. Although he guessed her line of thought he respectfully waited as any teacher would, allowing the student to learn by doing.

She turned her finely chiselled features to meet her elder’s gaze. “Perhaps she needs to return to Vulcan to Mount Seleya. Is it possible she is a Keeper?”

Since their meeting with Piper, Spock was beginning to suspect the possibility. Was it true that the Admiral was carrying Sarda’s katra – his living spirit? He was aware of the chaos his own katra had brought to Doctor McCoy in the short time he carried it. It had been *six months* since Sarda’s decease. There was one fact that remained clear on the record that resolved the matter. “Impossible. Piper was not present with him before his death. There was no way for him to prepare and pass it on.”

Sa’avik heard and understood the logic of his argument, yet she remained unconvinced. She turned and began walking once more as she processed her thoughts. Spock fell into step with her and waited, knowing she still had more she wished to

say. Their long association had taught him how to read her silences.

Slowly, she added: "For a typical Vulcan bonding, there are precedents we can use to judge. However, theirs went deeper than most, even though it was unintentional."

Spock was intrigued. "Please elaborate."

Sa'avik was torn. Theirs was a special, openly honest relationship. However, that did not include violating another's privacy – especially Piper. Theirs was an old and dear friendship. She looked up and down the corridor and made sure they were alone before continuing. She knew that anything she shared with Spock would remain confidential. "Piper has a very high psi factor, much higher than most Vulcans. On a previous mission there was a meld between her, Sarda and...." she paused for the briefest moments to contain her own grief, before continuing. "Commander t'Avik of the Romulan Navy – my mother – just before her decease. The meld was interrupted, and the psychic shock nearly killed Piper and Sarda when t'Avik passed. A part of her spirit remained with the two of them for a time and it kept them in a deep meld for hours. Only Commander Amantasandage's entering the meld brought them back to themselves. However, it left them with a permanent, and very deep, bond. They have been a part of one another since."

Spock's brow rode up. "Fascinating. I am beginning to understand the complexity of the situation. Perhaps Sarda's *spirit* remains with Piper in much the same way your mother's did." He noticed they were near their destination and paused. "We will need the services of a powerful telepath if we are to assist the Admiral. Perhaps Commander Amantasandage could be of assistance." He turned and started walking. Within seconds they

were standing in one of the ship's transporter rooms. "We must organise an intervention for her at the conclusion of this mission. Unfortunately, there is no time at present. We will have to manage her symptoms on our own."

Sa'avik nodded her agreement. Time was sorely limited. She looked over at the transporter operator and said: "Two to beam to the *Enterprise*."

Folding the last of her uniform slacks, Piper put them away in her drawers and considered her next move. Should she begin the inspection that was one of the first duties of a new commander, or just take a break? She knew she could use one. The ache in her bones these days was getting hard to ignore. Damn this getting old.

She had time. After all, Spock's briefing had informed her that they would not be shipping out until tomorrow as the appropriate staff needed to be recalled. A summit with the Romulan Empress was not something to be taken lightly.

Her considerations came to a halt as the door chimed once more. She scowled to herself. History *was* repeating itself. There were times when she doubted her open-door policy to her crew. Right now, she simply needed some time to herself to recharge her batteries and reflect.

"Come in," she said, not really wanting to.

The door opened silently and one of the most frustrating people Piper knew stood there, framed in the light of the hallway, looking as dazzling as she did the first time Piper met her. She was of average height and had an hourglass figure. Her large, brown eyes saw everything, and her wide, friendly mouth was always ready with a smile. Her most amazing feature was the pile

of red hair neatly stacked on her head that framed her face and swept down her back. It wasn't regulation, but ships' counsellors were given a fair amount of discretion.

"What can I do for you, Eliza?" Piper asked, already knowing the answer. The identical twin sister of the late Elise McKennah was practically a carbon copy of her. She had that same, charming wit and a relentlessness that would make a Klingon think twice. Piper wondered whether she had been tasked to the *Millennium* as this ship's counsellor or if this was a social call.

"You know why I'm here, Admiral Piper," she said coyly, her eyes sparkling. "You've been avoiding me like the plague. After the loss of the *Millennium*, you were supposed to undergo mandatory counselling sessions but, for reasons I can't imagine, you kept finding excuses to not see me." Her tone was cheeky, but still demanded answers.

Piper scowled. This time she had been cornered. She had suspected it had been McKennah she had seen on the starbase, now she was certain of it. "Like I told you before, Commander, I don't need counselling and I find it a waste of my time."

Much to Piper's annoyance, the doctor wasn't to be so easily put off. She just kept her disarming smile plastered on her face. "Physician, heal thyself, doesn't apply in psychotherapy and, the last time I checked, Admiral, that isn't a degree you hold. It is up to your counsellor to sign off on you. Now, when can I schedule an appointment, or should I simply keep dropping in on you unannounced?"

The Admiral fumed. She was stuck, and she knew it. A ship's counsellor could overrule the captain if she believed she

was justified – even if they held the rank of Admiral. “I will get back to you in a couple of hours, Doctor.”

Knowing this was her cue to leave, McKennah turned on her heel and stepped towards the door. “I’ll hold you to that, Admiral. I’d hate to have to drop in on you in the middle of the night for a session.”

Before Piper could give an appropriate retort, McKennah was out the door and out of sight. She would rather have been raked over hot coals and fed to cannibals than be head shrunk. She wondered if she could find a way to continue avoiding the shrink.

“Your behaviour is illogical, Piper. Doctor McKennah is only trying to help you.” Sarda’s voice came unbidden in her head, but when she heard him, it was never unwelcome.

“You know how much I hate shrinks, Sarda,” she said, quietly, to herself.

“You are in pain, and you need help. You are allowing your thinking to become clouded by grief and remorse. If you don’t deal with it, you may make a mistake that could cost a great deal.”

Piper sighed. “I just need time to get over your death,” she said, resigned to her fate.

The voice would not be put off. *“You have no intention of ‘getting over it’. I am just as much a part of you now as before my death. Until you let me go you will never begin to heal. Take me home and release me.”*

Once again, she was torn. “I can’t let you go. I’ve forgotten where I end and you begin. I need your guidance.” She was deliberate in avoiding the other truth of the situation and she knew it. She wiped the tears in her eyes, tried to ignore the

tightness in her chest, gave her a quarters a quick glance as she had finished her task, then left. Perhaps Sarda would stop nagging her if she got on with the inspection. It was wishful thinking.

Chapter Four

Time had passed and yet it hadn't. Piper wondered if she would ever get used to this shifting around in time and decided she couldn't. She was made for a linear existence, plain and simple. There was a beginning, now, and the end. Everything else could be someone else's domain – like the Time Agents.

The trouble with that line of thinking was that most of them she had met so far hadn't instilled her with a great deal of trust or faith. She was beginning to realise that, for all their difference in time, the Agents were just as flawed as she was. Sure, they had some fancy new toys, but they were just as hamstrung by their limits as temporal beings as someone from her own century.

"Now, that was boring," came Scanner's voice, even though he had not spoken. "There are only so many games of Tetris I'm willing to challenge mahself to."

Piper gave a bemused glance at her Chief Engineer who was at his station as he gave another, uncomfortable grimace. While he was fond of his granddaughter to the Nth power, Sustasandage's choice of personality for the AI in her ship was creepy. It was familiar, yes, and somewhat flattering, but also a grim reminder that one day he would be no more.

Sustasandage spoke up from her place on the Bridge, next to Piper's command chair. "I take it we're in the right place and time?" she asked amiably.

“Where else would we be?” AI Scanner said cheekily. “Jus’ trust old Scanner, I’ll get you there every time – any time.”

Piper could practically feel Scanner roll his eyes. All the same, for all the AI’s amazing abilities, she wanted her own people to verify their position in time and space. Without saying a word, she flashed a thought to Sarda at Science. Within seconds he had checked the stardate via Memory Alpha and their position relative to the stars. “*All is good, Piper,*” he thought back with a mental sigh. Trusting their fate to a machine that kept them in stasis for twenty years was not his kind of fun.

“How’s your energy reserves?” Sus asked her ship.

“Not good,” it replied. “Ah’m down to eighteen percent. Captain Piper, permission to come aboard?”

Piper looked over to Sus who nodded an affirmation to her unspoken question. Her ship was quite capable of flying itself. “Granted. Make yourself at home in bay three.”

“Dandy.” On the viewscreen the sleek little ship darted down and under and within moments had parked itself in one of the lowest decks of the *Millennium*.

Piper had no time for being a spectator. “Scanner,” she said, addressing her fellow crewmate, “as soon as it’s aboard I need you to start work on the upgrades.”

Not one for wasting a moment, Judd got to his feet and headed for the turbolift. “You don’t have to ask me twice.”

He stepped through the doors with Sus at his side. He was going to need her expertise if they were going to truly make the *Millennium* invisible. He looked up at Sus and, for a brief moment, wondered if, when this was all over, she was going to be another casualty of this time war. If his present version of himself should no longer exist, perhaps Sus will never have existed at all?

It was gut wrenching as he realised that, while not blood, she was indeed his own progeny, his legacy. She deserved to live. Sucking it up, he internalised his feelings and said, a little roughly, “Thanks for your help with this, darlin’. We’re already twenty years out of date and I don’t want to go into this with a see-through cloak.”

Judd had forgotten his granddaughter was a sensitive. She placed her paw on his shoulder and gave it a gentle squeeze. “I feel your pain, Grandfather. As Time Agents, we all take an oath to serve the Federation, and Time itself, regardless of the personal cost. Billions of lives will be saved if we can stop Hobus from exploding. If that comes at the cost of my existence, I am willing to pay it.”

The sigh came from the depths of Judd’s very soul. “This mess has cost the lives of so many people I can’t begin to count. Suzette – Piper Silayna – lost her entire version of the Universe and everyone in it. I’m sure there are people who were born who aren’t in existence now.” With a flash of anger Judd punched the lift wall. “If that bastard Nero had any idea of the absolute buggery he created then I hope he’s burning in a very private part of Hell.”

Sus’ eyes widened at the outburst. While she thought herself well versed in her family’s history, it was another thing to witness Judd’s passion for real. As the doors opened and they stepped out into the hall she gave what comfort she could. “Grandfather, I know you’re a good man and all that you do is from your fierce love for your friends and family. I believe that will be rewarded. I believe that God won’t forget your sacrifices.”

Judd was a little surprised with her bold statement of faith. He didn’t have a whole lot of time to consider what lay

beyond his life as he always told himself he was too busy to contemplate it. If he was honest with himself, he would have realised that he was simply procrastinating. Whatever his beliefs were at the moment, and he wasn't certain what they were, he was too much a gentleman to question hers. He gave her a brief smile and simply said: "Thanks."

The two of them stepped up to a nondescript door in the forward section of the engineering hull. It was unmarked and yet it had a retinal scanner placed next to it. Only a few people on the ship had clearance for the bay that housed the Cloaking Device but that was not important now. Security wasn't an issue for their antique equipment. All the same, Judd put his eye to the scanner and the door whooshed open.

Sus sucked in a breath. "Oh, yes. We've got some work to do."

Judd just chuckled. "So much for mah state of the art ship."

His daughter just shrugged. "It's not the tools that matter, Father, it's what you do with them."

With the preparations under way, Piper took a moment to take care of her own needs. She stopped by her quarters and picked up her Vin'tah, her katana and changed into a ghee for the first time in ages. It felt odd to her as she hadn't the opportunity to wear one for over a year. All the same, she felt freer in the loose-fitting garment, and she tossed a new one she'd had replicated to her sister.

Suzette held up the odd-shaped garb and turned it this way and that. "How am I supposed to get into this?" she asked, perplexed.

Piper stepped over and helped her out of her jeans and t-shirt and loaned her one of her sports bras – they were the same size. She then guided her into the outfit and did it up just so. She stepped back and admired her handywork. “Not bad,” she said with a smile.

Her sister grimaced. “It’s a bit stiff,” she complained.

“It’s still new. You’ll get used to it.” She looked around and found a pair of flat slip-on shoes. “Put these on. We’ll be practising barefoot today, but you don’t want to be running around the hangar deck without them.”

With the pair now suitably attired, they made their way to the turbolift and to the extreme rear of the ship – its vast hangar deck sitting on top of the Engineering hull. Aside from a number of fighters sitting in their bays in their usual scramble formation, the space was empty.

Almost. Sitting to the left of the lift doors was a large, white ball of fur. Amantasandage looked up at them and gave them a brief smile. “What took you so long?” she asked cheekily.

Suzette gave her a mock scowl. “There’s no surprising you, is there?”

“There’s something to be said for predictability,” she said amiably. “However, I pray that it’ll never be said of me.”

Knowing the drill, the three broke into a jog and began their circuit of the deck. Before Piper Silayna joined them the Captain and Security Chief would make ten turns of the kilometre-long circle, but they decided to keep it down to five this time in deference to Suzette. She was coming along with her fitness level, but she was still not a match for the others.

Piper Silayna also found herself slightly annoyed at the bouncing weight at her hip. Piper had entrusted her with the

Vin'tah – sheathed – and she was simply not used to its extra weight and the mere fact it kept moving around. Piper internalised a smile at her discomfort, but it was good training. As a Master of Scheel-Tah, she'd had to endure all kinds of inconveniences, including some that could have left a scar if she hadn't had a protoplaser handy.

The three jogged on quietly for a time, simply enjoying the sense of camaraderie they had as their shared experience and mental facilities gave them a feeling for one another. In that place and time, they were simply their version of a flock of seagulls, carried along on the breeze.

Spock was deep in meditation when he sensed the presence of an entity that did not belong. His eyes cracked open, and he unclasped his hands, unsettled. This was peculiar, considering the *Millennium* was still outside the confines of the Milky Way Galaxy. How the being came to be here was beyond him. All the same, he had to confirm his suspicions before reporting them. Given his great age, he took a moment to bring himself to his feet and dress appropriately. His human heritage had given him the same arthritis that had plagued his mother later in life and he had to move carefully these days. His Vulcan training had helped him manage the pain, but there were times when even he had to submit to the need for analgesia.

The Ambassador made his way out the door of the guest quarters and down the corridor. He moved gracefully and with purpose, not realising the deference the junior officers and crew gave him as he passed. They were in the presence of a living legend and responded in kind.

It was not long before he found a turbolift and entered.

“Destination?” the computer requested after a moment’s silence.

Spock wasn’t sure. “The aft section of the ship,” he said, still uncertain.

“The Hangar Deck?” the electronic voice queried.

“Yes,” Spock said. It was as good a place as any, he thought.

A moment later the doors slid open, and Spock found himself momentarily stunned by the size of this ship. Even in the twenty-fourth century among the *Galaxy*- and *Sovereign*-class ships he was used to dealing with, few of them had a hangar deck that could compare with this. The *Ingram*-class was enormous by twenty-third century standards.

The lift waited patiently for the ageing dignitary to alight, and Spock stepped out and took a moment to get his bearings. He closed his eyes and considered the presence once more. “It *is* here,” he said quietly to himself.

“What is?” Amantasandage asked as she quickly padded up to him. The moment she had seen the Vulcan she had broken into a run and gotten out ahead of the pack.

Spock turned and sized up the Caitian Security Officer who was now standing upright. She was capable enough, that he was aware of. Would she be willing to indulge an old man’s flights of fancy? One thing was certain, the muscles moving under that thick fur could probably break tritanium. He decided to go slowly. “I was deep in meditation when someone or *something* broke my concentration.”

It was the concern about the *thing* that caught Manny’s attention. “There is a presence here?” she asked, instantly on her

guard. It was her nature to protect others without thought to her own safety.

“What presence?” Piper asked now she had caught up with them both. Not far behind her Piper Silayna, huffing and puffing, but not completely winded, quickly joined them.

To their surprise, Manny had already found it. She looked off in the direction of the side room where Ghost stored the *Spectre*. “Whatever it is, it’s in there,” she said, pointing.

Moving a little slower than usual for Spock’s sake, the group sauntered over and paused outside the door. They knew the area should be empty as Ghost insisted that all maintenance on the craft be done by herself after a previous failure by ground staff had left her with a permanent injury. She was not the kind to give someone the chance to fail her. Also, the diminutive Irish woman was presently in the Conn as Piper was grooming her for more command duties.

There was no way Manny was going to risk the other’s safety, so she took it upon herself to step through the door and look around. She did this on all fours and did her best to slip, undetected, under the belly of the *Spectre*. Once in place, she looked around the room, searching out a pair of legs, feet, anything that might support a sentient life form. There was nothing. She considered for a moment whether she had inadvertently missed the target and that the intruder might be standing on the fighter itself. She was tempted to hiss at herself but did her best to keep her breathing as quiet as possible. She did not want to give away her presence and, as she flicked her ears around looking for sounds, she found none. It was deathly silent. It was peculiar as she could still feel the presence of something not only ancient but *other*. It was completely alien to her.

In the back of her mind, she could hear Captain Piper yelling at her telepathically and she had chosen to ignore it. Their recent experiences in the past had modified their working relationship somewhat and these days she knew that the Captain would give her more latitude than she used to.

"There's no sight of an alien presence," she announced in her mind. *"I missed looking on top of the Spectre. Can you see anything there?"*

Manny could feel Piper's scowl from here. *"One of these days, your running into the fray ahead of me is going to get you killed,"* she reproved.

"Better me than you."

Piper quickly glanced around the edge of the door and took in the space behind it. The *Spectre* was a tight fit and she could clearly see there was nothing hiding on its matte black surface. "Clear," she said loudly enough for Manny to hear.

The Caitian rolled out from under the ship and quickly stood, being joined by Piper, Suzette and Spock. With Manny in the lead, the quartet moved past the fighter's wing and looked behind its huge engine exhaust ports.

Manny's eyes went wide in surprise. Both Pipers said in unison: "What the..."

Spock simply said slowly: "Fascinating."

*Captain's Log, USS Enterprise, Stardate 10570.2,
We are currently en route to the Romulan Neutral Zone at warp seven with the Millennium, Farragut and Firebrand along as escort. We are one day out of spacedock and so far, we haven't had any problems. Considering the importance of our mission, we aren't taking any chances*

that our journey will be delayed. I don't think the Orions would be too happy about the possibility of peace. They've been trying to sell munitions to us for years saying we'd need them to protect ourselves from the Romulans. I hear they have more luck with the other side...

John Harriman checked his chair display where he saw a small graphic of the position of his little fleet. He had to admit there were few times in his career when he travelled in convoy and fewer when his ship was the one under protection.

“Are we there yet?”

The captain looked up at the face of one of his close friends on board. Dr Joanna McCoy had been with the B since that fateful Tuesday following the ship's launching. Daughter of Leonard McCoy, she had much of her father's irascible wit. “It'll be a couple of days until we reach the border, Doctor,” he said. “Why don't you catch up on some reading? You have plenty of time.”

Jo feigned a yawn, which with her wide mouth and glistening teeth was quite a display. “I'm all caught up. She glanced around the bridge as the collection of souls she had been travelling with for the past years and, rather than being introspective, considered how many credits she might win from them. “How about a game of poker this evening?” she suggested.

Harriman gave her a knowing look. “Said the spider to the fly,” he said with a grin. Jo's talents at the game were practically legendary. He took a moment to consider the idea, then nodded. “It's not a bad idea. We could bring the captains together this evening and I could let you clean them out.”

The doctor's grin became predatory. "Maybe I could buy a new boat when we get home."

John's brow went up as he thought of her optimism. Normally, he would agree with her. However, this time he had to admit to himself he had a bad feeling about this mission. Jo's attention was elsewhere so she missed the look of trepidation that passed over his ever-youthful looks. The possibility for a much brighter future was a carrot no self-respecting Starfleet donkey could refuse, however he hoped that in these circumstances he didn't make an ass of himself. While the present Empress had acted previously in a manner that was honourable and gave him a reason for hope, the Rihannsu had a long history of overturning previous Praetors. Starfleet had a running joke that the only thing that changed faster than the captains' drawers in a battle with the Romulans was their government.

"With the Captain's permission, I'll put out the word," Jo said after a moment of scheming. "This could be fun."

John wasn't so sure but was willing to give it a try.

All Federation starships had conference rooms where situations both benign and dire were considered and strategies hashed out. This was a place where victories were created by the minds of extremely able sentients who combined to bring their individual strengths to bear on a problem. The conference room on the *Enterprise-B* was lavish compared with the original's but bore a striking resemblance to the one on the *A* that had played host to the first meal shared by a Federation Starship Captain and a Klingon Chancellor.

Paintings lined one wall that depicted earlier incarnations of the *Starship Enterprise* from the XCV-330 early explorer to the

ship they were standing in. As John glanced at them once more and admired the artistic licence taken with each image, he was glad that his ship didn't look like it did after it returned from its very first mission. That was a launching he could have done without. The loss of Kirk was something he still carried today, years later. He was certain it would always bug him.

As it often did, his mind's eye went back to the bridge in the brief moment when he was standing in the turbolift, about to head down to work on the deflector dish when Kirk had risen from the captain's chair and told him that he would go instead. That moment had defined what followed for him as Kirk was not the Captain of the *B*, *he was*. He could have said no and gone anyway, but how do you say no to a living legend? That was the truth of the situation, and he knew it. There was no way he could have changed the mind of a force of nature like James T Kirk.

That was how he had come to accept the fact that Kirk had died on his watch. The review board had seen it that way. After all, it was staffed by Admirals who had all had run-ins with the man.

Harriman had been busy, so he had been the last to arrive at Jo's little shindig. While the space did have one long table dominating an end of the room, the other now sported a largish poker table replete with chips and a green, felt top to make the cards easier to handle. Seated around it were Admiral Piper, Captain Joseph Small of the *Firebrand*, Jo, and Captain Hitesh Chopra of the *Farragut*. John gave them all a welcoming smile as host and took a moment to shake their hands in turn. He then pulled out his chair and plonked himself down with a grin.

"Prepare to be fleeced," he said, delighted to be able to share this moment with them.

Captain Small, a six-foot tall human from Earth's British Isles who was exactly the opposite of what his name might bring to mind, gave him a confident smile. "This little pile of chips in front of me is just going to get bigger, my friend," he said in a deep basso voice.

"Not if I have anything to say about it," Jo chipped in cheerfully. Lambs to the slaughter, she thought. John could see it in her eyes.

Piper gave a slight smile. "I've got to admit, I haven't done this for a while."

Chopra gave her a wolfish grin. "Said the spider to the fly," he said. "Why don't I believe you, Admiral?"

Piper gave him a "Who, me?" look and grinned. "No ranks at this table, I'm sure," she said. "Am I right, John?"

Harriman nodded sincerely. "Absolutely. At the Poker table, there is no rank, no friends, only marks to be fleeced."

Jo wondered if the notorious movie fanatic was quoting one of them. "Sometimes you come out with the most amazing anachronisms, John. I sometimes wonder if we're still living in the 20th Century and we're nothing more than characters in a book."

Small looked at the doctor quizzically. "I sincerely hope not. That would leave us all at the hands of the writer, and who knows what he has in mind?"

Jo rolled her eyes and began dealing. "The game is five card stud; deuces and one-eyed Jacks are wild."

Once the cards were down the players all chipped in. Nobody raised so Jo turned up the next card.

"Where I came from," said Piper introspectively, "the author of the Universe was well known. The God of the Universe,

the One who made all, is a being of immense power who created space/time and all that is in it. The thinking is that, if He knows the end from the beginning and made all of time in one hit, then He truly is the author of history, and we are all players in His cosmic story.”

Hitesh made a face. “If that’s the case, I can blame him for this lousy hand.”

Jo grimaced. Like her father, she was not a believer in the metaphysical. “My Dad met someone who claimed to be God. That didn’t end well for Sybok.”

Small considered whether to up Hitesh’s bet and folded. He had nothing and generally didn’t like bluffing. “Who’s Sybok?”

Piper chimed in. “He was the brother of Spock,” she said, matter-of-factly. “He rejected the Vulcan ideals of emotional control and instead embraced them. Not logical.”

The comment drew a perplexed glance from John. Her tone reminded him of Spock, not Piper. “Getting back to the question of God, if He did create all of space/time all at once, then what becomes of self-determination? I’d hate to think that we’re all simply here because it was preordained – that even the thoughts in my head aren’t truly mine.”

The notion did not sit well with any of the people seated. They were all over-achievers who had worked long and hard to be sitting where they were. There were too many sacrifices along the way.

Jo chipped in: “If there is a God, I’d like to have a few words with him about how messed up the Universe is. Never mind there were a number of dumb things I did when I was younger that I’d dearly not like to take responsibility for.”

Piper chuckled. “That I can agree with.” Her mind turned back to the appalling dancing she had once done while under cover in an Argelian bar and how Scanner had recorded the event and posted it on the ship’s intranet.

“The course of history doesn’t always make sense, does it?” John said introspectively. “I never did understand why what happened to Kirk did. If that was part of some master plan, I don’t get it.”

The Admiral sighed. “I don’t get it, either. Remember, that was the thinking of my people on Proxima, and I don’t necessarily agree with them.” She picked up her glass of pineapple juice and took a sip. “I found that, in a room with five scholars you often had six different points of view. They didn’t often agree and there wasn’t always even any overlap between their notions.”

Jo noticed that the game had stalled. The call was to her, and she chipped in to keep things moving. She turned up the last card and noted that nothing on the table matched. This was going to be interesting.

Hitesh threw in a ten-credit chip to keep his hand alive. “The bid is yours, John,” he said, noticing how distracted the man was.

Harriman brought his gaze back from the streaking vista outside the opposite window and focused once more on the cards. However, he wasn’t quite seeing them. “If space/time is a physical property and it *was* created then the creator wouldn’t necessarily be constrained by its power.”

Piper nodded and said solemnly: “Agreed.”

Small seemed to see where he was going. “Then God, whoever he/she/it is, would be able to see the end from the

beginning. How do you then give life to something that simply is a part of the physical universe you just decided to create one day?"

Jo scowled. This wasn't the way she planned this game would go. A few chips won and lost, a bit of friendly banter and probably more liquor imbibed than was recommended, not this pseudo-religious claptrap. "John, the bid is to you," she said, chiding.

He looked down and considered his cards. Maintaining a poker face while seriously distracted was not something that came naturally to him. All the same, he had two pair. He wasn't about to capitulate. "Raise you ten," he said, tossing in his chips.

Chopra came back to the thought. "It is said that God made us because he wanted someone to hang out with."

Jo chuckled. "Isn't there a cosmic bar that deities can come together and share a beer in?"

Small grinned. The Englishman liked pubs. "He can have a pint with me anytime. I'm sure he would have a lot of good stories."

"No point telling him any jokes, though," Hitesh said, flashing some teeth. "He's heard them all before."

The comment brought a smile to all those present.

Piper wasn't about to let the subject go. "I've given it a lot of thought over time. While some of my friends back home tend to think that God's plan involves everything, right down to the last time I stubbed my toe, I tend to think that He's more like the sovereign who built His Kingdom for all to live in peacefully. He gave us laws to keep the peace and even has the front door open if we want to go to Him for help and advice, but, being a person who believes in the right to choose, He doesn't impose His will on His people."

To the surprise of the captains, Jo interjected: "If he is sitting up in his castle on the hill, why doesn't he come out and clean up the mess he made?"

Piper gave her a level look. "You err in that you think that the Creator isn't interested in what is going on." She shook herself, a little surprised at herself, then continued: "I personally think He allows us to live our lives but does intervene when things get badly out of control."

The cynic in Jo couldn't help but add: "Yes, the flood of Noah and such. Yeah, wiping out the population of the Earth wasn't his greatest feat." The idea of mass extinction of individuals was something that violated the healer inside her deeply.

Piper shrugged. "I'm not too sure on that one, either, but my dad used to say that, when the going gets tough God does send deliverers, and there have been many of them throughout human history. David in the face of Goliath, Moses, Christ, Constantine, some might even say Winston Churchill during the war with Hitler's Germany. Zephram Cochrane led us out of poverty. Even more recently, Kirk's intervention during the Khitomer Conference averted a disaster that could have turned overtures for peace into all-out war."

At that John tilted his head to the side. "Are we today's deliverers? Are we here to finally bring peace to the Alpha Quadrant?" He gave a wide grin. "I certainly hope so."

Piper gave him a look. "Peace with the Romulans would be difficult as they are Vulcanoids who have not embraced the teachings of Surak."

Harriman caught the Admiral's eye. Her face was a little slack and reminded him of the lack of animation he often saw on

the face of a Vulcan. Odd. “The Romulans have created their own philosophies,” he said. “I read that Empress Ael is devoted to the ways of *mnhei'sahe*. Surak isn't necessarily the answer to every Vulcanoid's problems.”

Not to be out-argued, Piper said: “For the Vulcans, emotions run very deep. It's only through the philosophies of Surak with his emphasis on emotional control and meditation that Vulcans found peace.”

Jo scowled at that. “I've never met a Vulcan who had been through Kohlinar that I liked. I might as well have been talking to a robot.”

Harriman ignored her and added: “Logically, we have to accept the fact that it is the Romulan's main philosophy, and we have to meet them where they are. We can't go into this conference with guns blazing insisting they follow the ways of Surak.” He spoke in a friendly, even manner then looked up into the Admiral's older and wiser eyes and was about to remind her the bet was to her. He was surprised at the fury he saw there. He looked at the crumpled remains of her cards clutched between whitened, angry fingers.

Jo's eyes widened at the sight of her. She had met the Admiral before and had always found her to be a reasonable woman given to wise choices. She had a reputation as a warrior, but nobody doubted her abilities as a peacemaker, either. The rage before her was out of character, that was clear.

“Admiral?” Harriman asked, invoking her rank and not only trying to remind her who and where she was but trying to help her to regain her emotional balance.

His tone caught the attention of Small and Chopra who had tuned out, letting their minds wander at this slow game of

Poker. The two men looked at the senior officer and watched as she tried to smooth out her damaged cards. “I think we’re going to need a new deck,” Chopra said whimsically.

The comment brought an angry glare from not only Piper, but Harriman as well. The man was not helping.

Piper looked at her cards, checked the table and decided it wasn’t worth playing. She tossed the battered remains of her hand onto the table face down and said: “Fold.” Deciding she’d had enough for one evening, she got to her feet. “My apologies, people. This has been a more trying day than I thought. If you’ll excuse me.”

Respectfully, the others came to their feet and stood and watched as she left the room. They all shared a look of wonder, but it was Harriman who was the most concerned. The two of them had collaborated a number of times in the past and he had never seen her lose her cool like she had this night. He wondered if the pressure was finally getting to her, or if it was something else.

As everyone once more took their seats Jo shot her captain a look. “What do you think that was all about?” she asked.

Harriman shrugged. When criticising the behaviour of their superiors one had to tread carefully.

The hand played out and Jo won the pot, which wasn’t much. As the cards were being collected John stole a glance at Piper’s hand. To his surprise she had held not only two pair, but Aces high. She would have won if she hadn’t folded, and she must have known she would. Weirder and weirder.

Chapter Five

The new *Bloodwing* dropped out of warp bathed in the bluish light of the giant star, Hobus. Ael had decided this would be a good place to have the opening talks with the Federation counterparts as it was closer to their territory and away from the rat's nest that was the Praetorate. She didn't need an ambassador to speak for the Empire, and she didn't trust they would have had *her* best interests for it in mind either.

She was delighted with the performance of the ship which was an upgrade to the *S'harien* class of ships in that it had been scaled up in size, was faster and had a larger power source, a new version of the artificial quantum singularity drive that was becoming the standard for all naval vessels. She had noted that this one also had an advanced shielding system that was powered directly from the singularity itself. It did double duty of not only protecting the crew from a device that could swallow the ship in the blink of an eye and from the x- and gamma-rays that they normally produced in copious amounts (that were not healthy), but it also protected it from threats from without.

Ael stepped forward from her place in the command chair on the bridge and bathed in the glory of this system's massive sun. Hobus had few equals in the skies of the Romulan Star Empire, and it was one of the reasons she had chosen this as the location for the talks. Bigger is always better in politics.

She had to admit she missed this. There were times when Ael would have given anything to put the pettiness of the Senate behind her permanently and take once more to the skies in command of a starship. As a youth, she had never aspired to more

than that. Being Empress hadn't been her choice or desire – the duty had been foisted upon her by a needing populace. The Great Houses had for too long kept all the power centralised to themselves and the average Rihannha had been left with barely enough to feed themselves. Their childish need to expand their personal spheres of influence had led them to make some foolish choices and so they had to be deposed – for the good of the Empire. It was something she reminded herself of frequently. It was all for the good of the Empire. It was practically her own, personal mantra.

She turned and looked about her at the spacious bridge and noted so many young faces. All recent graduates from the Imperial Academy and handpicked by herself. There was no space on this bridge for children of the Great Houses – whose allegiances were always divided and definitely suspect.

“Announce us to the station and have our dock prepared.” All good things come to an end, so the humans say, she thought.

“Yes, Empress.”

Ael was tempted to roll her eyes. A part of her had been hoping to hear “khre'Riov” – Commander in Federation Standard – that her time as the Praetor/Empress had been a dream – a bad one at that. It was a hard thing for Ael to admit that she had failed. At least she was willing to try something new. True insanity was repeating the same actions over and over and expecting a different result. She smiled within. This was a truth that Kirk had shown her.

“The station reports our dock is ready to receive us, khre'Riov,” came a voice to her left. Aidoann was teasing her Empress again. Ael noticed around her mixed reactions. The

younger officers were mortified, the more senior who had served with her simply smiled.

Ael sat once more in the centre seat and curled her legs under her. She found it relaxing. “Sub-Commander,” she said cheerfully, “take us in.”

As the dull metallic thud of the docking clamps attaching themselves to the outer hull rang through the vessel, Arrhae ran through her mind once more the things she had done before leaving her home. It was a difficult thing to put one’s affairs in order without revealing your intentions. In her mind’s eye she could see her staff observing her quizzically, wondering if she was just being overly cautious considering they were well aware of their mistress’s distaste of space flight. All the same, hers was a House of some standing, and they knew the importance of carrying on her legacy if the worst were to happen to her on this trip. In the end, they simply humoured her.

If there was one thing she *was* grateful for, it was a loyal staff. Arrhae had been meticulous with the background checks on everyone, and she liked to think she was a good judge of character. After all, an anthropologist should be. It was a difficult thing to do once she had become a Senator as the Tal Shiar had offered to do the security checks for her. Thankfully, her newfound status had given her the wriggle room to politely decline. She was quite certain that at least *one* of the people they “cleared” would be a spy and she had too much to lose. After all, she did have a bad habit of talking in her sleep and she didn’t always speak in the Romulan tongue.

She looked about the stateroom she had been assigned on the new *Bloodwing* and had to marvel that such things existed on

a Romulan vessel. It seemed like yesterday that she had a stone for a pillow and a leather “couch” to sleep on when she had been the house hru’hfe¹. Now, she was in a large room with an oversized bed with large furs for coverings and a down-filled pillow for her head. There were elaborate tapestries on the walls depicting vivid vistas from ch’Rihan’s mountain regions with white-capped peaks and gushing waterfalls. She wished she could take them with her.

All the same, she didn’t even have this much indulgence in her home back on ch’Rihan. When she had gone to sleep the night before she had felt claustrophobic being surrounded by such soft luxuries. It was a bit like being smothered.

It was different on a Federation Starship – that was certain. As a Lieutenant Commander on the old *Excalibur*, she had her own room. The bed had a decent mattress, and the room had its own sonic shower, at least she thought so. Her life in Starfleet seemed like a lifetime ago.

Thinking of the *Excalibur* gave her a tinge of sadness. She had learned years before of the loss of that ship due to the madness of the M5 computer that had used the *Enterprise* to wreak destruction on five other ships during what was supposed to be a wargames simulation. She’d had friends on that ship.

She sighed. Part of the genetic manipulations that she’d undergone for her transformation into what passed for a Romulan was a slowing of her ageing process. She was now not only older than her siblings, but she had outlived all of them. She should have been thinking of retirement as her human age was nearing a

¹Chief servant.

hundred. When she looked in the mirror, she was only just beginning to show the signs of middle age. It was a blessing and a curse. She might have fit better into Rihannsu society but, when the time came for her to return to her own people, she would be completely out of place.

The thought wasn't new to her, but it still made her pause for a moment and sit on the edge of her bed. Yes, most of her friends were now either a whole lot older than her – relatively – or dead. Never mind, she was certain that there would be some in Starfleet Security that would regard her homecoming with suspicion. Had she been turned? She had to admit it should come as no surprise if she was to find herself under a certain level of surveillance for a time.

She shook herself. This line of thought was depressing, and she wanted to think of something that might brighten her up. She realised there were some who would welcome her with open arms, that was certain. She knew the former crew of the *USS Enterprise* would treat her like family. They had already come through a lot together, what with the dramas starting with Doctor McCoy's "capture" and imprisonment at her former master's house that continued with the Sunseed affair. She looked back at that time, and it seemed like a blur.

Her door chimed and she guessed it was her house valet, Tivor, who had accompanied her on the trip. She'd wanted to leave him behind considering the risks involved in what the Empress had in mind, but it would have been more than unseemly for a Senator to travel without at least a minimal retinue. Even considering her well known distaste for the trappings of wealth, a personage of her standing would demand some level of assistance. She had settled on one – Tivor. He was relatively

young, and he had come from a family with no standing in Rihannsu society, so she was hopefully sure that he was not a plant. After she had caught the last one, she was constantly on her guard.

She gave her assent to enter and young Tivor stepped through the door with her breakfast on a plate in one hand and a steaming cup of tea in the other. As she watched him place them on the conveniently placed desk in this ship's stateroom, Arrhae found her thoughts going back to a previous servitor who had made a simple, but obvious, mistake.

The girl with the long, relatively unkempt raven black hair, slightly crooked nose and fairly dull, listless eyes had seemed a bit like a charity case for Arrhae. While she was legendary as a hru'hfe for her almost dictatorial style, as a house leader she was a bit of a soft touch. She had become known for constantly trying to lift the poor out of the gutter and the Senator later chided herself for allowing her nature to be used against her.

Ellemma spoke slowly and fitfully and so Arrhae had instructed her hru'hfe to instruct her in the basics – to make her a lowly maid servant whose first charge was to sweep, mop and dust. After a couple of days under her roof, Arrhae had stopped by the room Ellemma had been working in to see how she was doing. No surprise, when the Senator made her appearance in Arrhae's bedroom the girl had appeared startled. She had been tidying her linen drawers, which wasn't unusual, so Arrhae had just wanted her to feel a bit more at home.

“At ease, Ellemma, for Element's sake,” she had said with a slight smile.

To her shock and surprise, Ellemma automatically dropped into a militaristic “At Ease” stance. She tried to cover it

up and slouched a little, but Terise's Starfleet training had instantly caught the mistake.

At least her time serving as a Senator had taught her to keep a good Poker face. She had kept the realisation to herself and carried on as if she hadn't noticed. They had engaged in a short conversation where she had assured the girl that she was happy to have her here before she left to take care of her own duties.

Arrhae had quickly found her hru'hfe, Tellarhiel, and told her to put her out on the street by day's end. She gave no explanation, and she didn't have to.

Tellarhiel had simply given her a knowing look. "Yes, Mistress. I will put the spy out before midmeal."

Arrhae had responded with an upraised brow. "You suspected something?"

The hru'hfe would not meet her gaze. "Only intuition, Mistress. There is something not quite right about her."

The Senator gave her a nod of agreement and left. She had no idea what would become of the girl, and she didn't really care. Arrhae/Terise had no time for traitors. Her trust in people was as valuable as a drop of water in the desert – never to be wasted.

Arrhae brought herself back to the present and focussed on the young man who was waiting expectantly. He was in no way impatient. She was certain he knew the value of his appointment on her staff. It was a coveted position that brought honour to his clan.

While her human side would have normally thanked him for his diligence, Arrhae knew the Romulan way was to simply take what was given without acknowledgement. The work he did

for her was part of his job, his calling, and to give her nothing but the best was expected service.

She took her place at the table and began eating, savouring the taste. This might be one of the last times she got to enjoy an egg from ch'Rihan for breakfast, she thought. Who knew? Within days she might be eating pancakes with ... what was the name?... syrup. Returning to her people was going to be jarring at first, that she was certain of.

She glanced at Tivor, who stood to the side and waited while she ate her boiled egg, lightly salted, and then sipped her tea while she pondered the days ahead. Yes, things were going to change, but the Starfleet Commander part of her wondered just how in the Elements they were going to be able to pull it off?

Deep in the darkest dilithium mines on ch'Havran, a small group of disaffected Remans came together, careful to make certain they were not seen. Their Rihannsu cousins mostly left them alone – as long as they brought in their daily quota of dilithium crystals, among other ores.

All the same, being left alone was one thing. Being trusted was another.

Centuries ago, the Ships had arrived at the twin worlds and had begun colonising them. However, to their surprise, there was a small group of natives on ch'Havran who were not so dissimilar to their own race that they were incapable of interbreeding. While the locals were essentially iron-age peasants, the inevitable had happened and intermarriages had taken place. It was only a matter of generations before the aboriginal Remans had practically ceased to exist, leaving only a

mixture of Rihannsu and their cousins – who were seen as lowly half-castes.

Being a Reman had advantages. They were better suited to the harsh environment on their world as it was tidally locked with one side always facing the sun. In the early days most of the settlements had been on the terminator circling the world as it was the most easily tamed. Once that world's vast resources of ores had been discovered – it was only a matter of time before they had enough energy production to push further back into the night side.

Given that most of their lives were spent never seeing Eison, their sun, their eyes became weak and light sensitive. However, their ability to perceive objects in the dark was unparalleled. In their wars of expansion, Remans made up squads of elite troupes that would work with deadly efficiency in the dark.

Also, their skin became more pallid, and they found that they needed a diet rich in Vitamin D as they spent no time in the daylight. Their facial differences included long, sharp canines, longer ears and they were hairless. However, there was one difference they kept a very closely guarded secret. They knew that, if it ever became known to the Rihannsu they could be wiped out – or worse. Many of their kind were espers.

On the journey from Vulcan the Rihannsu's only strong espers had all been burned out by using their talents to accelerate their ships to near light speed to make their journey quicker. The downside was that, by the time they made landfall, there were none left. They had practically removed the esper ability from their genome.

What they had not realised was that the aboriginal Remans had been latent telepaths. They'd had to be to help them communicate in the harsh environment. Their interbreeding had made it possible for their children to once more become esper capable, but they kept it to themselves as they knew the Rihannsu would be insanely jealous of their abilities. After all, why should the lowly Remans be allowed to do something the true Rihannsu couldn't? Romulans didn't believe in allowing others to have an advantage over them. Regardless of their shared ancestry, they would be perceived as a threat and dealt with.

The four Remans, all childhood friends, pulled up chairs around the dingy old table they used in the break room. The chairs were worn and rocked, a feature that T'mock, their leader, exaggerated as he tried to get comfortable. He moved around a little then gave up, exasperated. "Is there nothing in this Elements forsaken place that works?" he grouched, looking about the bleak, stained, concrete walls. There were no windows here, naturally.

His sister, Varra, pointed off towards the corner of the room. "I believe the facilities still function – mostly."

"As long as you don't take a deep breath while you're in there," Krasni jested. The young male curled a lip in a mixture of mirth and disdain.

"At least we have a bathroom," Vashti said. She was the youngest of them – by a few months. She was also the optimist. In the middle of an ion storm, she would be the type to comment on the pretty colours.

T'mock scowled. "We have what we have because we haven't let the Rihannsu take it from us yet." The man was considered the leader of the group simply because none of the

others could equal his passion for the cause – throwing off the yoke of Romulus.

Noticing Vashti was about to say something to lighten the mood, he decided to call their meeting to order. “I’ve had some good news from our contact on ch’Rihan. We should expect some new equipment for us in the next shipment.”

Three sets of eyes widened in surprise. *Equipment* was a term they used for weapons. Miles underground in one of the dingiest corners of their world they still took no chances being overheard by someone affiliated with the Tal Shiar. It was true they had ears everywhere. Indeed, their concern was so ingrained that at even the mention of *equipment* the other three’s eyes darted this way and that, wondering if any of them had been overheard.

“How can you be certain?” his sister asked.

T’mock shrugged. “How much can a Rihannsu be trusted?” he asked whimsically. It was an old saying. They were aware that the Klingons thought their cousins were “without honour” and they had come to agree with them. “He hasn’t let us down before,” he added after a slight pause. He tried to sound hopeful.

Krasni gave a dark chuckle. “I’ll believe it when I see it,” he said.

Vashti’s eyes stared off at a possible future. “I hope he comes through,” she said. “It would be wonderful if we could push back a little for a change. Wouldn’t it be great if we could finally get our voices heard in the Senate?”

Of the group, Varra was the greatest realist. She had done the numbers a long time ago and realised there was little hope of overthrowing the existing regime. The best they could hope for with their little insurrection was a less-than-pointless death. But

that was much more worthwhile than spending the rest of their lives as slaves working for an Empire that saw them as nothing more than useful labourers. As a realist, she was also aware of how poisonous pessimism would be to their cause. "That would be a great day," she echoed.

Her brother knew her too well. He caught her eye and gave her a slight nod. "That's what this is all for," he said. "To have our voices heard. Remans have been treated as nothing better than food for the masses for too long."

Varra shifted on her chair. Her back still ached from some scarring that had yet to heal from a Romulan's lash. "Agreed, brother. Let us hope that the shipment arrives undetected."

The rest of them nodded, hopeful. All the same, none of them would admit to the fear that it brought with them. Sure, they might be able to make a difference with what they planned on doing, but none of them were stupid enough to believe there was a possibility of surviving it. Their lives were being traded for freedom for their fellow Remans. For the four of them, it was worth it.

Krasni changed the subject. "Did anyone get the final scores of the game?"

T'mock grinned, an odd sight on his severe face. "Fifty-five to forty-nine against your team, Krasni," he said cheerfully. "That's an hour of labour you owe me."

Varra grounded them once more. "Don't waste time collecting on it, Brother," she said darkly.

Storm clouds were gathering on the horizon and the Senator wondered if he should wait much longer before departing. His visitor was late and there was only so much time he was going

to waste sitting here. Although the Rihannsu were a technologically advanced people, they were still tied to the past with its superstitions, which included a reverence for the Elements. Hathness could not help but wonder if they were sending him a message with this out-of-season cloud which threatened heavy rain and even hail. Was that a flash of lightning?

Hathness shifted on the stone park bench and wished for the fiftieth time that Duras would hurry up. The longer he sat here the more suspicious it looked. He had brought a bag of seeds for the birds that flocked here but anyone who knew him would wonder at a sentimentality shown by one who had none. The only good bird, he thought, was one served to him on a plate.

A tall, youngish Rihannha, who had been sitting on the far end of the bench, looked at him playfully. She had caught Hathness's eye as she had approached from the far end of the park, and he had been mildly surprised when she had sat on the other end of the two-metre-long stone bench. She had sat there, looking off into the distance as if she, too, was awaiting someone. They had continued that way for some time until now. It was as if a switch had been thrown and the female had changed interests entirely.

Hathness indulged in fantasy and thought: "Why not?" He already had two females he visited – apart from his wife. Why not add a third? Rank has its privileges. It would be foolish not to use them.

The female's voice surprised him when she spoke. The voice was low and – masculine. "I think I've made you stew there for long enough," she said. "I was beginning to wonder if you'd ever figure it out."

Hathness drew in a startled breath at the realisation that his much-anticipated rendezvous had already happened. "How?"

"My disguise comes with many different faces, Senator. It would look suspicious if my janitor met you twice in this park," Duras said.

At that, the Senator had to give the Klingon credit. He was absolutely right. He nodded slightly to himself.

To which Duras had to wonder to himself: *It is a good thing for the Senator that he doesn't play cards. He cannot keep his feelings from expressing themselves on his face.*

Having collected himself, Hathness finally reported: "Our plans on ch'Havran are going forward. The Remans are going to stage a little insurrection there shortly. It should cause problems with our energy production and place pressure on the *Empress* to return to ch'Rihan and deal with it."

Duras resisted the urge to nod his agreement. Unlike the *Romulan* the Klingon had control of his impulses and didn't give away his hand whenever he was asked a question. "That is good news," he said with a touch of cheer.

"Are your forces in place yet?" Hathness inquired.

The Romulan was too curious for Duras' tastes. He wondered at that. In a culture as paranoid as theirs, curiosity could be as deadly as poison. "You can trust that they will be there when needed," he said cryptically.

Hathness was not to be so easily put off. "What does that mean?" he asked.

Poker faced, the pretty, young visage that hid the Klingon within gave nothing away. "It means exactly what I said."

The Senator was not much for taking unnecessary risks. "What assurance can you give me that they will be there on time?"

Duras tried to restrain his hostility and almost succeeded. “The same assurance that your people on Remus will do what you want them to, Senator. The future is as often as hard to predict as the weather.”

The mention drew Hathness’ attention back to the coming cloud formation. He noticed that it was raining, heavily, just a few stadia from their position. If he didn’t move quickly, he would be a very wet Senator and he couldn’t abide that. The thought came back to him that this was the Elements trying to tell him something, but he could not fathom whether they were giving him their blessing or announcing a curse on his bloodline. The not knowing brought a chill to him and he lurched to his feet. “We should be going,” he said quietly, turning his attention back to Duras. He started when he realised that the Klingon was long gone, and a quick glance around the grounds revealed no clues as to his whereabouts. The sense of foreboding deepened but he allowed himself a slight smile. Duras had no idea just what, exactly, he was up to on ch’Havran. All the better.

On the Hobus Starbase the Rihannsu version of the red carpet had been rolled out. Everywhere Ael walked she was bathed in emerald, the colour of Rihannsu blood, the source of their strength. The floors were green, the lighting had a tinge of green and their national symbol, the raptor holding the twin worlds in its claws, was everywhere.

As she was being given a tour of the station, Ael wondered if they had gone a little too far. Was all of this to honour her visit, to send a message to the Federation that they were the dominant force, or was it something darker? The lighting enhanced the green tinge to their flesh, and she wondered what

the humans from the Federation would look like here. The image gave her reason to smile.

Commander Kamor strode next to the Empress, a step behind and to the left to be respectful. He took great pride showing her around the relatively new space station. It served multiple purposes and he had taken delight describing them in almost painful detail to their leader.

On Ael's right, also a pace behind her, Aidoann tried to do two things simultaneously; take note of anything regarding the station she didn't already know (it was her business to know everything about everything where the Empress was involved), and not kill the Commander for his outright boorishness. In her own mind she was saying: *it's just a space station*.

In front, Ael kept up a punishing pace. There was a lot to do, and she wanted to get it done. Protocol stated she should give the local Commander his moment in the sunshine, but that time had almost passed. Concerned that Kamor was about to give her a tour of the station's washroom facilities, she glanced up at his hawkish visage and said: "Where is your conference room? I want to make sure it's ready for our visitors."

Kamor looked down at the now stationary Empress and started: "I assure you, Empress, that all..."

Aidoann wasn't going to let him finish. "Don't make the assumption that you and the Empress have the same standards, Commander. I assure *you*, you don't!"

The tall, slender man in his starched-to-perfection uniform seemed almost ready to argue the point, but a glance at the Empress reminded him of his place. Humbly, he nodded. "Of course, Empress. Any improvement you can make is gladly appreciated."

The two women shared a look. It said simply: *We'll have to watch this one.*

At least the man knew well enough to wait for the Empress to start moving before continuing on. He gestured off to their right and down the main corridor. "This way, my Empress," he said with just the right amount of contrition.

Ael took off at a brisk pace and marvelled at the high, curved roof that opened out onto a view of the stars. The warrior within her thought it a security risk. The young girl who used to look up at the night sky in wonder and delight felt the stars' call. She looked about her in the passageway and noted it was about eight metres wide and was lined with store fronts offering all kinds of goods – and not just from the Romulan Empire. She spotted clothing and entertainment follies from not only the Federation, but also the Klingon sphere of influence. Without missing a beat, she fired off a question at Kamor.

"Does the currency you earn from these shop fronts keep the lights on around here?"

Kamor wasn't certain whether she was being sarcastic or genuinely curious. He decided on the latter. "We do charge for their use, Empress, but the shopping services we offer here does make this base a more attractive outpost for our people to visit. Commerce does indeed aid in covering the cost of running this facility."

The Empress' security chief was less than impressed. "All I see here is an open door to espionage," Aidoann said emphatically.

The Station Commander seemed a bit miffed by her assertion. "I assure you that no contraband has been allowed onto my base. My people scan every shipment in and out."

“People can be bought off.”

“Not my people.”

Ael allowed a trace of a smile to tug at the corner of her lips. Aidoann was not the type to let go of the proverbial bone once she had her teeth in it. Her friend had a point. Considering the sources of the items around her it would be a simple matter to integrate eavesdropping devices into them.

The smile vanished when she realised that it was even more possible that the Tal Shiar would use such facilities for their purposes as well. She knew from experience that sometimes the worst enemies were the ones you called your friends.

She froze and Aidoann and Kamor almost ran her over. Indeed, their entire entourage, which included Senator Arrhae i-Khellian t'llhweiir, had to pull up short.

Ael stepped over to a shop front and scowled at the contents. She whirled on the Commander and barked: “Why do I see Cardassian goods here? I outlawed their importation a year ago!” She stepped past the threshold of the store and snatched a bottle of Kanar from the shelf. It was in its usual twisted-cord bottle shape. She held it up in front of the Commander and said for all to hear: “The Obsidian Order is one of the most devious intelligence agencies in the galaxy! I wouldn’t put it past them to have every cork in this shop bugged! How could you be so stupid?!”

The Empress did not need to say another word. Aidoann began giving orders that the shop be sealed, and its contents destroyed. The station’s security chief, who had been following the Commander, relayed them to his people.

Even though Ael was a good foot shorter than the Commander the man was terrified. He knew he had failed on a

grand scale, yet he stood his ground and waited for his punishment.

The Empress waited until her people were finished mopping up the mess, including arresting the shop owner for importing illegal foreign goods, all the while glowering. Finally, when the others had quietened down, she looked up at the Commander. Only a woman of her ability and stature in society could make it feel like she was looking *down* on him. Her bearing was one of extreme annoyance, yet she chose her words carefully. “Once you would have been marched off to an airlock and escorted into space for gross incompetence,” she said evenly. “However, I am a woman who believes in the rule of law. It is possible that, in the business of running this station, you missed the update on the status of Cardassian goods. No being is capable of knowing everything.”

Kamor seemed to start breathing again, very slowly. He still wasn’t certain what was to come.

“However,” she continued. “I am certain your security chief would have been aware of them.” She gave Aidoann a look. “Arrest her and make her punishment quick. I will not have us wasting time on useless people.”

Aidoann turned and informed her second to take care of it. Her place was with the Empress. Behind Kamor, the former security officer, an older female with tired eyes, was taken away.

Ael looked at the station’s former commander. “Where is your Sub-Commander, Kamor?”

The man, who had not lifted his eyes from his highly polished boots, addressed them. “Sub-Commander Valorian tr’Manntorr is on the command deck, highness,” he said, defeated.

Aidoann anticipated her next request. The Centurion had her communicator out and tied into the station's system. "Empress," she said, offering it to Ael.

She plucked it out of her hands and spoke into its grill. "Sub-Commander, this is your Empress."

The voice that responded was assured and strong. "Yes, Empress. I live to serve."

"I have relieved Kamor of his post for gross stupidity. You are now advanced to Commander and have control of this facility."

Even given his previous level of control, the voice that responded was clearly startled. "Y.. Yes, Empress. Thank you, Empress."

Ael was about to sign off when he continued. "Empress, I have just received notice that the Federation envoys have reached the Neutral Zone and are awaiting your permission to cross."

It was about time, Ael thought. "Pass on my greetings to their ambassador and give them leave. Tell them I look forward to our meeting."

As she snapped the communicator closed, she caught a look from Arrhae. Everything was coming to a head.

Chapter Six

Piper glared at the screen and wondered if she should trust these people at all. Even though they had the back of the *Enterprise* nearby, she had little faith in Romulans.

Even though she was an Admiral, this was not her mission to command. As a purely diplomatic errand, the final decisions fell to Ambassador Spock. Although she had met some very self-interested diplomats in her time – most of them were actually politicians – she had more than a modicum of respect for her former shipmate. Her first deep space assignment had been aboard the *Enterprise* NCC-1701, under the command of James Kirk and his faithful number two, Mister Spock. In their time serving together she had learned much about the man, including the fact he had a sense of humour. She recalled the time she had exasperated him by wresting the control of her first command, the *Banana Republic*, from the computer, which had locked her out, under his direction. When he had arrived and moved to give her access, he had found she had already done so.

“She out-humaned you, Spock,” she recalled McCoy telling him.

The memory usually brought a smile to her face and her lips actually did twitch in response. However, the familiar weight brought her back down and she lost even the tiny moment of cheer.

On the viewscreen, they watched as the Romulan Commander of the *Rendering Claws* gave them permission to cross the Neutral Zone.

“He doesn’t look too happy about it, does he?” Carman Valastro said so only his captain could hear.

Piper looked up at her new XO and nodded. “He looks like he just found an anchovy in a block of chocolate.”

At the helm, Commander Jason Nunn grimaced. “That’s about as bad as Vegemite flavoured confection I saw once.”

From her position aft on the Bridge Commander Caitlin “Ghost” Ryan chimed in: “What kind of Aussie doesn’t like Vegemite?”

It was an old argument. “One with taste buds,” he replied, his tongue hanging out in a gesture of disgust. “If you like it so much, you give it a try.”

Nunn had her there. “No thanks.” She did have her own offering. “How about Guinness flavoured Ice Cream?”

Piper decided they’d had enough fun. “The next thing you’ll be concocting is Hot Dog candy.”

To her surprise, her people all seemed to think it was a good idea considering their positive reactions. “No accounting for taste, I suppose,” she said drolly. She turned her attention to Science, where she once more felt a pang of loss as it was manned by an Andorian, Lieutenant Koss, a recent graduate from the Academy. “How many Romulans do we have on the scanner?”

Koss looked up from the viewer, ready to report. He had already been checking out the locals. “Admiral, I only register the two vessels we can see. Standard *S’harien* class warbirds.”

Her XO added: “We can guarantee there’s more.”

“Always,” Ghost agreed. “They’ll be out there somewhere, cloaked and ready to strike.” She had a streak of fatalism through her that came out at times like these.

To her left, she heard a gentle tsk. She glanced at Eliza McKennah who was observing the situation. Piper raised a brow in query. "Once upon a time you would have said something cheerful to shine some sunlight on the situation and give everyone a chance to relax."

The Admiral heard her out but did not deign to answer. She didn't want to enter into a debate about her feelings on her Bridge.

The communicator chirped and Captain Harriman appeared on the screen with his trademark confident smile. "Time to go," he said. Piper knew he wasn't just addressing her, but the captains of the other two ships as well. Captains Chopra and Small sent their regards as this was where they were left behind and, as far as the Romulans knew, they were going to wait for their return. However, John and Piper were aware they were their backup. They would run silent about a light year into Federation territory keeping a keen ear out for them in case they were needed to get them out of a hole.

The Admiral simply nodded and gave the order. "Proceed," she said and watched as her vessel first crossed into the Neutral Zone and then space claimed by the Romulan Star Empire. She had to admit she did not have a good feeling about this mission. Not at all.

Captain Piper watched the new *Millennium* on her viewscreen as it began to move into the Neutral Zone with the *Enterprise*. "So," she said. "It begins."

Scanner looked up at Sustasandage from his place at the Engineering console. "Thanks for the upgrades, love," he said gratefully. "The new cloaking device is working jus' dandy."

The Time Agent simply sighed. "Thank me when this is all over, Sir." She stepped down next to Piper's command chair. "We should keep our distance from both ships," she warned. "There are too many espers here for us not to go unnoticed."

Both Pipers nodded their understanding. They were both so well attuned to one another's thoughts they could *hear* one another from a hundred metre radius. Beyond that they were aware of each other's emotional state to a much greater distance.

Piper Silayna spoke up. "I can feel Admiral Piper's presence from here," she said.

Amantasandage added: "And whatever she's feeling, it's not happy," she added. She glanced at her Pipers. "Begging your pardon, Captains, but that Piper over there is seriously *distressed*."

Piper's eyebrows rose a little, curious. "I wonder why." She glanced over at Sus and noticed that old troubled should-I-tell-them-or-shouldn't-I look on her face. "What gives, Sus?"

The Cait quickly looked around her and she shook her head, No. The look in her eyes was clear: Not here.

The Captain nodded her understanding. This was one of those need-to-know moments. She wondered just how often they were going to be doing this in the coming days. "Mister Sarda, you have the Conn," she said as she, Suzette and Sustasandage stepped into her ready room.

The Vulcan took his place in the Centre Seat and noted, with some irony, that it was his right even though he was not the most highly ranked person in the room. Due to his ascendancy to the rank of captain, Krashtallash now outranked him. The notion was a pleasant distraction from the thoughts that plagued him. He could not help but think the subject of their discussion was him.

Piper sat down on her side of the desk and put her feet up on it. Piper Silayna stepped over to the beverage dispenser and ordered them up a cup of coffee each. She glanced over at their guest askance. Sustansandage shook her head: no thanks.

A moment later they sat down, and Piper simply indicated that Sustasandage start the conversation.

The feline fidgeted for a moment, indecision clear on her face.

“Would you rather discuss this telepathically?” Suzette suggested.

Sus shook her head violently. “No. That would only make things worse.”

Piper was clearly confused. “You want to tell me something, but you feel you can’t for some reason.” She considered the thought for a moment before light dawned. “Oh,” she said.

Suzette passed Piper her cup of coffee and asked: “What?” She didn’t get it.

Now the subject of the matter was clear to the Captain she extrapolated on the notion. If Sustansandage was afraid to talk to her – *especially telepathically* – about an issue, it had to be about Sarda. Continuing the line of thought, if the Piper on the other ship was messed up and miserable then the reason was clear. “How and when did Sarda die?” she asked bluntly.

Whiskers twitched as Sus tried to not be annoyed at just how clever this captain was. “Six months ago, when the original *Millennium* was destroyed. Afterward the Admiral became erratic until some friends intervened and helped her deal with it. The details are unknown.”

Piper wanted to ask further but her sister beat her to it. “They’re unknown or you don’t want to tell us?”

Sus’ irises narrowed as she began to get angry. “I’ve bent enough rules on this job, Captain,” she said through gritted teeth. She turned to Piper who was just looking at her with a gaze that could see right through her. “And no, I don’t know why she started losing her marbles.”

Her choice of wording wasn’t doing her any favours. Both Pipers bristled at the notion that either of them was capable of going nuts. “Do you want to clarify that statement?” Piper asked, her tone icy.

Sustasandage took a deep breath and let it out slowly. She reminded herself who she was dealing with, and the fact that there were two of them didn’t just add to the problem, it multiplied it. “Captain.... Captains. Admiral Piper nearly ruined her career on this mission. Some of her choices were... questionable. You’ll see when we get to Hobus.”

Suzette sat back in wonder, looking within and trying to come up with some reason why she might be behaving badly.

Piper, on the other hand, had a fair idea why. She looked up at the ceiling and called: “Commander Sarda to my ready room.”

Sus shot a look at her. “You can’t do this. He shouldn’t know about his future.”

The Captain glared back at her. “If there’s one person I know in this universe that can take it, it’s Sarda.”

Before they could speak further the door slid aside and Sarda entered the room. Piper offered him his usual chair and he took a seat, his posture erect and formal. He took a look about him at the roomful of captains and knew that he *had* been the

subject of their conversation. He looked across the desk at his friend and said: "I believe that you have something you want to share with me, Captain."

Piper took a deep breath and sighed. "Yes, but before I do, I have a question for you. Everyone here is aware you and I are linked, so there's no need to keep that to ourselves. Our friendship has deepened, and I've found that I like having you in the back of my mind. It makes us a better team, I've always thought."

While the Vulcan showed no outward signs of emotion, Piper could feel the sentiment returned through their bond.

"I would agree, Captain," he said formally.

Piper gave him a small, fond smile. It was a tiny reflection of what she actually felt for him. She loved him like a brother, and she had keenly felt his absence during their time in the past. When she had begun sharing her thoughts and feelings with Suzette, it had helped her, comforted her. Indeed, the time shared together – the year spend working and playing together – had cemented their relationship and now the two of them were inseparable.

Once she had returned to the present, she had begun to find things crowded in her mind. These days she could not only hear her own thoughts, but those of Sarda *and* Suzette – not to mention Manny when she directed her attention her way.

She made a mental note to ask Sarda to teach her some techniques for blocking out other's thoughts. She needed time alone with her own thoughts occasionally.

"Sarda," Piper continued. "I know our bonding was unintentional and there's no guarantee we will ever be able to break it," she could not help but feel the tinge of sadness that

swept over Sarda at the suggestion, “but I wonder just how deep it would become after another fifteen years.”

The Vulcan was silent as he looked inward and considered her question. The women in the room remained quiet and patiently awaited his reply. “Captain,” he finally said slowly. “There is something I need to tell you that I believe may be happening, indeed may already have happened, between us.”

The Captain sighed, a sound that came from the depths of her being. She had already guessed the answer. Years before, Dr Leonard McCoy, a friend of hers from their days on board the *Enterprise*, days that seemed like a lifetime ago, had been the repository of Spock’s living spirit, his katra, as the Vulcans called it. The man had become erratic for a time as his personality shifted back and forward between the two personages that he harboured. Spock’s intention was for his essence to be returned to Vulcan by the Doctor as he saw his death was imminent. He didn’t want all that he was, all that he knew, to be lost.

Sarda looked deeply into Piper’s eyes. “You already know,” he said with feeling.

The Captain gave him a tired smile. With a nod she asked: “We share our spirit, don’t we?”

Solemnly, Sarda nodded, absently reaching out across the table to take Piper’s hand. Nobody in the room minded the display of affection and indeed, they understood it. “We do, Piper,” he said. “Our bond is one that even very few Vulcans experience. My people usually require touch to share feelings with one another. The touching of fingers allows empathic communication. The touching of minds requires a deeper connection and that usually requires a time of meditation and preparation. You and I share both without any effort.”

He paused for a moment and Piper continued the line of thought. "And the longer we are together, working together, being a part of each other, the more we will become one in mind and spirit." As she said the words, she found there was no real regret for her. She wasn't getting younger, and she was well and truly married to her career. She had no plans on becoming a parent, either. She had sometimes wondered if she was the romantic type and she knew she did have the streak within her, it just wasn't a driving force in her life. The friendship and open, honest relationship with her first officer were the next best thing.

At times she thought she was being selfish, and they were thoughts she usually only considered when she knew Sarda was asleep, so she didn't burden him. Indeed, their bond had made them one of Starfleet's most formidable teams and yet she chided herself for making that her priority between them. Sarda had every right to find a mate, get married and have children. Their bond might very well make that impossible.

And now the news had come to her that, within the next twenty years Sarda might very well die. It was a thought that pained her, and she found a yawning cavern open up in her soul. It was a pain that she wondered whether she could manage if the worst did happen.

Piper gave her friend's hand a squeeze and sat back, feeling bleak. If the fleeting feeling she had just entertained imagining life without Sarda was just an iota of Admiral Piper's current status, the woman was in trouble. Knowing the answer to the question, she asked it anyway as she wanted to others to hear. "Sarda, do I carry your katra?"

The brassy haired Vulcan folded back in his seat and considered the question seriously. "I believe we do have a portion

of one another, Piper,” he said. “At this point in time, we can get by without one another as your journey into the past has demonstrated.”

Piper gave him a quick smile. “I had help,” she said, glancing at Suzette.

Sarda nodded. “For that, I am grateful,” he said genuinely, glancing at Piper’s double.

The corner of Piper Silayna’s mouth quirked up in a lopsided grin that he would have expected from his captain. The two of them were more alike than they realised, he thought. “You’re welcome,” she said warmly.

He turned back to Piper. “However, in the years to come we will come to the point where we will literally become inseparable. We will not be able to bear long absences as we will be too...dependant on one another.”

“The two become one flesh,” Suzette said quietly.

Sarda nodded. “In a manner of speaking. As we’ve discussed, most Vulcan joinings do not experience the depth of our bonding and so widowers and widows can move on without injury.”

Sustasandage chimed in: “However...”

“However,” Sarda continued, “we will be so deeply connected that it will require the services of a Vulcan priestess on Mount Seleya to release the other’s katra should one or the other of us perish.” The man was not stupid. “As the subject of the conversation that brought me here was me, I assume that in this timeline I have perished?”

Piper nodded sadly. “Yes.”

“Fascinating.”

Suzette was surprised at his attitude. "I'm confused," she said, turning to face him so she could see his every expression. "You find the notion that you're dead now...interesting?"

Sarda quirked up a brow. "I believe you humans have a saying: it would be like attending your own funeral? It would be interesting to see how my passing effects the lives of those I have touched."

The Caitian's fur bristled at that. "I wouldn't want to know when I die or see the faces of those who are grieving for me. I never want to be the cause of my loved ones' pain."

Piper came to his defence. "It's the Vulcan mindset, Sus," she said. "They have always accepted that life begins and ends and that, one day, it'll be their turn to die. Spock met his fate with composure when he sacrificed his life to save the original *Enterprise* because it was logical. His death had purpose and so he embraced it willingly. When it's my time I hope I have the same level of equanimity." She turned her gaze back to her first officer. "To actually see if you've made a difference once you're gone confirms that your fellow sojourners in life truly did benefit from knowing you, being influenced by you. Most of us can only hope that we leave a legacy. Sarda is hopeful of *knowing* it."

Sus nodded and a stray thought came to her. "All right. So, the Admiral is probably suffering from the effects of not having gone to Mount Seleya and surrendered Sarda's katra. Shouldn't she have known to do so?"

Sarda and Piper shared a look. "We do now," Piper said for them. "Maybe they never got around to talking about it," she added wistfully.

Suzette grimaced. “If she doesn’t know, then having Sarda’s katra floating around in her head has got to make things screwy for her.”

The time agent added: “Not to mention the loss of her best friend on top of that. It would be like losing him but not.”

Piper’s gaze came back to her first officer. “What are the likely effects the Admiral is feeling?” she asked.

The underlying question was there as well: *What can I expect if it every happens to us?*

The Vulcan steeped his fingers in thought. “I am uncertain. However, if Doctor McCoy’s example is anything to go by, she will clearly not always be herself or even be able to concentrate clearly. Over time, I suspect the symptoms to worsen.”

Both Pipers shared a worried look. “The Admiral might be a ticking time bomb,” Suzette said, voicing their thoughts.

Sustasandage glanced at Sarda, concerned. “Commander, do you think it’s possible that Admiral Piper will sense your presence?”

“Perhaps,” Sarda said thoughtfully. “However,” he said pointing across the desk, “I am bonded with *this* Piper and no other. I do not believe it possible to be bonded to two versions of the same woman at the same time.”

“Not that I’m trying to pop your bubble,” Suzette said a little playfully, “but we’re all aware that we didn’t even know one another in my timeline. However,” she pointed out the room’s window at the ships in the distance, “that one *was* connected to an older version of you. I wouldn’t be making any assumptions at this point.” She looked back at Piper. “We need to keep our distance.”

Captain Piper nodded her agreement. "I don't think cloaking devices protect people from espers," she said with a slight smile. "We'll keep about twenty thousand kilometres away from them." She looked at Sarda. "I usually can't connect with you from orbit so that should just about do it."

Thinking they had just about covered everything Piper suddenly slapped herself on the forehead. "How stupid am I!" she said angrily. "I can't believe I didn't think of it sooner."

The others looked at her askance. "What?" Suzette asked on their behalf.

Staring ahead, Piper said: "Why speculate when we have an eyewitness?" she said. "Spock was there when this all happened the first time!"

She slapped the call signal for her personal Yeoman. Carver, a young go-getter who would soon be leaving for the Command Training Program, reported within seconds from her place on the Bridge. "Yes, Captain?" she asked once she had come to parade-ground attention.

"Set up an interview with Ambassador Spock at his earliest convenience," she ordered. For the sake of the others in the room she added: "He's not a young man anymore and he might be resting. This can wait."

Carver did have an answer for her. "The Ambassador is in our best guest quarters, Captain, and I know he is sleeping. I will arrange it as soon as I know he has risen."

Piper nodded. "The man isn't getting any younger," she said whimsically.

The Caitian hardly moved a whisker, but Piper had the distinct air from the Agent that she knew something about the

elder Vulcan that gave her a great sense of sadness. Was he not long for this mortal coil too?

The Captain waved off the Yeoman and let her get back to her duties. Piper looked out the window once more and noted a small group of Romulan warbirds were just beginning to guide the *Enterprise* and the *Millennium-A* into their space. "It's time we got moving," she said, rising.

Captain Piper reclined in the centre seat of the *Millennium* and watched as the pilot had the ship cruise by the remaining Starfleet vessels, the *Farragut* and the *Firebrand*. She took special note of the latter as it had been named for the lost vessel of the same name in the Romulan Neutral Zone some twenty-odd years before, which to her was practically yesterday. She remembered her friend, Suzette DuQuesne, who had been master of that vessel, and how she had been lured into a trap by Duras' Klingon friends. She had never forgotten that sleight, and how the Klingon had put out a contract on her and her people. There would be a reckoning, and she hoped it would be sooner rather than later.

The newer *Firebrand* was a Saladin variant with two warp nacelles, one above, the other below. The *Farragut* was a surprise to her as it was an *Excelsior*-class vessel. She shrugged inwardly. Of course, there would have been many changes in the last twenty years. She made a mental note to keep that in mind. She spoke up for the rest of her bridge crew. "Take a look at the screen. A lot of things have changed while we slept. That wouldn't just be in the Federation. We should expect to see some new Romulan ships. Some of them might even be a match for *us*."

Piper noted that her people were nodding to themselves or thinking about it.

“We need to be ready for anything,” Suzette said from her left. “There’s no guarantee they still can’t detect us.”

From her right Piper heard Sustasandage say: “If they do, they have tech we don’t have in the thirty-first. I’d like to see that.”

Piper glanced at Suzette, who gave her a slight smile. “We do live in interesting times,” she added with a touch of mirth.

The *Millennium* was at warp once more in the wake of their successor and the *Enterprise-B*. Piper sat in the ship’s bar, her gaze out the window, watching the distorted starfield effect of the ship moving through space at warp. It looked a little odd as the ship was moving under cloak and she wondered at the energy expenditure of keeping their ship invisible while they were literally distorting space. That was a question she had to save for Sus.

She smiled as a very familiar presence was felt. She didn’t have to look up to know her doppelganger was standing next to her. Instead of sitting on the other side of the booth opposite her, Suzette slipped onto the padded seat next to her and pushed her a little further down with her hip to give herself a bit more room. Piper looked into her mismatched eyes and gave her a warm smile at her sister’s cheeky behaviour.

She took delight in the fact that the woman she had met a year before – from their perspectives – who had been so uptight and reserved was now much more likely to let her hair down and have a little fun. She had come out of her shell, and, to Piper, she was as dear to her as a twin she never knew she had.

“What’s up, Sis?” Suzette asked, looking out the window as Piper had been a moment before.

Piper’s brows shot up as she considered the question. “There are so many things running around in my mind at the moment. For one, there is no way in the universe that I could ever imagine I would be in a situation anything like this.” She looked out the window once more. “To think of it, we’re twenty years in the future chasing an older version of ourselves through space in a ship that replaced this one. We need to figure out what will cause the Hobus star to go supernova in another eighty-odd years and use that knowledge to prevent it happening again. It is just *soo* weird.”

A tinge of sadness swept over Suzette, and she had to force her small smile. “Try to look at it from my perspective. My life was going along swimmingly as the Captain of the Federation starship *Ingram* in a universe far different from this one. I had a husband I hadn’t spoken to in months and a collection of friends who barely tolerated me anymore. Then I met you and everything changed.” She hadn’t meant to make it sound like she was blaming Piper and she knew Suzette well enough to know it. She put her hand on top of Piper’s and let her feelings through the touch. “There are times when I still wish I could go back but I know that my timeline should never have been.” She felt a flash of anger at Nero, the Romulan they had met only briefly before they fried his ship in a star. She caught herself for a moment and considered: “Am I blaming the wrong person for this mess? Are my feelings misdirected?”

Piper’s head bobbed from side to side as she thought about it. “I suppose Nero does carry some of the blame for coming back in time and blasting everything that he came across to hell.” She

looked Suzette in the eye and added: "You know a lot more about that than I do."

Suzette picked up the mug of coffee that the bartender, Gillian, had so thoughtfully put in her hand. Indeed, she hadn't even noticed her do it. She sipped at the contents and said: "That bastard not only destroyed the *Kelvin*, a butt load of Klingon cruisers, the planet Vulcan, but then he tried to take out Earth! If Kirk..." Piper felt the twinge of anger her duplicate always felt at the mention of his name "... hadn't stopped him and destroyed the *Nerada* things could have gotten worse fast. Mind you, I wish Spock kept the *Jellyfish* in warp a lot longer than just a few minutes. That black hole he created is still too close for comfort to the Sol System." She caught herself then. "I mean, it was."

Piper sighed. She wrapped her right arm around Suzette's shoulders and drew her head down to place it next to hers. She could feel the turmoil that still warred within her sister, how she had literally lost *everything*. She was the sole survivor of a whole Universe. It was mind-boggling and, if she tried to wrap her head around it, she would give herself a first-class headache. "I don't know what to say or do, Sis," she said sincerely. "I just want you to know that you are very much loved." She turned slightly and kissed Suzette's forehead gently. "You're just as much a part of me as I am of you. Don't ever forget that."

Grateful for the concern and genuine affection, Suzette put her left arm around Piper and squeezed her back. "I just need to keep reminding myself that it's our job to find out what started this snafu and somehow make the change to prevent it happening all over again." She straightened up but kept her arm around Piper. "It's what keeps me going. I know that no matter what

happens, I, you, we... will keep on going in whatever universe we wind up creating once we've got it sorted."

In her heart, Piper felt the same, but the thing neither of them had admitted out loud was that they knew that one day the relationship they had would end – and the thought gutted them.

Admiral Piper sat in the centre seat on the bridge of the *Millennium-A*, a place that she couldn't have been moved from without a crowbar. The ship was in enemy territory and experience had taught her some grim lessons about being caught off-guard in such circumstances. While her job was support and security for the *Enterprise*, she still felt ill at ease and she couldn't help feeling like someone was looking over her shoulder, watching.

She glanced over at Commander Ryan who was taking a turn at Tactical. Piper had been grooming her for a Captaincy of her own and she had been moving her around when her main duty – as Pilot Controller – was not called for. "Ghost, are the *E* and our escort the only ones out there?" she asked.

Ryan gave a quick look over all the screens at her station and she gave her quick nod. "According to our sensors, we're alone out here, Captain," she offered. "Mind you," she added in her lilting Irish brogue with a touch of dark humour, "I wouldn't be surprised if we were surrounded by cloaked warbirds, Ma'am. We could be swatting them like flies."

Carman Valastro glanced over at her. "If only it was that easy to knock them down," he said ruefully. For the sake of extending the humour he said: "We'd need a seriously big swatter!"

The corner of Piper's lip twitched up in mirth but the thought of a gigantic fly swatter extending out from her ship gave her a thought. "What can't a Romulan cloak hide from?" she asked slowly.

"Lots of things," Carman said, picking up the line of thought. "If we fire at it while it's cloaked, we'd hit it undefended. According to intelligence, they still can't keep their shields up while its activated."

Ryan added: "It'd defeat the purpose anyway. We'd detect the energy surge from the shield itself."

"Whether or not they can fire under cloak is a mystery since Khitomer. If the Klingons can pull it off, it stands to reason that the Romulans will, sooner or later." Piper was analysing the situation, she believed, as logically as Sarda had taught her to. "So, like sonar in the days of naval submarines, we need to come up with a pulse that will rebound off the hull of a cloaked ship that it *can't* hide from."

Ryan and Valastro looked at one another as they considered the question. From her station at the Engineering console Hopetallash started with: "The visible spectrum is out as the cloaking field would simply redirect the beam past the ship."

Piper was delighted with the start. "How about UV or Infrared?"

Ryan shook her head, no. "According to our latest intel, UV would be bent like light and IR is too directional and consumes a ridiculous amount of energy to produce."

From his position at the Navigation station Carman added: "As far as I know the EM spectrum is unaffected as well. Once you get up into the Gigahertz area it all becomes moot. The Romulans have the whole spectrum spoofed."

“And space is too empty for us to use sonics,” Piper added as a passing thought.

To her left, Doctor McKennah had appeared and gave Piper a quick smile. “Where are you going that all of Starfleet’s best scientists couldn’t go, Captain?”

Piper gave her a dirty look and bit her tongue. She didn’t like being called out on one of her fishing expeditions.

Ghost looked down at the panel she was leaning on, and she could feel the gentle hum of the warp engines as the ship powered them through the void. She glanced over at the black feline, Hopetallash, and asked: “What is the MA made out of – I mean it’s hull plating?”

The Admiral shook her head in annoyance. “We’re not calling the ship the “MA” for short.” To her left, even the Doctor seemed to agree on that one. Eliza made a disgusted face.

Behind the Captain’s back the Engineer rolled her eyes. The Captain was more than her superior, she was an aunt and she had been exposed to many of her eccentricities over the years and she had learned to tolerate them as any good family member would. “It’s made out of Tritanium, the class is the first to have it.”

Caitlin nodded, shaking loose a lock of her slowly greying hair. “And we know what frequency does the most damage to that... to make even the rivets shake loose.”

Understanding was dawning in Hope’s eyes. “You’re wondering what the Romulan ships are made out of and if we can create a disruptive wave that’ll shake it around, even under cloak.”

Even though she had merely started a fishing expedition, Piper was pleased with the direction this conversation had taken.

She gave a brief smile of acknowledgement. "Precisely," she said. "What's the latest intelligence on Romulan warbird's construction?"

At that, Caitlin made a disgusted face. Of them all, she was the one most into ships and what they were made of. It was often joked among the crew that she had coolant running in her veins, not blood. "Not much, Captain," she said with a grimace. "I sometimes don't know why they're called "Starfleet Intelligence". There's not a whole lot of intelligence there, if you ask me."

Carman chuckled. "Careful, Ghost, you could include us in that as well," he said with a wink.

At that, the ace pilot simply shrugged. "If the shoe fits..." she said with a sly grin.

Piper brought things back into focus. "How about the scans we took of the ships escorting us. They must have shown something about their hull composition."

Once again, Caitlin made a face. "Our scans were more about checking for power signatures and whether their weapons were armed. Also, I was looking around us for subspace distortions that could give away the presence of a cloaked ship." She paused to reflect for a second. "I was looking for trouble, I guess," she said, a little regretful.

Piper sighed. "You were acting like a fighter pilot," she remonstrated. "As a science officer, you've got to be looking at more than just whether there might be someone about to shoot at you. We may have missed a golden opportunity for developing some intel." Her tone was a little harsh, but she knew Ghost could take it and learn from the error.

From her station at Engineering, Hope stepped forward. “Captain, there were three other ships present when we met the Romulans. We should contact the *Enterprise* and see if they did some more in-depth scans and, if not, call the *Farragut* and *Firebrand* to see if they did.”

Delighted, the Admiral gave her a broad grin. “Officer thinking, Hope.” She frowned as a thought came to her. “If we start making encrypted calls this far into Romulan space our friends out there might get the wrong idea. With so much riding on this mission, it would be a real pain in the ass to stuff it up now.”

Never mind the fact they were deep within Romulan space, everyone else thought.

“Send a message to the *Enterprise* with our logs of the encounter for their perusal,” Piper said thoughtfully. “Make a note to add our scans of the Romulan ships and ask for theirs in return. Even if the Romulans have cracked our encryption they can’t be surprised by what would look like a routine request.”

Valastro nodded his agreement. “Once we have their hull composition we can see if we can generate a disruption wave that can penetrate their cloaks.”

From her place at Tactical Caitlin added: “Even if it doesn’t do any real damage, it’ll give their position away and give the crew one hell of a headache.”

Piper stood and smiled. “Works for me,” she said with a wicked grin. She suddenly realised that Dr McKennah had disappeared, and she wondered when she had left. She must have done so while she was distracted with the conversation, she thought. Oh, well, it was no loss. While she was fond of the shrink, she never enjoyed being the object of her clinical

processes. She looked to Carman. "Mister Valastro, you have the Bridge. I'm going to get some exercise."

He nodded and watched her go. He was glad she was letting her hair down a little. The Captain had been more than a little uptight since the loss of the original *Millennium* – and especially Sarda. Perhaps she was beginning to let go of her grief, he thought. He understood its overwhelming power as he was a widower himself. He was also keenly aware that time didn't necessarily make it easier. All he had to do was think about his wife and a tear would still come to his eye some thirty years later.

He looked once more to the turbolift door and reconsidered his earlier musings. No, there was no time limit on grief.

He suddenly realised he was not alone; he caught Caitlin standing to his right waiting patiently. Quietly she said: "I'm worried about her, too."

Carman sighed and he chuckled softly, darkly. "At least I'm not alone in that," he replied.

With the door on the subject slightly ajar Ghost whispered: "Perhaps she should consider retiring? She's done more than her fair share for King and Country."

With eyes full of sadness Carman said in all seriousness: "Piper will retire when she's dead."

"I hope not," Ghost said with a touch of anger. "People like that often take others with them." With that said, she pecked her husband on the cheek, then returned to her station.

Carman just watched her go and worried that Piper might be the kind that would only go out in a blaze of glory. If that was true, she was in a position to take a lot of people with her.

The two of them had forgotten one little detail with their subdued conversation: Hopetallash had excellent hearing. She

considered their words and decided that she would make a call when she went off shift. She needed some advice.

At the rear of the *Millennium-A*'s engineering hull was one of the ship's most unusual, but also its most prominent features, its cavernous hangar deck. It housed an enormous array of fighter craft, as well as the ship's own prototype runabout-class vessel, the *Cork*, which it had inherited from its forbear.

One deck below and slightly forward of the hangar, Ghost's number two, Lieutenant Commander Rebecca "Emu" Armytage was briefing the troops on the mission. A veteran of over twenty years of service under Piper on *two USS Millennials*, Rebecca had pretty much seen it all. She was a relatively tall and slender New Zealander with a long neck, who had gotten her moniker from her Australian buddies because of that one attribute. Like all nicknames, it had stuck, and she had taken it as the good-natured woman she was.

That persona ended at the door. In this room, she was a dictator.

"As you all know, we just entered hostile territory. We may not be at war with the Romulans at present, but you know damn well that they have a long history of just looking for an excuse. From this moment on, consider yourselves at red alert. If you hear the word 'scramble' I want you in your cockpits in seconds and in space so fast your britches will be on fire."

Nobody laughed. Her people knew she wasn't exaggerating.

"The days to come will be hard on you, I know, but I expect you and your alternates to be fighting fit at all times. Be ready. We're counting on you." Rebecca gave the roomful – and

considering there were over fifty people in the room it *was* full – a look a complete confidence. “You have the training. I know you will bring us all home. Dismissed.”

She remained at the podium and watched them all filter out of the room. There were recreational facilities adjacent to the hangar set up for this very scenario so the crew could keep on their toes without burning out. She knew what it was like. It wasn’t so long ago that she was one of them.

When the last, youthful ensign left the room and the door shushed closed behind him, Emu relaxed with a sigh. She wasn’t sorry she was not going with them. While she loved to fly, she was over having to put up with the days of living with the heightened adrenaline rush of living on the edge. It was going to be bad enough being on the Bridge overseeing them anyway.

“Oh, well,” she said to herself. “Responsibilities never end, no matter what part of the food chain you’re on.” She shrugged. She wasn’t done. She still had to go upstairs and talk to the hangar deck crew. They had the tougher job.

Captain Piper knew it would take a couple of days to reach Hobus so she was making sure she was as prepared as she could be. There were many gaps in her knowledge regarding these times, but she was wise enough to know when she needed counsel. Both she and Suzette stood outside Spock’s quarters and waited for his leave to enter.

While they waited, Piper once again mused that it was patently unfair that she was stuck wearing her stodgy Starfleet uniform whilst her sister got to wear her famous arrow t-shirt jeans and runners. As she had correctly pointed out, her rank meant nothing on this ship other than the deference she was given

by the crew simply for that fact she was the twin of their Captain. Many knew where she was from, what she had seen, and she was respected for that. Piper had even noticed crewmen stepping aside to let her past – just as they would have if it had been herself.

Suzette turned her eyes to Piper and gave her a lopsided grin. “You’re doing it again,” she said with a chuckle.

“What?”

“Looking at me with those envious eyes. Don’t tell me you don’t still wish we were back on Merrijig wearing our hats, jeans and t-shirts, working on the *Pterodactyl*, and making our frequent trips into town to buy groceries.” She shrugged. “I know I do.”

Piper gave her a rueful look. “Those were simpler times,” she said with a sigh.

“They were,” Suzette lamented. “I really do miss them. No rest for the wicked.”

Piper shot her a look. “I’ll have you know I’m as pure as the driven snow, thank you!”

Before her sister could answer the door slid aside and Spock, looking older than Piper could imagine, caught her eye. “I can assure you, Captain Piper, that your statement is more than fallacious.”

Piper just rolled her eyes. “You know me too well, Spock,” she said, charming him.

The elder Vulcan perused the two of them for a moment, amazed once more at just how bizarre the Universe was. Just when he thought he had a handle on it something weirder came along. Here, before him, were two different versions of a woman he had once mentored on the *Enterprise*. It seemed only one of them knew him personally, and he could only wonder what other anomalies her timeline had held. “I gather you have matters to

discuss,” he said, stepping back and offering them entry. “Please, take a seat.”

In deference to Spock’s rank and age, and the mere fact Piper held him in the highest regard, she had allocated him the best stateroom on her ship. It was spacious and, she noticed when she crossed the threshold, warm. Her eyes darted over to the climate controls on the wall and noted they were set for thirty-five degrees Celsius, which she knew from memory was three degrees higher than he used to enjoy years before. Was he finding it harder to stay warm at this great age?

Both women watched as Spock brought them over to the room’s three-sided, wood-grained finished table and they each took a chair. Spock took his seat, slowly, carefully, as if he was a china doll that was afraid of shattering itself. Piper’s heart ached a little for this man who she knew instinctively was nearing the end of his life. A world without Spock scarcely bore thinking about.

“I can assume that this meeting is regarding my insights into the summit I am presently enroute to?” There was a touch of Spock’s logic humour in the question. It was true that he *and* the earlier version of himself were *both* heading towards Hobus.

Piper nodded. “Yes, Ambassador. For a start, I’ve been told that the other me out there,” Piper gesticulated in the direction of the other *Millennium*, “is not in her right mind. Can you give me an idea what’s going on?”

Spock raised a single digit. “I can only give you suppositions as I was, *am*, travelling on the *Enterprise-B* and I was unaware of many of the Admiral’s choices and her reasons for doing so. What I *can* tell you is that the Admiral is not in her proper state of mind.”

Both Pipers nodded. Suzette chimed in: “So the Admiral *is* carrying Sarda’s katra.”

The Ambassador was only mildly surprised at the statement. “You have done your research, I see,” he said solemnly. “Yes. We learned, only too late, that the Admiral was indeed still harbouring Sarda’s katra and it was not only affecting her ability to command but it was causing her to act erratically. There were even times when it was suspected she was hallucinating. While her actions were questionable at times, I do not believe them to have been the cause of the summit’s final outcome.”

Piper looked at him sideways. “Which was?” she asked slyly.

Spock grimaced. “Not what we hoped.”

Chapter Seven

The *Equipment* had been more than they could have hoped for. There were disruptors, phaser rifles, grenades, and even a few explosives. If the Remans observed Christmas, then T'mock would have been expecting a turkey dinner as well.

The four leaders of their little cell had managed to spirit away the two large cases of illicit weapons from the rest of the cargo delivery without being spotted. Indeed, they had been, but it had not been by anyone other than some of their fellow Remans who were delighted for an opportunity to stick it to their Rihannsu dominators any way they could.

The crates were heavy, but on a world given to chronic overmining and exploitation the sight of a group of individuals carrying a bunch of crates on an antigrav sled was anything but unusual. Once they were inside the small system of abandoned caves the cadre used as their base of operations, they were able to move without being observed. Indeed, they had been careful to scan the area for any eavesdropping devices. They had every right to be paranoid. The Tal Shiar really *was* out to get them.

T'mock, his sister Varra, their friends Krasni and Vashti were not alone. They were the core of their little resistance cell, its brain. Aside from them, there were eight other Remans with them, all young and idealistic and they were all eyeing the contents of the cases with wonderment. Vashti wielded a rifle and waved it about in the air above her. "I feel like we could take on the whole Senate with what we've got here!" she said.

Her mood was infectious. A number of her fellows were caressing the weapons as a lover their beloved. The feeling of sudden power was almost intoxicating.

Almost. T'mock was level-headed about their windfall. "Don't get too excited, my friends," he said, bringing them down to the ground. "The Rihannsu have many more of these than we do." He waved a hand over the crates. "However," he said, not wanting to be a complete buzzkill, "this is a good start!"

Even Varra, his sister, the prophet of doom, was feeling elated. *Perhaps my death won't be entirely fruitless after all*, she thought. She smiled past her fangs and gave her brother some cheer. "We can make a difference with these," she said.

T'mock nodded. "Yes, we can," he said, clapping his hand on her shoulder. "With warriors like these," he said, gesturing to his fellows, "the Empire will feel our rumble."

Krasni sidled up to the two of them, a grenade in his hand. T'mock was a little put out at the sight of the fellow wielding the device. He wondered if the man would turn into a berserker once he was armed. He reached out and took the lethal weapon from his hand under the pretence of curiosity. "Did these come with instructions?" he asked.

The younger male looked at him incredulously. "It's simple," he said, pointing to the cover on the top of the device. "You simply flip up the top, press the button, throw it and run!"

Their leader looked down at him with a touch of annoyance. "I know that," he said, as if he had been teaching him how to pour a cup of water. "That's not what I meant." He held up the device between his thumb and forefinger. "I want to know how much damage these things will do. As in, how fast do I have to run?"

Krasni's eyes showed his understanding. He took a moment to walk over to the case and rummage around. He produced a small booklet that he waved before him, and he quickly returned with it. "The instructions!" he said with glee.

Their leader took the book from his hands and flipped over the first couple of pages. "Now, isn't that typical?" he said in derision. "The least they could have done was give us something in Romulan!"

Varra looked over his shoulder and squinted in the low light. The script on the page was nothing she was familiar with, either. She, too, had been expecting the glyphs of the Rihannsu script. "What is that?" she asked.

T'mock flipped it over and perused the front of the book. "No idea," he said. Even the red, pointed glyph on the cover told him nothing as their people were taught practically zero about anything Klingon other than they were the enemy. He narrowed his eyes in not only annoyance, but with more than a touch of suspicion. If these weapons were not Rihannsu, where did they come from? Why were they being given alien weapons?

His suspicions deepened then, and he decided he needed to know more about this ordinance before they used them. They could be worthless junk foisted upon them by the Tal Shiar who wanted to flush them out and then make short work of them and their useless weapons.

"We need to test these, seeing we can't translate this book," he said. Typical of a repressive society, the availability of free information was anathema to their mentality. Indeed, the notion they could even look up and translate this on a computer system was foreign to them. If they even tried, it would be red-flagged and their cover blown within moments.

Krasni objected. “We can’t safely detonate one of the grenades without setting off every alarm on the planet!”

Varra smacked him on the side of his head, playfully remonstrating. “Where do you think we were born? Ch’Rihan? Of course not!”

T’mock knew it also. If the particle weapons tested out it was reasonable to assume the others would function as well. “We’ll take one of the disruptors and phaser rifles into the deepest of the old tunnels and test them there. We should be far enough away from the sensors not to trigger anything.” He took the grenade back from Varra, partly to keep it away from Krasni, and said: “We can’t set off any explosives without triggering even a minor seismic shockwave that the Rihannsu will detect. If it’s not used for mining, they’ll want to know what it was.”

His sister agreed. “We’ll have to take it on faith, then,” she said. “When do you want to try them?”

“Time should have been a fire element,” T’mock said, frustrated. “It constantly disappears like smoke.” He considered their future and made a snap decision. “We try them now.”

A quarter of an hour later their small group was in the deepest, most remote hollowed-out cave they could find. In torchlight they perused their chosen weapons – after carefully concealing the rest – and looked them over. The disruptors seemed simple enough, just point and shoot. There seemed to be only two settings on the device, and Vashti suggested: “Perhaps they’re simply stun and kill?”

Krasni shrugged and said: “There’s only one way to find out.” He tried one setting, pointed it at a largish rock some distance away from them and pulled the trigger.

He missed. However, the beam shattered a boulder behind it and to the left.

“I think you need some work on your aim,” commented Varra darkly. “If you shoot like that when we make our move, you’ll wind up killing us, not the Rihannsu.”

Krasni was not amused. He tried the other setting and, taking careful aim at the first boulder, tried again.

This time his aim was true. The red beam of light struck the rock squarely and vaporised it. Shocked, he almost dropped the gun.

Varra chuckled to herself. “Two settings,” she said. “Kill a little or kill a lot.”

Considering the lethality of the weapon they had first tried, T’mock was almost reluctant to try the phaser rifle. It was of a similar design to the disruptor, but the barrel was much longer with a stock for the shoulder. He made his group step back near the entrance to the cave, then he looked for a settings selector. There was none. “At least there’s no confusing this thing’s function,” he said to himself. Taking aim on the wall on the far side of the cave, he had some of his people train their portable torches on the spot before he took aim and fired.

The beam tore across the chamber and ripped a twenty-centimetre-wide hole in the wall. Shouldering the weapon, they made their way across and marvelled that the bore was at least two feet deep.

“Not bad for a test,” Krasni observed. “I can’t wait to try it out on some of our oppressors.”

There were murmurs of agreement around him and T’mock had no doubt there were many who were itching to try.

Fine, he was going to give them their wish. “We move tonight,” he said. It was time.

Duras sat in his “embassy” and mused over the plans that were threatening to ensnare him. He was fairly confident that he could keep things unstable between the p’takh Romulans and the even worse Federation, but he was not certain that he would be able to escape this accursed “empire” with his skin intact.

Indeed, he was surprised the Romulans had gotten this far. Their famous intolerance of species not their own had weakened them. They were far too narrow-minded in their vision. He could understand the idea of racial purity and the desire to keep one’s ideas true to one’s own culture but not having a variety of different perspectives led one to have a very narrow vision. It was well known that the Romulans only tolerated two species within their borders – the Rihannsu and the Remans – and the latter was only so due to their ability to work and the fact the two races were descended from the same ship clans. It was their shared history that kept them from killing each other.

So, he thought. Duras was singularly minded that way. Others could have their opinions, but that did not make them either right or valid in any way. He had a purpose and those notions that fit into his worldview were tolerated. The rest, well, they could keep them to themselves. The opinions of his foes – which pretty much everyone not of his clan fell into – were only useful as far as they could be exploited.

As he considered the players in the game that was afoot, Duras had to smile to himself that the fates had delivered the individuals who had most frustrated his work to the board. As a General in the Imperial Navy, Duras was familiar with many of

the galaxy's favourite forms of strategy games – excellent teachers all, but few of them incorporated the one element that was inevitable: random chance. The humans revered the game of chess and it's many various and subtle strategies, however it failed to cover the possibility of a third player, which his people's game of Klin Zha did. Rarely were there only two players in any situation, and even if there were only two sides, the players were often driven by their own personal directives. There was always the element of chance and the possibility of any player acting in an unexpected manner.

The humans had another game of war: Risk, that *did* incorporate the unknown. Each move required forethought and strategizing, but it all came down to the roll of the dice. That was one thing Duras understood. Every time you committed to a plan of action you rolled the dice and took a chance. He wondered if the p'takh, Hathness, understood this with his activities on Remus. Upsetting the balance on that fragile world could wind up with an explosion on the level of Praxis – politically, or even worse.

The game that best mirrored their situation was the human game, Poker. Nobody knew what the others were holding in a game, and it was much more about deception than anything else. Duras didn't know if he was holding a full house or a pair of deuces. It didn't really matter. As long as he managed to make the others believe he was holding a royal routine all was good.

The Klingon wished he had a yeoman to take dictation for his messages to the homeworld, but the man trusted no-one. As such, he had to operate the keyboard himself and, even after all these years of having to fill out reports and ordering assassinations, he had never gone past the good, old-fashioned

two-finger typing style. It was time-consuming work, and Duras hated wasting time.

However, it *was* necessary. Q'onos insisted on a daily report of his activities, and he did his duty. What his superiors were unaware of was the encoded message within each one. The man had a mind like a steel trap, and he spent time every day considering what he needed his people to hear and then devising a message to carry it in.

He sometimes wondered if his superiors knew that some of what he was telling them was complete garbage, but he didn't care. His "superiors" were also his enemies until one day he could call them his subjects. He would settle for nothing less than the Chancellorship itself. However, that was only the first step. Then would come this accursed "empire" and then finally the Federation. Who knew what would happen after that? He might then turn his attention to the Cardassians.

There was no limit to his ambitions.

He hoped his forces would be ready. When this message got through, after the Tal Shiar read it, of course, his people would have to move swiftly. His ships would have to make their way to their destination at maximum warp if they were going to make it on time.

Duras cast his eye over the message on the screen and made certain *both* messages could be read. Confident all was well he hit "send".

Former Fleet Admiral Reen t'Khenniel was once a being that was so famous that, if someone passing by in the street didn't know her, would have had to come from a family so poor they couldn't afford a home viewer. Now, she sat in an out of the way

café on the border world of GC, the local's nickname for Galorndon Core, a nobody.

The planet was the second out from an ordinary G-type star and, to all intents and purposes, looked average. What made it particularly interesting was its vast deposits of dilithium.

Once upon a time this would have made it interesting in the Romulan sphere of major importance but, with the Imperial Fleet's converting to Forced Artificial Singularities as their primary power source for their vessels, the need for dilithium had reduced drastically. Romulan merchant vessels still needed it, as well as land-based energy generators, but they sourced most of theirs from ch'Havran. There were two reasons for this: it was cheaper, and it was from the homeworlds. Pride kept them sourcing it from home, even when it was out of the way.

Rihannsu pride was at the heart of everything that motivated Reen t'Khenniell. The diminutive woman who was on the late side of Romulan middle age still sat with a rigid spine and, while she tried to act nonchalant, it was not something that came easily to her. While she appeared to sit on her wicker chair staring off into the setting sun whilst idly stirring her tea, the woman's mind was racing. She was considering her next moves, trying to stay not two steps ahead, but believing she had the whole game played out in her head. If she could just manoeuvre the players, she could be certain of the outcome.

Her mask was a simple one. Since she had disappeared in the nearby spaces some twenty-odd earth years before after a failed attempt to depose the Empress, Reen had made a point of making herself blend into the crowd. Indeed, she had made certain her whole personal navy could do the same.

When her flagship, the *Razor's Edge*, had warped out of the engagement zone after failing to destroy Ael, she had quickly raised the ship's cloak and taken a circuitous route over the border and into Federation space. Whilst doing so she had gotten word to those ship commanders who were still loyal to her to sit tight. When the time came to move, she wanted them where they were – sleeper agents ready to spring from their hidden traps to catch the despised *Empress* when she least expected it.

The reason for hiding in the Federation was clear: it was the only other place in the galaxy where a Vulcanoid could hide in plain sight. They wouldn't last five minutes in Klingon space and the Romulan Empire had Tal Shiar operatives everywhere. It would not be long before they were uncovered in the Rihannsu sphere of influence.

In the following years Reen had hidden herself by submitting herself to the surgeon's knife. She had found a Vulcan female not too unlike herself, quietly killed her, then changed her appearance so that she could take her place. The late T'Fawn had little family, was not pair bonded and was of little consequence in society other than she was a skilled trader. She was the perfect cover.

Reen kept herself far from Vulcan circles and, when she did encounter one, she avoided them like the plague. She kept up the disguise of T'Fawn so that she could make connections within Federation space and prepare for the day when she would strike back at her life's tormentor.

That day had arrived.

She had spent years considering the best way to achieve her goal and, given Ael's ever present guardian Aidoann's brilliance at protecting her, she decided the best form of attack

was not frontal, but subtle. However, given the Empress' predilection for keeping an eye on the Senate, which she clearly did not trust, Ael tended to remain on ch'Rihan. So, there weren't too many opportunities for her to be taken out offworld and Reen had been patiently waiting for just the right time. Ael's trip to Hobus seemed to be a gift from the Elements themselves. All the pieces were in the right place for the first time.

A shadow fell over the sun and Reen had to shade her eyes to see who had blocked her view. The officer within her reacted and sought a phaser, however her intellect told her to stay calm. S'Timon had returned.

"It is pleasing to see you again," Reen said, making certain that she kept her Vulcan visage in place.

"And you, T'Fawn," her second-in-command replied calmly. He took a seat next to her so neither of them had to stare at the sun. He, too, had allowed himself to be altered, and he had taken the moniker of Simon. It sounded Terran, but also fitted a Vulcan male well enough.

"Did you acquire it?" she asked, almost nonchalant.

S'Timon wanted to smile but simply let his eyes glint his pleasure. "Yes, T'Fawn."

"Did you have to haggle over the price?" she asked. Given their flight from Romulan space she and her crew had found their resources stretched. Over the years her cover of T'Fawn had allowed her to gain some credits, but most of them had been used keeping the aging *Razor's Edge*, and its crew, spaceworthy.

"The price was not an issue," S'Timon stated calmly.

A flicker of concern crossed Reen's eyes. Her second had killed him. This could bring some unwanted attention.

“I see,” she said. “I gather that the issue is sanitary?”

“There is no cause for concern. There was some disruption, but the matter has been taken care of.”

Reen understood. There was no evidence to follow when the victim had been vaporised. She allowed herself the pleasure of a slight sigh of relief. Play acting a Vulcan was taxing on her nerves. “If we have the goods there is no longer a reason to delay. It’s time to return.”

S’Timon’s eyes glittered with delight. They were finally going home. “Yes. I will pass on the message to our associates. I am certain they will be gratified to hear this news.”

t’Khenniell gave her second a sideways look. Sometimes she wondered about him. He played the role of a Vulcan *too* well.

The two of them stood and made their way past the tables haphazardly placed in the courtyard to exit the space.

As they walked S’Timon asked, curious: “Is there anything here you will miss?”

Reen considered the question and gave a simple answer: “Where we’re going, I can’t buy a decent cappuccino.”

As they left, they paid no heed to the other guests in the café. They were just Federation plebes who were not worth their consideration.

Their attitude suited Starfleet Captain Jessica Holmes of the *USS Challenger* just fine. After all, there was nothing like hiding in plain sight, was there?

Seeming to pay the two Vulcanoids no attention at all, Jessica brushed a lock of her unruly, midnight black hair from her eyes for the millionth time. Commanding a Federation starship didn’t always give her time to do undercover work like this, and there were times when she really missed it. Command had its

privileges, so she had taken the opportunity rather than trusting some over-eager security officer who couldn't do UC if they tried. Most of the time, they might as well sit there with a neon sign over their heads flashing "Starfleet". They couldn't to naturally casual if they tried. Most of them were so stiff they could be used for surfing.

Ever since she had come to her attention, she had decided that T'Fawn was a woman who need special handling. There was something about this "Vulcan" woman that smelled more than a latrine pit in mid-summer. She appeared to the casual glance to be the goods, but there was something about the words she chose, her mannerisms, which were simply not quite Vulcan. It wasn't solid evidence. After all, she had once met T'Pol in her old age and, even given her advanced years, it was clear she had a sense of humour. The meeting had nearly shattered all her illusions regarding Vulcans.

She considered her XO, who, she knew, thought she was nuts. Ellie was a good friend and the two of them had been through a lot together, and Jessica knew that the former Intel Analyst brought a more tempered style to their partnership. They were opposite sides of the coin. She knew herself to be the kind of person who would go where angels feared to tread willingly, with a smile, a beer and a pack of crisps. Ellie was conventional, while Jessica knew herself to be a maverick – one Starfleet tolerated because she had a knack of pulling herself out of the fire smelling of roses. It was true, she knew. There was no deodorant like success.

She recalled Reen's passing comment and wondered. If she was a Vulcan, it was true, there weren't many opportunities to buy a decent cappuccino on their homeworld. If she truly *was* a

Romulan there probably was no chance this side of hell of getting a decent coffee anywhere on that planet. So, where are you returning to? she wondered.

She considered for a moment. Starfleet would not normally appreciate the diversion of one of the ships of the line, but Jessica had been right enough times in the past that she would be permitted this indulgence. If they were needed elsewhere, she knew enough people in low places to keep tabs on T’Fawn.

She waited for her quarry and her associate to get out of earshot before “casually” wandering the streets for a time. Once in a relatively secluded spot she flipped open her communicator. “Holmes to *Challenger*. One to beam up.”

There were some things even a major player in the Romulan senate like Hathness didn’t want to know. The name of the Tal Shiar operative sitting next to him in what passed for a café on Romulus was high on that list.

The operative, Sub-Commander S’hinder tr’Llweeiin was an average looking individual who would go unnoticed wherever he went, and that was one of his greatest assets. No matter where he was, he blended into the background and most who met him, if asked for his description later, would give a very vague answer that would describe half the male population of the planet.

All the same, it was a dangerous game he was playing. Although the Empress believed she was keeping the Tal Shiar on a short leash these days she had no idea just how far their reach went. There were few places on ch’Rihan they hadn’t either bugged or had under surveillance. She was one individual they couldn’t control, but that didn’t prevent them from trying to

influence her activities. The trick was making sure she wasn't aware of their manipulations.

Hathness didn't see the face of the operative this time. He simply sat in his usual chair, ordered a stiff mug of tea and bread roll and waited for it to arrive. He took out his work tablet/computer and perused the daily news. "Hmmp," he said, apparently to himself. "Nothing of interest other than the Klingons are up to their usual mischief."

There was no reply from his contact, and this was expected. If he was to say something immediately it might be noticed and more than likely *would* be. The Tal Shiar had done such an amazing job of creating fear in the land that nobody conversed with seeming strangers. You never knew who you were talking to. What you said could and *would* be used against you.

The man suddenly acted as if his communicator was receiving an incoming call. "Yes?" he replied. "Hello! No, I'm alone. She's gone on a fishing expedition and won't be back for a while. I'm hoping to take advantage of the peace and quiet. Get up to some mischief, that sort of thing. You know what's it's like, when the one who thinks she runs the universe is gone I can finally get something done. Oh, don't worry. I've got plans on making our home more like what it should be without her constantly telling me what I'm doing wrong. Thanks for the call. Jolan tru." The man snapped the communicator shut and picked up his tea, savouring the smell and enjoying the flavour.

Behind him Hathness thought about the coded information he had heard. He knew the entire conversation was for his ears alone. It came as no surprise to him that the Tal Shiar was aware of the Empress' every move and that they were up to

something while she was offworld. They were also planning on helping him unseat her which was good news indeed. The lack of response to his comment regarding the Klingons meant they were not going to interfere in his dealings with Duras. Excellent.

His order was served and Hathness enjoyed a sip. He kept quiet, knowing that his silence would be taken as understanding. He took a bite out of his roll and chewed whilst considering his options. Things were going to get messy – quickly.

Two minutes later S'hinder got up, left the right amount of currency on the table and left. He had no doubt that Senator Hathness was a fool, but the Elements sometimes looked on them with favour from time to time. His read of the man's file showed him to be selfish, arrogant and entitled. That all added up to "easily manipulated". All you had to do was find his pressure points and he was yours.

The pieces were in play now that Reen t'Khenniell was moving again. They had kept her on the shelf, waiting for the right time to use her. Considering her animosity towards the Empress, all they had to do was let her know where and when and set her loose.

S'hinder allowed himself a brief smile. Yes, everything was about to sink into chaos, but that was where the Tal Shiar liked it best. When the world seemed to be in chaos nobody really knew what was going on besides the people pulling everyone's strings.

There was no better place to be in the Universe, as far as Reen t'Khenniell was concerned, than sitting in the command chair on her own ship. There had been a time, not so long ago, when this had been one of many, but these days her influence had

diminished somewhat. Fortunately, the pieces had finally come together and the time to come for her to act.

“Status?” she asked.

“On course for the Neutral Zone, Ma’am,” S’Timon answered.

“Keep us under warp six. Our cloak loses effectiveness beyond that.” They had come too far to be brought undone by foolish mistakes.

She was preaching to the choir. Her second gave her a fond smile and reported: “Proceeding at warp five point five, Admiral. We are a half hour from the Neutral Zone.” An odd turn of the head caught his eye. He stepped over to the weapons station and asked: “What is it?”

The Sub-Lieutenant on duty looked up at him, concerned. “We have an echo on sensors, Commander. It does not close on us, and it moves as we move.”

S’Timon was immediately suspicious. “Have you run diagnostics?” He needed to cover all the bases.

“I have, Commander.” The reply was less than convincing. “However, our vessel is not what it used to be.”

The officer was correct. The *Razor’s Edge* was suffering in some areas due to being patched time and again, and having some of their equipment replaced with cheap, Federation knockoffs. He knew for a fact that part of their navigation system was now running off a second-hand cargo vessel unit he picked up from a junk yard. “Understood,” he said. “Let me know immediately if there are any changes.”

“By your command.”

S’Timon returned to his place next to the Admiral. He decided to keep this little detail to himself. He could see she was

lost in her own thoughts and plans, and right now she didn't need to know. There was a lot riding on this mission, and there were many pieces in play. It was his experience that, once the game had begun, it rarely followed the shape one envisaged. No point in bothering her with one minor sensor malfunction.

“Holding at warp five point five, Captain. As ordered, we're matching their speed and movements,” the helmsman of the *USS Challenger* reported.

“Thank you, Mister Chen,” Captain Jessica Holmes said.

In the centre seat, Captain Jessica Holmes sat, irritated. She had been surprised that, having suspected that something might happen soon, it had been quite so in-your-face. With a Federation Heavy Cruiser in orbit of a Federation world a Romulan Bird of Prey decloaked and beamed up the very individuals that she had been surveilling. Without so much as a “by your leave” it had recloaked and headed out of the system.

It had become very quickly clear to her that her suspicions regarding T'Fawn had been bang on the money. After all, it wasn't every day when a Romulan Bird of Prey decloaked, beamed people up from the surface, then recloaked, heading out system, straight for the Neutral Zone. It was a weird thing to see. If they were spies, it was almost *unprofessional*. Either they didn't care they would be seen...

Or they were in a big hurry.

“Are they still on course for the Neutral Zone?” the captain asked. The almost invisible ship had made a number of odd course changes and she wasn't certain they hadn't been completely turned around.

“Yes, Captain,” her XO replied. “It looks like you were right about T’Fawn.”

The comment brought a cheeky grin to the captain’s face. “Yes, I was right about that after all, wasn’t I Commander Harrelson?”

Ellie looked back at her and rolled her eyes. Her unspoken message: I’m not going to hear about this all day, am I?

Jessica’s cheeky grin said it all. *Yes, you are.*

Her old friend and comrade, Melisandra, stepped up beside her. A green Orion woman who could not help but attract the attention of all, she moved with cat-like grace. “Whatever they are,” she said, her voice practically a purr. “They’re not Tal Shiar.” She sounded bored.

Jessica considered her Orion friend. The woman was formidable. Her skills good enough to keep the captain up at night wondering what she might have done in the cause of peace. Melis wasn’t Starfleet, but she was a valuable player in arenas where the rules were either murky or had been thrown in the recycler years ago. Considering their current assignment, she had been brought on board as a consultant. Though unusual, her results spoke for themselves.

Jessica sighed. “I agree. Their cloaking device is something out of another era. Either they picked it up at a second-hand bazaar or that ship’s older than anything the Tal Shiar would show their faces in. Their performance was almost... sloppy.”

The nubile woman examined one of her perfectly manicured nails. “Either that, or they could be lulling you into a false sense of security, leading you into a trap and then turning you, me and this lovely ship of yours into a cloud of floating debris.”

The captain turned her eyes upward and thought to herself: Way to go on your pep talks, Melis. She turned to her comms officer. “Mister Koren, have you had any response to our report on the situation?”

The brunette woman at the Comms board turned and reported: “Aye, Captain. Just a follow and observe order, I’m afraid.”

Melis was dumbfounded. “Boring, boring, boring. Doesn’t anyone in your precious Starfleet have any imagination? You have a starship that could make that piece of...” she loosed a string of Orion expletives that the Universal Translator opted not to illuminate, “nothing more than scrap metal for the wreckers yard. You could do sooo may more *interesting* things and those Romulans wouldn’t know what had hit them until they were in the afterlife being asked for their Identity Cards. But no, nooo, your Federation superiors have you *following* and *observing* them.” She gave a disgusted snore. “Honestly, are you sure you were trained by these people, Jess? You should have been born an Orion. You would have had so much more fun.”

A small smile played over the captain’s lips. Her green friend had struck a few familiar notes on the instrument she knew so well, the captain of the *Challenger*. “Not now, Melis. We’re not going to stop them because it’s an exceptionally bad time for it. Admiral Piper and a Federation delegation are meeting the Romulan Empress on a peace mission *right now*. Destroying a Romulan bird of prey, even if it’s on our side of the border, could derail that. Never mind it could put the *Enterprise*, the *Millennium*, and the entire delegation in danger if we screwed this up. I doubt that’s something the Admiral would be all that happy

about.” She paused and added: “We’re not going to do anything just so things can be *interesting*.”

Melis thinned her lips in disgust. “Politics,” she growled.

Jess smiled. “Think of it more like trade negotiations.”

If there was something Orions understood, it was commerce.

Toying with the hilt of her dagger, Melis coyly said:

“Jess, don’t you remember ever watching me negotiate?”

That comment brought to mind a few images the captain could have done without. Bad analogy, she thought, bad analogy. “Point taken,” she said, her face having reddened slightly. “For now, we keep an eye on them and just make sure they stay out of mischief.”

Green eyes rolled. “I take it we’re going to stop when we get to the border.”

The captain nodded. “I just wish I knew where they were going,” she said. She had a bad feeling about this.

Melis turned impishly, heading for the turbolift doors. “Let me know if something *interesting* happens. For now, I’ll go and do something more entertaining... like watching the paint peel.”

Jess watched her go. It was her hope that *nothing* interesting was going to happen. Sure, the question of T’Fawn was settled in that she was not your garden variety Vulcan trader. There was no chance she could have picked up a slightly used Romulan Bird of Prey at the local starship dealership. While her actual identity was still an unknown, it was pretty clear she was no Vulcan, but a Romulan operative of some kind. All the same, there were too many questions that remained unanswered. Who was she? What was she up to in Federation space? What does she plan on taking back with her?

Their watch and observe orders had pretty much sealed their fate in this situation. It was not likely that the Romulan ship was about to pull up, invite them over for tea and explain themselves. Not likely at all.

Hmmm, she said quietly to herself. If things changed and got what Melis might even consider *fascinating*, then their immediate futures could become very messy and some of the Orion's more colourful notions might become reality. She turned to her XO. "Ellie, here's what I want to do..."

Four hours later, the *Challenger* found they had to drop out of warp. Their quarry had finally reached the Neutral Zone and had not even bothered to slow down. In fact, once they had entered, their scans showed that vessel had increased speed after it had crossed the border. However, to the captain's surprise, it had remained cloaked.

Jessica stared at the screen.

The *Enterprise*-class starship hovered a mere kilometre from the edge of the Zone, her Captain bothered. Her quarry had done exactly what she had expected them to do, run for home. The bit about the *why* was what was bothering her. "T'Fawn" had been up to mischief, that was certain. How much, and against whom, she did not know.

The sound of an incoming transmission chirped, and the captain looked over to her comms officer.

"We're being hailed by the *Farragut*," he reported.

Jess had wondered who might be on patrol in this section of the NZ. "Put him on screen."

Captain Chopra's handsome, dark features gave her a welcoming smile. "Hello, *Challenger*," he said with natural

charm. "Captain Chopra here. What brings you into this neck of the woods?"

Still a little annoyed, Jess replied: "Taking out the trash."

Not biting, her inquisitor simply tilted his head to the side, curious, inviting further comment.

"We've been tailing a Romulan Bird of Prey, cloaked, as they were leaving Federation space. I was hoping to find out what they were up to, but I never got the chance to ask."

Concern showed on Chopra's face. "Did you plot its trajectory?"

Jess turned to Science. "Have you got their course plotted?" she asked.

The officer looked up casually, not understanding the import of the information she sought. "It looks like they were going to the Hobus system, Captain."

On the screen, Chopra's cheerful visage vanished. "Not good, Captain Holmes. Not good at all."

The hair on the back of Jess' neck was standing on end. "Why?"

Chopra responded gravely. "We're sending the coordinates on a coded frequency. Meet us here and I'll fill you in. You're not going to like this."

Chapter Eight

The Empress stood in the starbase's lounge gazing out the huge curved, overhead window in wonder. She had spent most of her career in the Fleet out in the void and yet there had been few times when she could truly enjoy the majesty of it all like she could here. The stars didn't twinkle in the eternal night, they remained strong, fixed points of light that demanded your attention. The problem was that there were so many of them.

The base was, wisely, turned away from the Hobus star so she wouldn't be blinded by its glare. Looking outward, she could still trace the line in the stars that revealed the ecliptic that was the Milky Way. She had thought it an amusing name for it – she had once heard Doctor McCoy refer to it as such – and she found it ironic that the name had stuck in her memory. Ch'Rihan had its own version of milk, not to mention what her own body had produced to feed Tafv when he had been young, that she could see the correlation. It was poetic and, while she was a warrior at heart, she appreciated the fact one could sculpture with words.

“Which one is Eism?” Arrhae asked, standing next to, yet still slightly behind her. Ael noted a sad fondness in her voice. It was clear the Senator was committed to her course, but she didn't have to like it. The woman's blood may once have been red, but her heart beat for ch'Rihan.

Once a navy captain, always a captain. Without missing a beat, Ael pointed off to a slightly bluish speck on the right. “There.”

Arrhae's eyes widened in surprise. “How do you do that?” she asked, amazed.

Ael sighed. “When you’ve spent about as much time in space as I have you find you can navigate anywhere with just a glance.” She found that she, too, longed for a life that was no longer hers.

Above her a sight she hadn’t beheld for some time nearly caught her breath. Not one, but *two* Federation starships warped into the space around the station and glided into orbit about it. They were followed only seconds later by two Rihannsu birds of prey. She watched as they followed approximately one kilometre behind each of the visiting vessels. They were well aware that the Empress was here, and they were taking no chances, even given the “peace” mission.

An aide appeared behind them and announced: “The Federation ships have arrived, Empress.”

The women shared a glance and slight smile. The opportunity to state the obvious was rarely missed by the lower echelons.

Ael pivoted on her heel and stepped over to the chair that had been set up just for her. The observation deck had been chosen by Ael for the first encounter. It was large and imperious enough to remind their visitors that the Rihannsu Empire was not to be trifled with. Ael slid into the chair, cheekily tucked her feet under her to be comfortable then told the aide: “Inform our envoys that we are ready to receive them.”

Without saying a word, the young man bowed, turned and left the room. Aidoann stood just outside the door, she knew, and would personally scan every individual who entered this space. It would take time and she only hoped it didn’t aggravate their guests. While Ael was keen to give an air of strength and resolve, she knew they were here at *her* invitation, which meant they had

something she wanted. That immediately put her on the back foot and gave her foe power over her. She glanced at Arrhae who stood nearby. The woman seemed deep in thought. “Do you think they will be interested?”

Terise looked out at her from behind those eyes. Sometimes Ael wondered if the woman was indeed two people. “I think they honestly want nothing more than peace, Empress. However, considering the blood that has been spilled ever since the original *Enterprise* wandered into one of our minefields, they will be cautious.”

In a moment of complete honesty Ael said quietly: “I just hope they don’t hate us.”

Arrhae sighed. “I know there are many in the Federation that do. However, I am familiar with the careers of the envoys sent us and I believe they will at the very least give us a fair hearing.” She raised her upswept eyebrows, trying to give her a hopeful look. “Anything’s possible.”

Ael’s gaze turned to the windows above her and she watched as first the *Enterprise*, then the *Millennium* slowly moved past. She was quite familiar with the captains of both, as John Harriman had done an excellent job of carrying on the tradition of his ship’s stellar name. He was a fair-minded and even-tempered man and was known to be reasonable. Piper, on the other hand...

Admiral Piper was the woman Starfleet gave the most dangerous jobs to. She was known to be a maverick, much like Kirk had been. Her solutions were not always by the book, but she *was* effective. There were times when she had solved a situation diplomatically – including the incident at Galorndon Core years before – but she was also known for using the amazing

power of the ship to its full advantage, as she had done at Cait when she had destroyed the original *Ingram*. She watched as the *Millennium-A* swept by again and she took particular note that the *Odysseus*-class ship sported megaphasers – an innovation that had been dropped from this variant but reinstated by her captain. Piper left nothing to chance, it seemed. Ael drew in a deep breath and considered. Perhaps it was time to get to know her better, she thought.

The large, wooden door swung in and Ael found herself wondering again at the many affectations from home she had observed on this station. Wood, of all things!

The newly promoted Commander Valorian tr'Manntorr stepped into the room. He was a tall, officious male, Ael noted, but that was hardly a surprise given their culture. However, in the short time she had known him she had seen a sharp mind and an eagerness to get the job done well and efficiently. That gave him all the saving graces the Empress needed. She didn't have to like the people who served under her, but she did expect them to be reliable. "Empress," he stated loudly. "May I present the emissaries from the United Federation of Planets, Ambassador Spock and Lieutenant Commander Sa'avik."

Behind him a couple of Vulcans entered the room – at least they appeared as such. Ael knew better.

Spock was beginning to show his age. He was well into the Vulcan form of middle age with more than a touch of grey in his hair. His face was lined and some of his youthful vigour was gone. However, the spark of intelligence was well alight, and he missed nothing. The man wore a Vulcan robe that was stately yet functional. The Empress thought the whole effect reminded her of his father, Sarek, whom she had met on occasion.

Next to him was Lieutenant Commander Sa'avik, his protégé and some wondered if she would be his mate. Unlike Spock, she still looked young and vibrant. Her curls were piled up and in control and her eyes took in everything. She had an elegance to her that made Ael think of her mother, the late Commander t'Avik, her cousin. She wondered if the Starfleet dress uniform enhanced that effect. They were both women of honour who lived to serve. She liked that.

Ael had to admit to herself that her heart skipped a beat upon seeing the young woman. She had kept their familial alliance to herself. There was no telling what some would do if it was known that Sa'avik was her kin. All the same, the girl was her family, and it was always good to see family.

Breaking with protocol, Ael slid off the chair and crossed the room. Spock and Sa'avik drew up short as they waited for the Empress.

“Welcome, Ambassador Spock,” she said, giving him the Vulcan salute. She turned and did likewise with his companion, but also gave her a broad smile. “It is good to have you here. Thank you for coming.”

Spock nodded solemnly. “You honour us, Empress. On behalf of the United Federation of Planets we greet you.”

At the door, Valorian wasn't certain what to do. His job wasn't done. He glanced at Ael, looking for a cue. She gave him a look and a quick nod – continue.

“Empress, I also present Admiral Piper and Captain John Harriman of Starfleet,” he announced. The slight catch in his voice betrayed his dislike of the Federation force.

Fortunately, the two humans were above such pettiness. They strode into the room and came up behind the Vulcans, who

parted to admit Ael. At the door the Empress noted Aidoann took a hesitant step forward, always on her guard when it came to her safety. A look from Ael stopped her in her tracks. She was among friends here.

Ael found herself having to look up at both starship commanders. It didn't bother her at all. She was aware of her position and status and so differences in physicality were irrelevant. The only time it would have been an issue was if she expected to have to do battle. She noticed that, even though Piper was on a diplomatic mission and was attired in full dress uniform she still had the hilt of her Vin'tah hanging off her belt. It was part of her signature, she thought. The notion of Piper being out without her much vaunted sword would seem almost out of character. This woman was a warrior, even when she was holding out the hand of friendship. Piper reminded her of herself. She thought of the S'harien sword behind her on the side of the raised chair and how she loved to wield it. The weapons were an extension of themselves and could be used for quick justice or defence when necessary. They were women of action, she thought, feeling a sense of kinship with her.

"Admiral Piper," she said, holding out her hand in greeting. Piper took it and gave her a pleasant, if not warm, smile. She wondered if there was something behind those eyes. Ael got the impression the human was having a bad day.

"Empress," Piper said in reply. "It's good to see you again."

It had been some years, Ael knew. She cast her mind back to the intelligence report she had been given on both Federation commanders and she recalled her Vulcan first officer had not survived their last battle with the Cardassians. She knew from

experience that there comes a day when you just lose too many compatriots, and it was time to retire. The loss of too many friends in the line of duty was the price of serving, but there came a day when the price was just too high. Perhaps Piper was simply not yet aware the time had come.

“And you, Admiral,” Ael said more formally. “Thank you for what you did for peace at Galorndon Core.”

Piper gave her a brief smile and was mildly uncomfortable. “All in a day’s work, Empress.”

The diminutive leader turned and greeted Captain Harriman. She had been keeping an eye on him out of the corner of her eye and noted that he was a consummate professional and patient. She shook his hand and welcomed him. He responded with a warm, from-the-heart smile that made his eyes sparkle.

“Thank you for your invitation, Empress. It’s not every day I get to enjoy the company of Romulans.”

Ael judged he wasn’t being cheeky, just friendly. His dossier had mentioned his gregariousness. She gave a slight smile. “I don’t think it’s always been enjoyable, has it?” she asked with a touch of sadness.

Harriman’s smile took on an extra depth of warmth, as if there was a truly charming man inside him who looked forward to showing himself. “Perhaps that can change, Empress,” he said hopefully.

Ael caught his gaze and gave him a look that showed him she hoped so too, but that the Romulans would not be pushovers. “If not friends, Captain, then at least good neighbours.”

Behind her Spock spoke his agreement. “There are many within the Federation who have yet to work out grievances between them and their neighbours. However, we have found that

giving them an equal voice affords them an opportunity to air their grievances. It is only through dialog and discussion that we can find common ground and build on it. It is our hope that we may be able to make a new beginning for our two people groups with these talks.”

Ael stepped over to him, gave him a look of understanding, then walked past him and back to her place on the throne. She sat regally and spoke, the voice of Romulus and Remus, and not just her own. “On behalf of the Rihannsu Empire I welcome the delegates from the United Federation of Planets.” She glanced over at the door. It was time for their guests to be offered somewhere to sit. She gave the Commander a nod and he indicated to servitors to bring in five chairs – one extra for the Senator – and some refreshments. They would need to be comfortable as they had a lot to discuss. The Empress noted the servitors on the station were well trained, but clearly of the lower castes of Rihannsu society. As such, she paid them little attention.

Her Federation guests took the offering gratefully and then waited for her to speak.

Ael took a deep breath and began. This was going to have to be done right or the loss of face to her people would be a price too great for them to handle and this would all fall apart.

“This is boring!” Captain Piper drummed her fingers on her chair armrest and gazed at the viewscreen. It was at maximum resolution so they could watch the space around the station, including their ship’s namesake. So far, it was a huge nothing-burger.

No-one on the bridge was going to contradict her because they were all in agreement. This was getting old fast as they sat and watched.

“There’s got to be a way we can get on board and watch things up close,” Piper said, thinking out loud. “We may have already missed something vital.”

Standing to her right Piper Silayna sighed. “If there was going to be something that’s going to make this sun go nova, I hardly think we’re going to miss it.”

Piper looked over at Sustasandage and said with a slightly reproving tone, “They did.”

Her sister smirked. “Point taken.”

Aware she was the subject of conversation, Sus stepped over from the science console where she had been assisting in watching the space around the star and interjected: “My people do have personal cloaking suits, but we don’t recommend using them for too long. The field can do cellular damage with prolonged exposure.”

Piper started. “How long?”

“About two hours.”

The Captain considered her options. “We could have people going over in teams,” she said, eager to get into action.

Krashtallash threw cold water over that idea. From behind her chair, he said: “Everyone except the Captain, Commander Sarda, Suzette and Manny. There’s too high a chance they would be noticed by Admiral Piper – even cloaked.” He looked at his kin. “I doubt the cloaking field shields one from telepathy.”

Sus grimaced. “No. The only way to properly dampen our psi abilities are through drugs that slow down our cognitive

functions. I wouldn't want to beam onto a Romulan space station without being ready for everything. At this stage in their development, they still have a long way to go."

Piper Silayna nodded. "There's no cure for paranoia."

Her sister nodded her agreement. "The Tal Shiar have got a lot to answer for."

Sus scowled. "You don't know the half of it." It was all she was going to offer, and no-one was going to push her.

Feeling better now they had an actionable plan, Piper looked over her shoulder to Crash. "Captain Krashtallash, I'll leave you with the plans for Operation Infiltrate." Behind her, Crash nodded, inwardly pleased to be given such an important task and the reminder of his new rank. Piper turned back to Sus. "How many suits do you have?" she asked.

For once, Sus had a good reason to smile. "How many do you need?" She knew her replicator would turn out as many as were required.

"Just one more thing," Piper said. "I know we'll need to bring the ship into range of your time stasis bubble, or causality shielding, or whatever you call it, so the people we beam out don't just vanish outside it. We're going to need to bring the *Millennium* in closer, but that could expose Suzette, myself and Manny to detection – maybe even Spock or Sarda. We need a way for us to shield our thoughts and presence from Admiral Piper." Once again, she cursed inwardly that her older self was present. "Oh, and it would be helpful if your ship's AI could be watching what's happening outside as well."

Sus smiled. "Way ahead of you there, Captain. Scanner's been scanning – pun unintended – with our modern tech ever since we got in system."

Piper grinned. "Excellent."

"You're kidding me, right?" Piper said, frustrated at the cramped conditions.

Sustasandage shrugged. "It's the best we can do aside from putting the five of you in a coma."

"Quit complaining, Sis," Suzette said as she lounged on an ornate chaise lounge with Piper sitting between her legs. It was the only other piece of furniture on Sustasandage's tiny starship aside from the pilot's chair, which had been set aside for the aging Spock. Manny sat on her haunches on the floor alongside Sustasandage, once more pleased with herself that she was of Cait. All they ever needed was a few cushions, and her kin had already provided her with that.

Piper leaned back and, now pressed into her sister's form, she turned her head and looked into her eyes at close range. She wriggled a little and said: "At least this is more comfortable."

Suzette gave her a small smile and pecked her on the cheek fondly. "You know you're always welcome."

Sustasandage gave them a curious look and, seeing it, Manny shot a thought into her mind. "*If you had any idea of what the two of them have been through, you'd understand.*"

Captain of her little starship, Sus spoke up. "Scanner, shift us forward zero point one of a second and give us a 3D representation of what's happening on the *Millennium's* bridge. I'm sure Piper wants to know how Captain Krashtallash is doing."

Piper was a little annoyed at that. "I have every confidence in his abilities, Sus," she said, defending her former second officer.

Sus glanced over at the Captain and reminded herself of what history had recorded about this woman. Loyal to her crew to a fault, the file said. They weren't wrong! "Of course, Captain," she said, mollifying her. "My great uncle ... is an amazing Cait."

Nobody missed the slight catch in her words. They knew that she often thought of them all in the past tense as her home was the distant future in a time when they were nothing more than an almost forgotten memory.

Piper cast a glance over at Sarda, who was sitting in a corner, meditating. He had been quiet since boarding the vessel, and she wondered what was going on in his mind. She could have eavesdropped through their link, but she didn't want to intrude on his privacy. All the same, she fired off a comforting thought. *"I'm sorry I couldn't leave you in command, my friend."*

His response was immediate. *"Captain Krashtallash is my superior officer, and you were right to put us in here. Our link could be a risk to our security. Admiral Piper might feel my presence."*

"I see you've given this a lot of thought."

"Indeed."

Piper smiled to herself. Sarda was not the sort to put ego before the mission. *"You're a good man, my friend. I'm glad you're at my side."*

Sarda's reply was simply the sense of warm comradeship she felt from him when he projected his absolute confidence in her.

Their conversation took only seconds, and, as they conversed, the space around them turned into an amazing, scaled graphic of the larger ship's bridge. They could clearly see

Krashtallash sitting in the centre seat radiating a confidence in himself and the crew that Piper was having to get used to. He had commanded his own ship for over six months, and she noted his style had developed markedly. He was no longer a substitute commander for when she was asleep, he was a leader in his own right. The thought gave her a sense of pride, but the knowledge that he had already outgrown her gave her a tinge of sadness. It was time for him to move on.

“Krashtallash, can you hear us?” Piper asked.

“Loud and clear, Piper,” he said, using her first name as he was now part of the captain-first-name club. “If a little bit tinny.”

“Side effect of the phasing,” Sus said helpfully. “With us slightly out of phase our psi presence can’t be felt and we’re not so far out that our causality bubble no longer protects you.”

Crash grimaced. “Am I glad for that! If we vanished, I’d never hear the end of it from Susanna.”

Both Pipers chuckled. Crash’s wife was a force of nature, that was certain.

Just to be sure, Sus looked to the strongest telepath present. “Grandmother, can you sense anything outside this space?”

Manny closed her eyes and concentrated, then frowned. “That’s weird,” she said, clearly disturbed. “It’s like the Universe still exists, it’s just that there’s nobody in it.”

Piper Silayna blanched. “Yuk! I wouldn’t want to be in a Universe occupied by only the six of us.”

Speaking for the first time, Spock interjected: “I have been told on occasion that I am very good company, Captain Silayna.”

Suzette wasn't certain how to take it, however her sister laughed. "Quite right, Ambassador. You've never failed to amaze me!"

"What do we do now?" Manny asked.

"We watch and see what Crash's people find out."

Ghost hated being in suits, they tended to cramp her up as they restricted her movements even more than her back brace, which she was still wearing. She twisted a little in the suit to try to improve her situation, but the movement was fruitless. "Damn," she quietly cursed to herself.

One of the good things about being Caitlin Ryan was that she didn't take up much space. She was only just over five feet tall and was slight of frame. Fitting into the suit wasn't a problem – Sustasandage had custom made it just for her. Even the helmet was not much more than a fishbowl that sat upon her head. It had no breather unit as she didn't need one. It just had a power unit on her back that was governed by voice commands.

"What's the matter, Commander Ryan?" AI Scanner asked her.

At times like these she needed to remind herself that she wasn't addressing her superior officer. "Scanner, you'd know if it was possible to squeeze you into a suit."

The sentient program chuckled. "Another reason I'm glad I'm not inhibited by flesh and bone."

The thought gave Ghost a moment's wonder. Was it possible for the ship to operate an android body by remote?

She shook her head slightly to bring her back to the present. Then and there, Ryan was standing on the deck of a Romulan space station not far from the doors that led into the

chamber where they believed Admiral Piper was conversing with the Romulan Empress. This was not friendly ground.

She gave a thought to the other two of their group. Carman Valastro was on the command deck of the station watching what was going on there, whilst Rebecca “Emu” Armytage was watching the docking bays to see who was coming and going. She was aware that the others shared her sense, even *need*, to do something other than just sit on the *Millennium*. However, right now, she wasn’t certain this was much of an improvement.

There were two guards at the door, and she couldn’t get past them as she didn’t think it would automatically open for her anyway. She noticed the pad on the jamb behind one of the guards and put that out of her mind. She would have to follow someone going through it so as not to be noticed.

She realised she was being overly cautious. Her suit was fitted with a Head’s Up Display and right now the HUD was showing her the only two people in the corridor near her were in front of her. She would see them coming.

Ghost stepped over and looked at them. “Don’t Romulan uniforms ever change?” she asked herself.

She didn’t realise she had spoken the phrase aloud. Scanner’s voice sounded in her ears. “Not so much. If there’s one thing the Romulans are known for, it’s consistency. Even in the 27th Century, when the crew of the original *Discovery* found Daekon, he was still wearing a uniform that had hardly changed in a millennium.”

Caitlin paused for a moment to consider the complete non-sequitur of the NX-04 somehow winding up in the distant future to find a man she assumed was a Romulan. The thought

almost caught her flat-footed when the door opened and she found herself in the path of the Empress, who was followed by a fierce-looking woman she assumed was her bodyguard. Behind her was Ambassador Spock, looking a lot younger than the last time she had seen him, with a Vulcan woman by his side she wasn't familiar with.

As Caitlin put her back to the wall, she listened to the conversation.

"Admiral Piper," the Empress said in a tone that surprised her. It sounded quite conversational, almost friendly. "I'm going down to the station's exercise deck to work out. I'm well aware you're a master of Scheel-Tah. I thought you could show me a few moves I might not be aware of."

Behind Spock, Ghost finally caught a glimpse of her captain's future self. Gone was the Admiral's honey-blond hair she was famous for. She had let the greys take over and, as she guessed she no longer had any colour in it, it was a mix of light and dark greys. While she still looked young for her age, she was certainly well and truly into her sixties, with lines in her face and bags under her eyes. To Ghost's eyes she seemed almost ... haunted. However, the voice was still the same. "I'd be happy to, Empress. I'll go easy on you."

The Empress stopped in her tracks. Those behind her made sure they didn't run her over. "I certainly hope not, Admiral. I would be insulted."

Ghost couldn't be certain whether the woman was sincere or taking the piss. It wasn't something she was used to from a Romulan, but Caitlin was fast beginning to realise this woman was no ordinary Rihannha.

"Challenge accepted," Piper said, a little flatly.

While Caitlin and Piper weren't the best of friends, she was an individual that she had come to admire and respect deeply. She was very familiar with her personality and eccentricities, and she was coming to realise there was something a little off with this lady. Had Sarda's passing messed her up?

The Empress gave her a wicked grin. "Excellent. You will fight for the honour of the Federation and I for the Empire. It will be something for our children to remember."

Piper stood a little straighter and her usual steely resolve shone through. "I will warn you, Empress. I've never lost."

"Neither have I. Today will be a first for one of us."

Ghost gritted her teeth. This was going to be interesting. In all the years she had known Piper, once the woman was engaged in battle she did not back down. Caitlin felt a touch of ice as she wondered whether this could end very badly for a diplomatic mission.

As the retinue continued, Ghost fell in behind Piper and a man she had been briefed would be Captain Harriman of the *Enterprise-B*. He was tall and handsome, by her standards. She smirked to herself that she was feeling an attraction for a man who was likely in his early twenties in her time. A bit young for her, she thought.

"Admiral," the captain said quietly. "We are on a diplomatic mission. Perhaps this sparring session isn't such a great idea."

Piper didn't meet his eye. "I can't back down now, John. We would lose face and that's not something we need when negotiating with Rihannsu."

John looked back at her with a look that was not exactly trusting. Ghost wondered if the man had faith in the Admiral's

motives being pure. “Of course, Admiral,” he said genially with a smile that would have made a used flitter salesman proud.

“Why doesn’t he trust her?” Ghost whispered to herself. Now that the coast was clear, Caitlin fell in well behind the retinue to keep her distance. Ultra-careful, she was startled when Piper suddenly stopped, turned, and looked back at the space she was occupying.

Her heart in her mouth, Ghost paused and wondered what she should do. She couldn’t call for a beam-out as the stream would be noticed. She looked up into green eyes that seemed to be searching her.

“What’s the matter, Piper?” John asked, wondering what this enigmatic woman was up to this time.

The Admiral simply shook her head. “I don’t know,” she said. “I just get the feeling we’re being watched.”

Harriman shrugged. “This is a Romulan space station. *Of course* we’re being watched. I wouldn’t be surprised if there were cameras lining every wall.”

Piper caught his gaze. “You’re probably right,” she said, thinking it over. “I’m just a little jumpy.”

Now Harriman gave her a genuine smile. “You? The Trouble-Shooter? Starfleet’s thrown you in the deep end so many times you’ve earned your nickname. Word is that nothing fazes you.”

At that, she sighed. “I wouldn’t go that far,” she said quietly. She gave up on her search and the two picked up the pace to catch up with the Empress.

Caitlin gave them even more space and followed.

On the command deck, Carman was finding it a little hard to stay out of the way. The area was spacious but was it busy! The large space had wall-to-wall monitors with someone watching pretty much everywhere at the same time.

“Is this place run by the Tal Shiar?” he asked himself.

In his ear he heard Emu say in her New Zealand accent, “The security here is as tight as a fish’s bum.”

Unfamiliar with the vernacular, Carman gave the image a little thought and realised what she was inferring. “I’d agree with you, Emu,” he said dryly. “From what I’m seeing up here on their bridge, I wouldn’t be surprised if there were cameras in the head.”

He heard a slight Gaelic chuckle at that. “I’m not sure the Admiral would take too kindly to someone perving on her in the loo.”

Carman nodded to himself. “I don’t think Piper in any timeline would.” The Commander turned his attention back to his surroundings and looked in awe. Each station had nine screens and somehow the officer at each position was managing to keep an eye on all that was going on in this huge station. He considered how different life was in the Federation, that people were allowed the freedom to act under the assumption that they were doing the right thing. It was clear they had the opposite view in the Romulan Empire. The general view was that all their citizens were malfeasants and that they were going to get up to mischief at any, and all, times. The notion did not sit well with him. He couldn’t imagine living in a security-mad society; it would be suffocating.

Inside his suit Carman’s stomach growled and he realised he should have had a decent meal before this away mission. There was no way he was going to be able to eat inside this helmet.

To his surprise, AI Scanner's voice sounded in his ears. "Getting hungry, Commander?" it asked.

Carman smirked. "Yes. However, there's little I can do about it."

There was a light, and slightly odd, chuckle over the speaker next to Carman's ear. "Sometimes I think you forget what century I come from, Mister Valastro."

Inside his suit visor Carman suddenly felt something brushing against his lips.

"Go ahead and eat it, Commander," Scanner said. "It's perfectly good for humanoids."

Tentatively, Carman grasped the object with his lips, drawing it into his mouth. It hit his tongue and became something truly delicious as it quickly dissolved. With one swallow, the material passed down to his stomach and suddenly he didn't feel hungry anymore. "What was that, and how on Alpha's soil did you get it to taste like Gyros?"

"In the 31st Century we aim to please. We stopped making our rations taste like cardboard ... quite some time ago. That was full of all the nutrients your body needs and it tastes great because the suit tailored it for your palate."

Carman made a mental note to stop underestimating the time ship's capabilities. It was truly a wonder. "Thanks for that."

Back in the present, Carman made his way around the room carefully, taking stock of the different stations and what they were for. He found himself standing behind a chair that was manned by a decidedly bored young male who was doing a fairly good impression of someone doing their job. Up close, he could tell the youth was faking it and he could but wonder what he was really thinking about.

Carman perused the monitors and noted the boy was supposed to be observing the scanner for signs of suspicious activity outside the station. He considered that this probably was one of the most boring places to serve as little could possibly happen to such a well defended station this far within the Romulan frontier.

All the same, his eye was drawn to a blip on the screen that the youth missed, but that Carman did not. Curious, he watched the intermittent reading appear and disappear, but it quickly became clear that the object – he didn't know what else to call it – was making its way towards the station.

Carman moved off and back to a corner where he would be out of the way. "Scanner," he said, worried. "Put me through to the captain."

Rebecca wondered to herself whether she was more bored back on the *Millennium* holding the ship in its cloaked orbit, or here, standing in the station's docking bays watching for irregularities. The problem with her mission was two-fold. One, she was on a Romulan station, so normal wasn't something she was acquainted with here, and two, there was *nothing* going on.

"They don't let anyone on board unless they've been strip and cavity searched," she muttered to herself. "No wonder nobody wants to come here."

"I heard that," she heard AI Scanner say. "Not that you're that far from the truth, but the Romulan Empire prided itself on its security measures."

The slip did not go unnoticed by Emu. "So, there's a time in the future when the Romulan Empire no longer exists. Now, *that's* something to look forward to."

“Nothing lasts forever is all I’m saying.” The computer left it there. “I take it there’s not much happening where you are.”

Did an AI understand sarcasm? Emu wondered. Was it worth the effort? “This is where the party’s happening all right.”

“I’ll take that as a “yes”.”

A different voice came over the commlink. “Emu, watch out down there. I think the station’s about to have some uninvited guests. I’ve been watching motion on the station’s scanners and something’s headed for the docking bays.”

That got the fighter pilot’s full attention. “I’ll keep an eye out.”

Now fully on the alert, Lieutenant Armytage watched for well over a quarter hour before she spotted something amiss. Before her was a long, curved corridor with differently marked doors leading off the circular docking ring on her right. The reason Emu had taken this position was that whoever left the ring for the station proper had to come through this point if they wanted to get inside. To Rebecca, this place was like a customs booth that visitors had to pass.

There had been zero activity along the corridor for some time until, all of a sudden, a door slid aside where no ship was docked and two Romulan officers stepped out and began walking like they owned the place. The thing that caught Emu’s attention was that they were not coming towards her. They were going the other way, back to where she knew the Empress’s ship was docked.

She wondered whether following them would be a dereliction of duty. “Commander,” she said quickly. “We’ve got two boarders, dressed like Romulan guards, who are moving towards the Empress’s ship. Should I follow them?”

Over the comms she could hear Valastro sigh. She knew he did that whenever he had to make a judgement call. “Let them go,” he said. “We’re here to observe the Admiral and the Empress and to keep anything from happening to them. I wouldn’t be surprised if it was a visit from the Tal Shiar. They’re always up to mischief.”

Emu frowned. There was something truly off with the two, but she knew she had a post to keep and leaving it could expose those under their care to greater dangers. “Yes sir,” she said and tried to let it go. She bit her lip and prayed she hadn’t just made a terrible mistake.

Chapter Nine

On the world of ch'Havran the idea of night was nothing but an abstract notion. The Romulan day was roughly the same length as a day on earth, although a Reman could never know that. A Reman would also never understand how a diurnal species normally operated. Night and day were all the same thing to them.

T'mock understood the need for the notion of a day. Even Remans needed a circadian rhythm and the notion of a day helped them manage their time. Ch'Havran days followed a ch'Rihan day at the Capital as their planet was tidally locked towards the sun – making a day nothing more than a way of measuring time. T'mock had never seen a sunrise – the notion seemed foreign to him. The idea of the sun coming over the horizon was peculiar – it was just *there* – and something to be avoided. As the sun side of the planet never had the chance to cool it was not somewhere you wanted to be. The closer you got to the sun the hotter it got. It was only nearer the edges of the world that you could farm where the sunlight was filtered by the atmosphere. Their world produced a surprising amount of grains as the green ring around the planet was in constant sunshine and the planet had enough water for their produce.

The problem with the water supply always grated on T'mock and his sister. The Rihannsu hoarded the precious liquid for food production and rationed the rest to the Remans, the majority of whom worked in the dilithium mines on the dark side of the world.

T'mock looked slightly down at his sister as they rode the elevator. He noticed her frowning. “What is it?” he asked gently.

Varra returned his gaze. “We’ve lived out our lives on this dirty ball working in filthy tunnels and never once have I had the luxury of enjoying a bath.”

Her brother shrugged. “I never had a problem with sonic showers.”

Varra gave a chuckle. “That’s because you’re male. Women need time to just soak away their problems ... so I’m told.”

Behind them Krasni chimed in. “Females have such weird fantasies.”

Vashti put her hand on Varra’s arm. “I’m with you, sister.”

Their leader considered the whole question moot. He glanced upwards at the destroyed remains of the surveillance camera with a small smile. Remans hated them and were constantly vandalising them. It was one small way that they fought back against their oppressors.

He glanced down at his wrist chronometer and knew their time was near. “Are you ready?”

His friends all nodded. It was time to go.

As the doors slid aside, they stepped out and walked across the wide, gunmetal grey corridor towards the large docking bay doors. A Rihannsu soldier was standing there, guarding them. He was so used to the locals not giving him the time of day he didn’t bother to even look at passers-by.

T’mock vaporised him with a quick shot from his disruptor. The man never knew what hit him.

With that single act their group was now committed to their course. Nothing but death was going to stop them now.

Stepping through the docking bay doors the group fanned out and began quietly taking out the Rihannsu guards one-by-one.

The space had one large shuttle that would take the daily quota of dilithium back to ch'Rihan. There was a conveyor belt dropping the crystals into its open hold through a hatch on its roof. T'mock had been counting on the routine being so dull and ordinary that it would take the guards some time to react.

Fortune seemed to be favouring them as the team moved methodically through the large, crate-filled space. The dock was used for moving foodstuffs as well as dilithium. Whenever they came upon one of their fellows they went on by unhindered and the Reman either ignored them or gave them a quick nod of approval.

On the other side of the docks the other team was mirroring their activities and Rihannsu were dropping silently as they were mostly knifed through the ribs or had their throats slashed. Green blood was flowing freely.

"The Elements are on our side," Varra said cheerfully, making T'mock wish she hadn't said it. Invoking the Elements was always a bad idea.

T'mock had to admit to himself he was surprised they had gotten this far. Each member of his team was loaded down with phasers, rifles and grenades. They must have seemed like amateur avengers. He glanced up at the guards that stood to the sides of the shuttle door and noted one of them was looking about him curiously. His hand had gone to his side and his fellow noticed his apprehension. He, too, went for his weapon.

Disruptor beams erupted from numerous positions and T'mock noticed that most of them went wide and missed their targets, either bouncing off the shuttle's duranium hull or passing over it entirely. Only one was true and the first guard disappeared in a red haze.

The second guard realised he was exposed and ducked inside the open hatchway, firing blindly as he had yet to see one of his assailants. He opened his communicator and raised the alarm.

Overhead the lights turned red – the universal signal for trouble. A siren began wailing and T'mock knew he had to move quickly. They still had much to do before the Rihannsu guards showed up.

He took a grenade out of his pocket, keyed it for a five second delay and threw it as hard as he could towards the doorway. The Elements were good to him. It passed over the guard's head and bounced off the bulkhead. A second later the charge detonated, and the guard was no more.

"That's one way to do it," Varra said with a shrug.

Mostly confident that the room was now under their control, T'mock ushered his people forward. "You know what to do. Make sure you barricade the doors as well as you can and, if you find the pilots, don't take them alive."

His people fanned out and moved towards the exits. T'mock mounted the ramp up to the shuttle's door with his sister behind him. Vashti and Krasni went with the others to supervise. At the top of the ramp, T'mock turned and looked out across the tops of the crates and was surprised to see so many of his fellows coming to their aid. He wondered how he might get them to help.

At the doors, his people were busy putting their equipment to use and were welding the doors shut. Once that was done, their brother and sister Remans began moving the crates into place to cover the doors using the antigrav lifters. The sounds of hammering from the other side were carrying throughout the cavern. Their Romulan masters were waking up to the problem.

From his vantage point, T'mock, who had spent many hours considering what he would say, shouted, "My brothers, sisters! For too long we have suffered under the weight of the Rihannsu, who have treated us as second-class citizens – no – slaves! We are here to send a message to the Senate! Our message is clear! No more! We want equality with the Rihannsu! We want our freedom!"

Throughout the space their little cadre raised their fists in solidarity, and to his delight, their fellow Remans were with them. He noticed that some of his people began sharing their weapons with the others. He wondered to himself if that was such a great idea. Aside from the fact they shared a common heritage and status he didn't really know any of them.

"Finding something new to worry about?" Varra asked drolly.

T'mock rolled his eyes. "In our situation there is always plenty to worry about."

Varra looked about her at the Remans who had been given weapons. "We're trying to unite our people against our common foe. The first people who need to receive that message are right here with us. We need to give them a taste of freedom if they are going to want more of it."

Her brother sighed. She was right. Never mind that they probably weren't going to survive the day anyway. Why look for trouble? "You're right, sister, as usual." He turned and headed into the shuttle. "We need to get ready for phase two."

In the Capital's spaceport, a lone Klingon scout ship sat, guarded day and night by a squad of warriors whose sole job was to maintain the ship's safety and therefore secure Duras' escape

route if he so desired. The warriors weren't quartered in the building. They lived on the ship and never ventured further than the end of the boarding ramp. That was as far as the Imperial Navy – and the Tal Shiar – were going to permit. They were not to sully the soil of ch'Rihan with their filthy feet.

It was tedious work, and if it had been any other group of warriors, they might have given into boredom and wreaked some havoc just for the fun of it. However, these warriors were entirely loyal to Duras; especially their commander, Kaylor, who had her own reasons for staying.

Standing at the end of the ramp, Kaylor stood guard of the *GhIH*, and kept her eye on the doors that led into the hangar. She knew it was only a matter of time before Duras returned. Klingon “Ambassadors” never stayed long on this planet, may it fall into Ghe”or. No, Klingon Hell was too good for it, she thought to herself. After all, there were Klingon warriors there. Sure, she mused, they deserved to be there and not Sto’vo’Kor, but at least if the Romulans wound up in the fires it would give the fallen Klingon warriors a chance to redeem themselves. The corner of her lips curled up at the thought. Yes, a fitting end for this cursed world.

Not much ever happened in this hangar. She knew why. The Tal Shiar wasn't giving anything away, and the less they learned about the paranoid Romulans the happier the secret service was. So, they practically reserved this little corner of the complex for the Klingons and left them alone – no doubt surrounded by recording devices. She shrugged to herself. They would have done the same thing if the Romulans came to Q’onos.

As if in answer to some silent prayer, the doors slid open and Duras stepped through. Every step purposeful, he strode over

the quarter kellicam distance in moments, each step warming the fires in Kaylor's heart. She had so yearned for his return!

He stepped onto the ramp next to her and clasped her wrist tightly. "It is good to have my feet on Klingon steel again," he said. "Surrounded by those loyal to me."

Kaylor's bosom rose as her heart swelled. "Yes, Duras. It is good to have you back. Is it time to return?"

The flicker in his eyes betrayed his intentions to her, even though he said: "Yes."

So, he had something else in mind. Whatever it was, it would certainly bring glory to the House of Duras, and further plans to gain a foothold on the Chancellorship. She bared her teeth in a smile that was more a snarl. "Then let us get off this world before our *merciless* ship rots in his bones," she said, invoking the small vessel's name.

With Kaylor by his side, Duras strode up the ramp, feeling more in command by the moment. "Get us ready for take-off," he said, the gangway already rising. "As soon as we can, cloak the ship and set course for Hobus."

Kaylor was surprised by the destination. It was still well within the Romulan sphere of influence. However, her faith in her mate was solid. If he led them into the fires of Ghe'or, then she would follow gladly, her fangs bared, her bat'leth ready, happy to take on the hordes of hell if her love was by her side.

T'mock stood at the open door of the shuttle and looked out over the wide, open space that now surrounded the vessel. His fellow Remans had done an impressive job piling up the extraneous crates to block off the entrances, as well as killing the feed from the conveyor belts that had been filling the ship.

“You think they’ve shut it all down yet?” Varra asked him, her gaze up at the ceiling.

Her brother knew what she was referring to. Most of the mining operations on ch’Havran used automated systems to transfer the material to this very bay, and now that the flow had been stopped the whole production line would have to cease to prevent the product piling up and blocking the tubes. “If they haven’t, they’re going to be in a lot of trouble,” he mused. He shrugged. “Not that it matters to us.”

“Point taken,” Varra said.

T’mock raised the communicator he had taken from the shuttle’s cockpit and spoke into the microphone mesh. “This is T’mock, commanding the Reman forces who have taken the ch’Havran docks. I suggest you be very careful trying to burn your way through the doors. I have placed charges behind them all and you might get a nasty surprise if you’re not careful.”

He waited for a moment for a reply. There was a sound of clunking from the speaker, and the siblings wondered if someone was fighting over the mic. They gave one another a curious look as they heard a gruff voice say: “Give me that!” There was a little more plastic juggling, then: “Who is this?”

Varra rolled her eyes as her brother repeated his previous introduction. They waited for a moment, staring at the communicator as they were joined by Vashti and Krasni. Krasni almost choked when their inquisitor said: “If you surrender now, I can guarantee you won’t be killed outright.”

Varra, drolly, said quietly: “And this is some form of encouragement?”

The man on the speaker replied: “I can hear you. Yes, it’s not much of a prize. Better that than me hunting you down,

catching you like halai, throwing you in a cell and slowly torturing you to death.” After a very brief pause he added with complete candor: “And it would be so much fun. So, I’m giving you this one opportunity to surrender now. I’ll kill you quickly and my workers can get back to what they were doing.”

T’mock rolled his eyes. The Commander was just another Rihannsu stooge. He drew a breath to calm his nerves, more from impatience than fear, and said: “Now, listen to me, you Rihannsu moron,” he said drolly. “I know that you have no interest in peace and that you think of myself and my brethren as nothing more than slaves of the Empire. To all intents and purposes, we are. However, today that is going to end. I know the Senate will convene to discuss the situation. You will deliver a message to them from me. Remans want equality and a voice in the Senate. We are not puppets of the Empire. We are its backbone. And the sooner it gets that idea into its collective head the sooner we can all live once more in the light of Eism as free men and women.”

The communicator was silent for a moment, causing T’mock and his fellows to wonder if the thing was broken. He turned it over, just to make sure the power pack hadn’t fallen out.

“And if I don’t?” it finally said.

T’mock took a breath and said with all finality: “Then you can die with us.”

The mining station’s Commander was a Romulan who hated his posting but was determined to excel at it. He knew that this position could lead to greater things in the Empire’s armed forces if he did things right and didn’t ruffle the wrong feathers.

Bortun was from a long line of individuals who did their best to be average. They didn't seem to want to excel and for most of his forebears their main reason for existence was simply staying alive. They were talented at just being mediocre and even his father had often counselled him to "just keep your head down".

It was a line he had learned to hate. He would listen to his father respectfully, then go away and dream of actually making something of this family's House. It wouldn't take much for him to come out on top of a family that simply floated through life. Bortun was made to swim.

Commander Bortun tr'Tennensae was not happy to be here, but even unhappier that his grand plans of making something of himself was under threat by a band of rogue Remans. A band that had its finger on a very lethal trigger.

Once T'mock had disconnected the comms after his very real threat, he turned back to his security people. "What is going on down there?"

His subordinates were patient. They had to be. Their commander could order their deaths if he so chose. The Sub-Commander under him said once more: "The cameras are all out, Commander."

"How about audio?"

"The rebels have destroyed all but one of mics, sir."

"Let's hear it."

The Sub-Commander had already done so and knew there was nothing to be gained from it. All the same, he obeyed, and noise issued from an overhead speaker. The sound was unenlightening as all they could hear was the sound of machinery.

"What is that?" Bortun asked.

“I’m not sure, Commander. But whatever it is, it’s deliberate.”

“What do you mean?”

“Antigravs don’t make noise.”

“Oh.” He stepped back and considered the issue for a moment. “Get the shock troops together. I want them ready to take back the hangar in half a cycle.”

Sub-Commander tr’Varik considered the order. The Commander had every right to make it, but he was concerned about the unknown element. “Pardon me, Commander, but I’m not certain that is the wisest course of action at present.”

Bortun scowled at the younger man. “You believe you know better than me?”

tr’Varik was committed. “Commander, the shuttle in the hangar is carrying a shipload of dilithium ore. If the shuttle was hit, it could detonate the ore and Remus would become another Praxis.”

Bortun blanched. He hadn’t considered that. If the ship went up there wouldn’t be enough time to swear let alone pray for salvation. Ch’Havran would be a cloud of dust that would eventually reign down on ch’Rihan and destroy it as well. It would be the end of the Rihannsu race. It was almost too much to consider. “What do you suggest, Sub-Commander?” he asked, willing to listen.

“These rebels didn’t take over the hangar to steal the shuttle. It’s still there and they’ve made no effort to open the roof to escape. They have a reason for doing this. I think we should wait them out.”

Again, the Commander was not happy. The idea of having to give any ground to these Reman scum gave him a very bad

taste. Never mind the knowledge that he would go down in history for all the wrong reasons. He had believed himself to be the saviour of his House. Right now, all he could see was its future in flames. “I’m not giving those bastards anything,” he growled.

Tr’Varik looked left and right and dropped his voice. “Commander, we should be careful. We may have Reman sympathisers among us.”

Bortun nodded. “Understood. We will let this little game play out, but in the end, it will come to nothing for them. I will not have this mine taken over by the rabble of the Universe.”

While tr’Varik agreed with his sentiments, the fact was they all had skin in the game. He wondered to himself whether the Commander had the fire within him to wage a war against the Remans. So far, all he had seen in the man was air. He prayed the Elements would grant him another day. “Will you pass on the Reman’s demands to the Senate?” he asked. They needed to know.

Bortun drew himself up and gave him a baleful glare. “I will not be a messenger boy for these... *miners*,” he fairly spat.

Tr’Varik caught his eye. “We do have to report this, Commander.”

Sneering, his superior snapped: “Make the call.”

With the Empress offworld, the Senate could not sit in session. However, that did not mean the government ceased to function. Even in the famed Romulan Star Empire, the cogs that kept the machine functioning were the bureaucrats – including the Tal Shiar, which were a force unto themselves.

Senator Hathness found himself wishing, at times, that the Empress was still in her domain. At least he would spend less

time with grovelling minions like Kring, and more time wheeling and dealing with the other members of the Great Houses. Truth be told, he did that anyway, just not in public, and certainly not under the watchful eye of the Tal Shiar.

“Senator, without the support of the Imperial Fleet, we cannot secure the passage of the grain shipments from Valor IV.” There, Kring thought, she’d said it. Truth be damned.

Hathness was bored. It was a part of his duties to hear the requests of the bureaucracy, and then he would do whatever he wanted anyway. All the same, while this woman’s requests were not unreasonable, there was little he could do about it. Certainly, he was on the committee for the Imperial Navy’s oversight, but even that went only so far. All the same, he had to put on the appearance of giving a damn. “Yes, Administrator Kring, I understand. Klingon incursions into our space are costing us dearly.” They always have, he added in his thoughts.

The fact that the Senator had actually responded emboldened the young and idealistic Kring. “Can you organise for a warbird to escort them?”

Hathness looked across the table at the female. She was one of the Empress’ protégé’s, he believed. He would have to make a note to dispose of this woman as well when the coup took place. He dragged his thoughts from his “I could care less” box over to his “give it lip service” one. “You have a fair point. I will endeavour to bring this up at my earliest convenience.”

Kring didn’t know Hathness well enough that this was his code for “not a chance”. She almost smiled her delight. “Thank you, Senator.”

Any further grovelling was put on hold as Hathness’ personal assistant stepped up behind him and bowed, waiting for

his superior to acknowledge his presence. The fact that he had entered the room without being announced gave him all the clues he needed as to the reason. The insurrection had begun. “What is it?” he asked, offhandedly.

“Senator, there has been a disturbance in one of the docks on ch’Havran.”

Even Kring wasn’t so green as to not understand the importance of the played-down report. For it to be reported to a Senator at all showed the matter could be grave indeed.

Not in the least bit surprised, Hathness rose to his feet. It was a less-than-subtle message to Kring to “get out”. “I regret that I will have to end our meeting early,” he lied. He gave the briefest of bows in reply to Kring’s sincere one. “Jolan tru.”

“Jolan tru,” the woman whose name Hathness had already forgotten said on her way out the door.

Once the door was secured Hathness caught his aide’s eye. “Is it what we expected?”

“Yes, Senator.”

For the sake of the Tal Shiar microphones he was certain were listening he asked: “Who and where?”

“A small band of disaffected Remans at the main docks. They have taken control of the facility.”

Hathness was mildly surprised that they had gotten this far. However, he had learned long ago not to underestimate Remans. They could be formidable warriors. “We must convene the Senate immediately and decide on a response.” This was possible, given the circumstances. With the Empress away, if an emergency presented itself the Senate could convene and make decisions without her. Their timing was perfect.

The Senate's ruling would be nothing more than a formality. There could only be one response to an insurrection. It would be deadly.

He checked his wrist chronometer. The attack was pretty much on time.

"Do you wish to transport or travel by flitter, Senator?" the aide asked.

Hathness cast a glance out the window. It was a beautiful day. "We'll travel by flitter today. There's no hurry after all, is there?"

"Yes, Senator. It shall be done."

Hathness took a moment to look out the window and stare at the sky. Now things had been set in motion he wondered if it would all work out as he had planned. If the Elements were for him about this time tomorrow he would be standing on a very different Romulus. One without their hated Empress and even a few less Remans to worry about. A smile crept across his face, one devoid of humour and spoke of absolute avarice.

Chapter Ten

Standing off to the side of the large, open exercise room on the Hobus station, Ghost stood in her cloaking suit and sweated. Sure, it wasn't just the pain in her spine that was keeping her on her toes. Standing for this long was not good for her, and her back brace while helpful, did have a habit of slipping down from time to time, forcing her to adjust it. Annoyingly, there was no way for her to move it given her hands were gloved and her outfit unwieldy.

In her ears, AI Scanner's voice was heard. "Is there a problem, Lieutenant Ryan? Your biosigns are shifting."

"It's nothing," she said, uncomfortable that her situation was so transparent to a machine.

"Ghost," the voice sounded again, gently chiding her. "I'm well aware of your spinal issue. Do you need some analgesia?"

Caitlin's eyebrows shot up in surprise. "You can do that?"

"No problem. I would have done it already, but it's unethical for me to do so without your permission."

The prideful pilot sighed. She gave in to the logic of the suggestion. There was no telling how much longer she was going to have to stand here. "Go ahead."

Ghost felt the slightest of pressures on her arm and, within seconds, her pain had vanished. What caught her attention was there was no impairment of her cognitive functions whatsoever. "What is this stuff?" she asked.

Scanner chuckled. “I’d tell you, but then I’d be decompiled when I got back to the future. Suffice to say, I’ve just given you a taste of things to come.”

“Cool,” Ghost said, delighted. “Just do me a favour and leave me a bottle of it before you go home.” She knew it was impossible, but she thought she’d at least try.

Still chuckling to itself, Scanner made another adjustment. Within the suit, tiny nanobots were dispatched to readjust Caitlin’s brace. Within seconds, it was back where it should have been and the bots remained, holding it in place.

Ghost giggled as it moved. “That tickles!” She had to admit to herself she was beginning to like this artificial creature. She turned her attention back to what was going on around her. Her levity left her as she considered the possible ramifications.

On one side of the room the Empress stood, her S’harien sword in her hand while her servitors buzzed around her removing anything from her uniform that would be a possible impediment to combat. Caitlin had to admit it didn’t give them much to do as the woman always seemed ready for a fight.

She turned her attention to the other side where Admiral Piper was divesting herself of her uniform jacket, leaving her in her boots, black slacks and white, turtleneck top. She considered that this version of her Captain was about twenty years older than the one she knew and, knowing how the passage of time wore one down – she was quite familiar with the process herself – this Piper might have bitten off more than she could chew. Not only were Romulans Vulcanoid, but the Empress clearly seemed to be at the peak of fitness. Was this going to be the way her friend was going to end, with a fight between her and the Romulan ruler?

“Ghost to *Millennium*,” she called.

Crash's voice came to her in a heartbeat. "What is it, Ghost?"

"I'm watching the Admiral getting ready to spar with the Empress, and they're doing it with very big razor blades." Her sense of dread could be heard clearly.

However, her imagery was lost on the Caitian. "Then they can't do that much damage to each other," he said uncertainly.

Caitlin gritted her teeth. She hated having to repeat herself. "That's not what I meant. I mean, the Admiral's using her unsheathed Vin'tah and the Empress is using a blade that reminds me of something I saw in *Crouching Tiger*." For the captain's sake, she added: "It's a very formidable looking sword."

"Oh." There was a slight pause, it was clear the captain was torn. "Keep me apprised."

"Do you want a play-by-play?" she asked.

That was something Crash was familiar with. "No. Just let me know if they kill each other."

Caitlin had known Crash to be fatalistic at times, but not to this extent. All the same, she realised he must be feeling the same way she did. They were to be spectators here, not participants. "This really pisses me off," she muttered to herself.

She didn't realise she hadn't cut the channel. Crash responded with a sigh: "You're not the only one."

Giving vent to her feelings, she added acidly: "When do we get to act?"

"When Captain Piper says so, and no sooner." His tone brooked no argument and Caitlin got the impression that the conversation was now over.

"Yes, sir."

On the Federation side of the room, Captain Harriman looked uneasy. Caitlin didn't have to be an empath to know the man was torn. Even Spock and Sa'avik, with all their Vulcan reserve, were unhappy with the course of events.

"Are you sure you want to go through with this?" Sa'avik asked Piper. She had stepped forward to speak with her at Harriman's request. He hadn't said anything, just looked at her, then indicated the Admiral with his eyes. Of all the people in the room on their side of things, she knew she was the closest to her.

Piper looked slightly down at the every-youthful Vuluman, as she liked to call her, considering her blend of Vulcan and Romulan genes, and gave her a tight smile. She loved this younger woman who never seemed to age. "When the gauntlet is thrown down there's no choice but to take it up and fight for your dignity."

Sa'avik looked over at the Empress, concern clear on her face. "It could be your life."

The Admiral rolled her eyes at her. "Way to go on your pep talk, Sa'avik. You really need to work on your style. Don't forget I'm a Grand Master of Scheel-Tah."

Even with that said, the younger Commander was not convinced, nor was the Admiral convincing. "And about sixty-odd Earth years old. You're not getting any younger, Piper."

"The chips will fall where they will, Sa'avik. If she skewers me, you can always call on Merete or Doctor McCoy to put me back together."

Sa'avik was concerned about the Admiral's state of mind. It was if the woman was inviting death. "There are some things

even they cannot fix. Please, we've seen enough grief this year. Be careful."

Piper hoisted her unsheathed Vin'tah, its blade glinting in the artificial light. She made a point of honour keeping the blade sharp enough to cut through metal. Flesh would give it little resistance. She gave her friend a brief smile and said: "I intend to come out of this alive, little one. Don't worry."

Knowing Piper's tone of voice as 'I love you, now go away', Sa'avik backed off. "Good luck, Admiral," she said. Spock caught her eye, his eyes curious. She shook her head and joined him at his side. "It would be easier to move this planet's orbit than to talk her out of this."

Very quietly, Spock let out his breath in a slow sigh. Even Vulcans could feel tense.

Across the room, Arrhae watched the scene playing out before her in amazement. Here was a battle of titans, fighting for... what? For honour? For glory? Or just being stupid? It was late in the game, the scores were tied and they were about to start the eighth inning. Now, both teams were putting forward their best players, when they really should have called the game, gotten off the field and shared a beer.

She caught herself and wondered if, with the prospect of going home so close to realisation, whether her old nature, the Terise Haleakala-Lobrutto that hid inside her, was showing her true colours. She had always loved baseball. Now she was falling into old habits.

She took a deep breath and kept her place. She knew that, even if she were to counsel the Empress not to do this, that she would anyway. A challenge was offered and accepted. It was

mnhei'sahe. It was the Romulan way. It was her way as well. For all her love of the Federation and Starfleet, she felt a strong kinship with the Rihannsu, that she *was* Rihannha in her heart of hearts.

All the same, the Empress was up against a formidable opponent. Admiral Piper might have been getting on a little in years, but the woman was clearly still very fit. The way she handled her... sword? She wasn't certain what it was. Whatever that thing was, it looked ready to draw blood. Either way, this "sparring" session could turn into a disaster. If the Admiral were to be killed, Starfleet would leave and this chance for peace would be lost. If the Empress was killed – all hell would break loose. No, this was a very bad idea. What were they thinking?

Both fighters stepped to the edge of the mat and considered their foe. They were unaware that the video cameras in the room were tracking their every movement, and not only were the staff on the station waiting with bated breath, but the crews of the nearby starships were watching as well. On the *Millennium's* viewscreen the bridge officers were watching Caitlin's live feed.

By unspoken agreement, both women stepped forward and came to rest about six feet apart. Piper drew her Vin'tah back over her shoulder, holding it erect, her face a mask of pure concentration. The Empress's back was to Arrhae, so she could only guess, but she knew the warrior leader well. She was going to give the visiting starship commander no quarter. She would fight with everything she had and only draw up short of killing her – she hoped.

She wasn't certain who moved first, but the resounding clang of metal on metal shattered the silence and left her ears

ringing. Both women lashed out again and once again, an attack was parried. As if moving in concert, they stepped around one another to their right, slowly circling.

At the docks, Emu saw the officers she had observed return down the corridor and she could not help but wonder what they had been up to. They raised the hackles on her neck by looking about them, as if searching for spies before disappearing through the doors they had first appeared through. She wasted no time calling it in. “Emu to *Millennium*.”

“Go ahead.”

“Those sus people I saw before have come back. I don’t know where they’re planning on going considering there’s no ship docked here.” She bit her lower lip, concerned.

“Understood. We’ll check it out. What dock number did they come through?”

It was a good thing the team had boned up on basic Romulan before beaming over. Emu looked at the icon next to the door and tried to remember. In her ears she heard her AI assistant say: “Dock six.”

“Dock six,” she repeated to her superiors.

“Hold tight. Be ready for an immediate evac if this turns out to be “sus”,” Captain Krashtallash replied. She could practically hear his wry grin at her use of vernacular.

Emu looked about her at the now empty docking hall. “OK,” she said quietly to herself. “It’s not like I have somewhere I need to be.”

On board Sustasandage’s timeship, the level of tension was rising.

Piper Silayna looked into her double's eyes and said: "I wouldn't have pegged you to be that reckless."

It was clear what she was referring to. Piper couldn't take her eyes off the image of her older self clashing blades with the Romulan Empress. "Don't blame me," she said, amazed. "I would have thought it would be a good idea to not try to kill the woman you've been sent to make peace with."

Then they heard the report from Emu.

Sustasandage looked up to the ceiling, a habit she had when addressing the ship's computer. "Scanner, can you see anything there?"

The computer made a disgusted sound. "Ah'm just as nobbled as the *Millennium* is when it comes to active scanning. Never mind that, even those frequencies ah can employ would not see through what I think is probably a cloaked Romulan Bird of Prey."

The import of that one report brought a few seconds of silence as they all shared a concerned stare. Piper broke the tension by saying: "Krashtallash, we believe there's a cloaked Romulan Bird of Prey docked at the station, intentions unknown."

Crash didn't have to be a genius to know that meant trouble. Whether for them, for the Empress, or for both. He considered for a moment whether the use of the cloaked vessel was perhaps even expected since the Tal Shiar was notoriously secretive. On this side of the Neutral Zone, it might have been the case that they normally operated under cloak. Knowing a little of Earth's literature, Crash would have considered the Tal Shiar to be a version of Orwell's Big Brother – always present, always

watching. His hackles rose at such a notion. There could be no freedom in a society what was constantly in the grip of fear.

His first impulse was to scan for the vessel, but he knew immediately he couldn't. His next thought would have been to ask his sister to try to sense it, but that was out of the question as well. Never mind the fact that their prime mission here wasn't to interfere, but to observe. Frustrated, he balled his fist and slammed the chair arm. "I hate being so impotent!" he quietly snarled.

Scanner touched his shoulder from behind. "We're right there with you, brother."

Crash almost flinched at the sensation, then calmed himself. He looked about him and quickly realised he was not alone. He nodded his thanks and said: "Options."

Silence reigned on the *Millennium* bridge. Nobody had a clue.

"So, we wait."

On the bridge of the recently refit *USS Enterprise*, the ship's science officer peered at her viewing scope and scowled. Lieutenant Pria Khatri was a pessimist at heart, always on the lookout for trouble because she firmly believed it was a being that had been stalking her all her life. Her friends knew her to be a serious sort, but not averse to a good laugh. All the same, she had been given the moniker "Prophet" because she was always seeing trouble coming before anyone else did. Tall and slender, she turned her dark chocolate eyes to the centre seat. "Commander Sulu," she said, her tone serious.

The crew had long learned to recognise that tone of voice. The stress levels on the bridge suddenly went up a notch.

“What is it, Prof?” Demora asked professionally, yet even she could not keep all the tension out of her voice.

Pria kept scanning and spoke to the console. “I have movement on the displacement scanners. Not much, but there really shouldn’t be anything out there triggering our sensors at all.”

Demora sprang out of the chair and joined her science officer at her station. “Just the one ship?”

The Lieutenant grimaced. “Just the one trace so far. That doesn’t mean we’re not surrounded by a fleet of cloaked vessels.”

Demora scowled. Coming into Romulan space was always going to be a dangerous venture, and she hoped she would never have to do it again. It gave “walking on eggshells” a whole new definition. “Just what we didn’t need,” she muttered. “Keep a close eye on it,” she said. “If it does anything hostile, let me know immediately. I want to be able to raise the shields at a moment’s notice. Share your findings with the *Millennium*’s comms officer on a tight beam, encrypted channel. I don’t want the Romulans being spooked or knowing we’re wise to them.”

Pria nodded. “Aye, Commander,” she said and kept scanning.

Demora stepped over to the comms officer. “We need to figure a way of alerting the captain without the Romulans guessing.”

In the station’s gym John Harriman was sweating almost as much as the women on the mats. Their blades had been slashing and clanging for how long, he had no idea. He didn’t think he’d taken in a single breath since Piper had engaged in this farce with the Empress. This was diplomatic madness.

He was glad for the sudden interruption of this communicator chirping. He tore it off his belt and turned to take the call. "Harriman here."

Demora's voice came from the grill. "Captain, we're going to have your favourite Spencer Tracy, Sidney Poitier movie on in the rec hall tonight. I just thought you should know."

The avid movie buff understood the reference immediately. They were about to have unexpected guests. "Understood," he said. "Be ready to beam us out when the movie starts. Have you invited Admiral Piper's crew?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good. Harriman out." John turned his attention back to the duelling women and began wishing the station would come under attack. It just might help avoid something worse.

Admiral Piper had to give the Empress her due. She was a gifted warrior. Even though she had thrown nearly everything she had at her, the wily, older Romulan woman had managed to dodge her attacks and had some pretty close to landing a few of her own blows. It was odd, that for all the exertion Piper felt more alive in this moment than she had in the last six months. As she deflected yet another flashing blade coming from the right. She swept the attack up, stepped forward, and allowed them to come together at the hilt. While Piper had a height advantage, the Empress was clearly as strong as she was.

"You have fought with honour, Empress," Piper said with a delighted grin. "I haven't had this much fun for a while."

Ael took the moment for a quickest of breathers as they stood face-to-face, their blades held high. "You have been a

worthy opponent, Admiral. We call this llaekh-ae'rl, "laughing murder" in your tongue."

Piper wiped her brow with her sleeve and stepped back, keeping her blade high. The sound of steel sliding over steel made Caitlin's teeth hurt. "It has been that Empress," she said cheerfully.

The Empress also stepped back, now out of range. She said quietly: "I wanted to take a moment to offer my condolences on the passing of your second, Sarda. I know the two of you were close and his contributions to keeping the peace between our peoples have not gone unnoticed."

Piper's reaction to the Empress' words was not what she had expected. Fury flared in her eyes, and she looked about to re-engage her in battle, her Vin'tah fairly shook in the air. From Ael's point of view as she looked into her eyes the woman had become momentarily unhinged. She had completely misread the Admiral's attachment to her fellow officer and the comment had done nothing but enraged her. They weren't just compatriots; it clearly went a lot deeper than that.

From behind the Admiral, Sa'avik stepped forward and said a plaintive warning, tempering her voice to reach the maddened woman. "Piper!"

The Admiral shook and she was at war with herself. It took a moment, but sanity won out and she slid a finger up the hilt of her Vin'tah. A small button was pressed, and the blade slid into it. Bowing stiffly, she turned to leave the mat.

Unknown to her, nearly every man and woman present took a deep breath. As one they had been holding it, concerned the Admiral would strike in anger. At the side of the room, hidden

from everyone in her camouflage suit, Caitlin said a quiet: “Bloody hell! That was close!”

On the bridge of the *Millennium*, Krashtallash considered the situation. He had the distinct feeling that the situation was about to go sideways. “Away team, move to secluded positions and signal for beam-out. I don’t want you stuck over there if the station raises its shields.”

His people acknowledged the order and he hoped he hadn’t left it too late.

John Harriman watched as the Admiral made her way to the edge of the mat, more than a little concerned. The *Enterprise* was on perhaps one of the most important missions of the ship’s career, perhaps even more so than the Khitomer Conference, and here he was having to keep Admiral Piper from starting a war. His personal opinion of her was confirmed, she was past the time for retirement. Right now, she was a loose cannon – no, a nuclear warhead in freefall.

He was grateful to see that Sa’avik was tending to her and making sure that she didn’t do something else stupid. Spock was close by as well, and he noted the elder Vulcan was a calming force wherever he went.

To his surprise, he turned and found the Empress’s bodyguard, Aidoann, standing just behind him to his right. He hadn’t heard her approach, and he put it down to the slightly cushioned floor. He had noticed earlier you could jump on this flooring and not make a sound. Great place for an assassination!

“Can I help you, Commander?” he asked, pouring on the charm.

The Romulan officer seemed a little nervous, he thought. That was odd, considering where they were. Perhaps she was concerned for the Empress, considering his superior officer had nearly tried to fillet her. “Is the Admiral quite sane, Captain?” she asked.

The bald question was not one to be taken lightly. His first reaction was an honest one: no. However, it was never a good idea to undermine one’s superiors, especially in the presence of the enemy. All the same, the question, as asked, was a curious one to ask, and he could not help but wonder at the woman’s true motivations. Were they truly peaceful? One could never tell with the Romulans. Deceit seemed to run in their blood. “I’m certain the Admiral was simply carried away by the sport of it.”

A slight narrowing of the eyes told John all he needed to know about Aidoann. She had zero tolerance for political BS. “Her *enthusiasm* nearly had me reaching for my disruptor, Captain.” There was no falsity in her voice, and Harriman realised she was speaking warrior to warrior.

“I understand, Commander,” he said with sincerity. “I admit to being a little concerned myself. I will encourage her to leave her Vin’tah at home next time.”

“I would appreciate that, Captain,” Aidoann said.

The Romulan woman gave him a slight, serious, nod, then turned and made her way back to where Ael and Senator Arrhae stood. He briefly caught the Senator’s eye, and he gave her the briefest of smiles. He was read in on who and what the Senator was, and he was under orders to look for an opportunity to contact her. He glanced around the high walls for a moment, wondering where the cameras were in this room. He considered that there was very little chance of actually talking to the deep

cover operative while on this station. He was certain the head had a camera.

Turning back to the rest of his people, John slipped his hands into his pants pockets and was surprised to find what felt like a folded piece of paper. He was certain it wasn't there before, and he resisted the urge to take it out and look at it. Someone must have put it there covertly, perhaps even Aidoann. Making certain it didn't slip out again, he took his hands out and clapped them together behind the small gathering of Federation representatives to get their attention. "How about we take a break on the *Enterprise* and come back later? I could use a coffee."

Spock caught his eye and realised the captain was making the request for strategic, rather than recreational, purposes. Getting the Admiral away from the station would be a good idea. "Agreed, Captain. I will inform our hosts."

He stepped away, and the captain was once more struck by how much import and wisdom the Vulcan put into every motion. Nothing he did was foolish, or wasteful. If there was someone who could rescue this snafu, it was Spock.

Harriman turned back to Piper and saw a mixture of emotions playing over her face, as if she was completely unsure what she should be feeling at this moment. He decided to break the ice. "I have some really nicely chilled pineapple juice in the fridge in my ready room, Admiral, just for you."

The offer perked the older woman up and Piper brightened. In a moment she became much more centred, and she gave him a slightly pained smile. "I'd appreciate that, Captain. When Spock comes back, I'll take you up on your offer."

John gave her a warm smile, but inside he felt more than a twinge of sympathy for Piper. She had had a brilliant career for

many years, but he feared that her recent behaviour was going to bring it to an inglorious end.

Chapter Eleven

On the Federation side of the Neutral Zone, three Federation starships came together, their Captains meeting on the largest of them, the *U.S.S. Farragut*. They were a study in contrasts, the smaller, twin-nacelled *Firebrand* and the *Enterprise*-class *Challenger* hovering nearby, their prows all pointed towards the Neutral Zone, as if they were thoroughbreds waiting in the stalls, ready to race.

Having already made their arrangements over subspace, no sooner had the *Challenger* come into transporter range her emissaries beamed over to the *Farragut*. They were met at the transporter pad by the captain's yeoman, who quickly escorted them to deck one. There was no waiting as Captain Jessica Holmes and her XO, Ellie Harrelson, stepped into the captain's ready room. A steaming cup of coffee was awaiting them both. Captain Chopra was well known for his hospitality. Offering them each a chair, he introduced the ladies to Captain Joseph Small of the *Firebrand*. Each shook a hand, then seated themselves.

Not standing on ceremony, Jessica asked: "Hitesh, what are your standing orders if things go to crap for the *Enterprise*? After all, you're not sitting here because you want to get a tan."

Chopra flexed his dark fingers and said with an amused smile: "I certainly don't need any more than I've got." He engaged Jessica with a cheerful look. "Our orders are to respond to any threats if the *Enterprise* or *Millennium* signal for help. We are to proceed across the NZ if, and only if, they face overwhelming numbers."

The *Challenger* officers were familiar with how formidable the two ships mentioned were. The *Enterprise*, after a recent refit, was outfitted with the latest weapons and shields, not to mention the ship's powerplant was second-to-none. Its massive impulse engines could propel it brilliantly in a fight.

The *Millennium* on the other hand was a ship that was designed to last longest in a firefight. It had trinary shielding, fore and aft torpedo launchers and squadrons of fighters on call. Like Pike taking on Section 31's Control alongside the *USS Discovery*, the latter of which was lost in that fight, they had to pity anyone who was stupid enough to try their luck. It would take a lot for those two ships not to make their own way home.

Ellie spoke up. "If the Romulans try something they'd be in for one hell of a fight."

Captain Small shook his head. "It's not the Romulans I'm particularly worried about. I was an ensign on the *Potemkin* at the Battle of Galorndon Core, and I saw how the Empress operated. When it became clear that both sides had been played, she called the whole thing off. She's an honourable woman."

Harrelson had been listening, turning her coffee cup in her hands, contemplating. "Then who..."

Jessica spoke up. "He's worried about T'Fawn. There's an old saying. It takes a thousand nuts to put a car together, but only one to scatter them all over the road. T'Fawn is the rogue element that could destabilize the whole thing and flip it on its head."

Chopra rolled his eyes. "The truth of the matter is that our hands are tied. Unless the *Enterprise* or *Millennium* ask for assistance, we are to remain right where we are. Federation starships are not permitted to cross the Neutral Zone."

A bizarre idea popped into Jessica's mind at that very moment. She glanced at Ellie, who caught her eye and realised what her captain was considering.

"Jess..." her XO warned, but it was already too late. Her captain's mind was in high gear.

"I have a thought about that." Without saying another word, she swung about in her chair and stepped towards the exit.

"You're not going to tell us about it?" Captain Chopra asked, surprised.

Holmes paused in the doorway and glanced over her shoulders. "I'll tell you this. The less you know about it, the better." She gave them both a cheeky grin and hurried for the transporter room, and the *Challenger*.

Five minutes later, the *Farragut* Captain watched as the *Challenger* went to warp – away from the NZ. He could only guess what the feisty woman had in mind. From her reputation, it was at the very least going to be unorthodox. The thought gave him cause to smile. The rules and regulations he had to follow as a Starfleet Officer were often limiting and there was a part of him that envied Jessica Holmes. It was well known she often coloured outside the lines. As the late, great Elizabeth Taylor was fond of saying: there was no deodorant like success.

Half an hour later a small Orion long-range shuttle crossed the Neutral Zone half a light year from the *Farragut's* position. It was on a slightly circular course for the Hobus system with one person on board: Melisandra, Jessica Holmes' green-skinned operative friend. The ship went unchallenged as Orions were given free passage over the border. The Romulans were

always looking to profit from technologies invented in the overly friendly Federation.

All the Federation wanted in return was a bit of Intelligence and crates of Romulan Ale. The Rihannsu were a political pain in the ass, but their beverages were all the rage, especially among the humans.

As Melis checked the computer's board and heading, she pondered once more why the Romulans had never taken the opportunity to release a chemical or biological attack on the Federation using the sapphire-blue liquid. She saw it for what it was, a weakness that could be exploited. Considering her usual trading contacts within the Romulan Star Empire she knew the copper-blooded people there were not that different from anyone else. They just wanted to make some credits and have the government leave them alone. That was why the trade was so lucrative. She was also canny enough to realise there had to be soldiers and politicians who were on the take and allowing it to happen.

Melis tried not to think too much about politics. Just about every politician she had ever met had been petty, selfish people who wore smiles that were nothing more than masks. They would all make good Orion slavers. All the same, considering the broad scope of this "mission" that Jessica had requested, she considered making a few extra credits on the side and picking up a few crates. She even knew a few *Challenger* crewmen who would be willing to pay a tidy sum for the intoxicant.

Now relaxing in her private, little ship on her way into Romulan space, she had eschewed the more formal garments that Jess had asked her to wear on her starship and had adorned a much

simpler garb that had the double effect of being more comfortable – especially in the warmer and tighter confines of the shuttle – and giving her greater freedom of movement. A human male had once asked her if Orion females wore what they did because it made them look sexy. Melis had replied, honestly, that Orion females simply didn't like the feel of fabric on their skin. It had nothing to do with sex. After all, they didn't need to look sexually appealing to humanoid males, their pheromones did that for them. In fact, to be able to function on the *Challenger* she'd had to undergo daily hyposprays to suppress her body's ability to produce them. Jess said they were distracting to the males on board, and for the sake of their friendship she had tolerated them.

Thinking on this caused the Orion woman to catch her reflection in the console and she looked back into her own eyes. She had to admit it, the humans seemed to have been rubbing off on her. She would never have admitted it to another of her kind, but she considered Jessica Holmes her friend. That was why she tolerated living under Federation rules on the Starfleet vessel. She might even have admitted that she was beginning to get used to them. Careful, she chided herself. If you start thinking like them, you'll become like them, and then what reason would Jessica Holmes have for keeping her around?

Melis shrugged off the thought, slipped a small knife out of her cleavage and began cleaning her nails. It was still a three-hour flight to Hobus, and there was little to do in the meantime but tidy herself up. After all, if she was stopped by a Romulan patrol she would need to look her best. It wouldn't be the first time she had used her wiles to get her past a checkpoint, and she was grateful she had been able to miss today's anti-pheromone injection. Within an hour she would be back at her full potency,

and heaven help any man who tried to cross her. She would either have them wrapped around her little finger within minutes, or his blood would be on her hands. She shrugged. One was just as good as the other.

“I fail to see how engaging the Empress in combat furthered the cause of our mission here.” Ambassador Spock’s statement hung in the air in the conference room of the *Enterprise*, and nobody was willing to speak to it. Captain Harriman shared a brief glance with his second, Commander Sulu before flicking his eyes over to Doctor McCoy. They all understood the import of the matter, but neither was willing to venture an opinion. Sulu remained non-committal, while Joanna just shrugged.

Piper, who sat at the other end of the long, wood-finished table, simply fumed. She was aware that she had screwed up and she didn’t need the elder Vulcan reminding her of the fact. Never mind the quiet voice in the back of her head that kept telling her she needed to go to Spock’s homeworld, to Mount Seleya. She ignored it, believing she was *just fine*.

Down the other end of the table sat Doctor McKennah who was just looking at her with those big, hazel eyes. She wasn’t accusing, just sitting there with a knowing smile. Piper gave her a brief, annoyed scowl, then turned her attention back to the others. She suddenly realised that nobody had spoken regarding Spock’s comment. *Why haven’t I said anything?* she wondered to herself. *I’m an Admiral, for God’s sake. I should be intimidating him.*

Piper cleared her throat, wondering why it had constricted. “You were there, Spock. The Emperor gave an invitation, I accepted. It would have been rude to refuse her.”

Spock would not be moved. “I do not have an issue with friendly combat practice, Admiral,” he said gravely. “I am more concerned with the last thirty seconds.”

Piper curled her lip in annoyance. The man was right to call her out on it, she just wished he’d done it in private. “Yes, Ambassador, you’re right. I did momentarily lose my cool. It won’t happen again.”

Joanna McCoy couldn’t help herself. She snorted derisively.

“What do you mean by that, Doctor?” Piper snapped.

Joanna glanced at her Captain who very gently shook his head. He’d always known that one day the Doctor’s lack of propriety would wind up with her sticking her head into the mouth of the lion. Realising she was on her own, Joanna started to speak when the lights in the room turned a deep red.

“Red alert. Captain to the Bridge.” Starfleet officers jumped to their feet and moved for the door, with Spock remaining at the table with Sa’avik. Neither of them was needed for this fight.

Stepping onto the Bridge, Piper took in the image on the viewscreen while Harriman asked for a status report. The Admiral could guess what was happening from the image on the screen. An older style Romulan warbird was facing off with the station. Curiously, it wasn’t firing – yet.

“Captain, the ship is broadcasting a video image over an open channel.”

John shared a look with the Admiral. Whatever they wanted to say, they wanted everyone to hear it.

Piper considered the situation. So far, no shot had been fired and there was no need to be at Red Alert. Their response

was understandable, but unnecessary. However, things could change very quickly. If they did, she wanted to be on her own bridge if all went to hell.

“Captain Harriman,” Piper said. “I’m heading down to Transporter Room One. Prepare to drop shields for transport.”

“Admiral,” John said. “If the shooting starts, I’ll have to raise the shields.”

“Understood, Captain. Good luck.” Piper stepped into the lift, on her way back to the *Millennium-A*.

Harriman turned his attention back to the viewscreen and, as he was want to do in stressful situations, he put his hands in his pockets while he thought. It was then he was reminded of the paper note he had been given.

He took a moment to unfold it and read its message. It was from Commander Haleakala-LoBrutto – Senator Arrhae to the Romulans. It was brief, and to the point. She needed extraction. He sighed to himself. If things weren’t complicated enough.

He turned and approached the science station. “Prof, I need you to scan for a rare earth element: Praseodymium. It should be somewhere on the space station.”

Curious deep brown eyes met Harriman’s blue. “Why?”

The captain smiled. “It’s on the finger of a Starfleet officer we need to bring home.”

In the turbolift, Piper started when she found herself sharing the lift with the Universe’s most annoying pile of red hair. “Where did you come from?” she barked at McKennah.

“I think you once compared me to a bad penny,” Eliza said with a grin. “So, are you going to talk about what happened on the station?”

Piper looked at her incredulously. “Doctor, we’re facing a possible combat situation and you want to discuss my feelings?”

“We have thirty seconds,” McKennah said cheekily.

Her hands twitching as she fought for self-control, Piper said: “The Empress pissed me off.”

“I see. How? All I saw was her offering her condolences for Sarda’s parting. Why is that such a bad thing?”

Framed that way, Piper couldn’t answer. She knew it was a massive over-reaction on her part. The Empress had meant nothing by the comment, and she sincerely believed, with the benefit of hindsight, that her intentions were honourable. “I don’t know. I suppose I’m just angry that Sarda’s not here anymore.”

McKennah sighed. “You know that’s not exactly true, Piper,” she said quietly.

Before she could say anything more, the doors whooshed open, and they found themselves standing before the entrance to the transporter room they sought. Almost as if she were fleeing conflict, Piper strode out without even checking to see if the doctor was following. She quickly alighted onto the pad and, finding the shock of crimson cheerfulness next to her, she gave the order. “Send us back to the *Millennium*.”

The Admiral closed her eyes as she felt the sensation of transportation take her. She’d always hated it and saw it as nothing more than a necessary evil. Back on her ship, Piper gave the briefest of nods to the transporter chief before darting out the door, heading to the Bridge and, hopefully, some answers. She couldn’t help but hope their resident shrink wasn’t following.

Piper was expected as she stepped onto the Bridge. Commander Valastro turned and immediately began filling her in. "Captain, a Romulan Bird of Prey has decloaked, but has made no aggressive moves. While you were beaming over, they put out a broadband call." He glanced at Communications. "Put it up on the viewscreen."

The recording began to show an old, familiar face. Piper felt a chill. This was not going to end well.

"This is Admiral Reen t'Khenniell calling Ael t'Rllailieu, the woman who imagines herself to lead the Rihannsu Empire. You are nothing more than a pretender to the throne and I insist you meet me in combat. As the challenger, I choose as weapon: our starships. If you don't respond within two minutes, I will open fire on the station."

The message was short, and far from sweet. Piper prickled at the complete lack of respect on show. If the Empress didn't respond in kind, she would lose all face within the Empire. The former Admiral knew how to push her buttons.

Standing behind her, Ghost said derisively: "I'm surprised the Empress doesn't just blow her little old ship out of the sky."

Piper turned and looked at the Irish woman whose hair had long ago started turning grey. A fleeting thought passed through her mind that the two of them were getting too old for this. She gave her old friend a brief smile. "The Admiral has been clever. The Empress has to respond on the field of battle, or she may as well abdicate her throne."

Ghost nodded, then turned and looked at the aging warbird on the screen. "I might have worried about those old

dinosaurs when we were kids, Piper, but it's hardly intimidating now."

The Admiral saw her point and looked once more at the screen; her eyes narrowed. The Empress' ship was state of the art, and the Admiral was challenging her with a leftover from the scrap yard. "She's not stupid, Ghost. I'm sure she's got cards to play we haven't considered."

A similar conversation was being held on their mirror.

"What does she think she's doing?" Piper Silayna spoke into the air of the cabin.

Piper had to remind herself that she was a little more familiar with the Rihannsu than her counterpart from the alternate timeline. "She's slapped her, publicly, in the face with her glove."

Although the Caitians present did not understand the reference, the humanoids did. Even Spock was familiar with old Earth customs.

Spock spoke up. "She has challenged her to a duel." His eyes were grave, but there was something else there, Piper noted, although she wasn't certain what.

Manny curled a lip in disgust. "She's taking on the sun with a slingshot."

Piper tapped her front teeth with a nail. "The Romulan Admiral is no fool. She's called out the Empress and made known the rules of engagement. Even though her ship looks like Noah's Ark, I wouldn't be surprised if she's enhanced the ship's defences."

The external view shifted in the 3D image hanging in the air before them. A 2D pane appeared with the Empress' visage clear. She was not happy. "So, the traitor comes home. I was

wondering when you were going to show your face again after hiding outside our sphere of influence. Your terms are agreed. You and I will face off, with my new *Bloodwing* as my blade, which I will gladly end your miserable life with.” The transmission ended abruptly.

Knowing what would happen next, Piper spoke into the air. “Move us away from the combat zone, Captain. We have to let this play out.”

On the *Millennium*’s bridge, Krashtallash had anticipated the order. They were already moving their cloaked ship away from the station at low impulse so as not to leave a wake.

Marching down the corridor towards her ship, the Empress was fuming. This day was not turning out the way she had imagined. Not one little bit. At her sides were Aidoann, who was stoic but concerned for her ruler and friend, and Arrhae, who was calling for calm, whilst unconsciously fiddling with the ring on her finger.

“Surely, Empress, the traitor is laying a trap for you.” Arrhae’s unspoken question was heard all the same. *Are you sure you want to do this?*

Without breaking stride, Ael said: “It’s *mnhei’sahe*. The challenge has been made and I must respond.” She didn’t have to add: *Or I may as well step down from the throne right now.*

Terise was tempted to stay her *friend* with a hand, but she refrained from doing so. To lay a hand on the Empress at this moment in time could be misconstrued as treason. Instead, she reached out with reason: “She could have a dozen cloaked vessels in orbit about the station.”

Ael graced her with a glance. "I'm aware of that, my friend. However, honour, as you know, must be served. All that being said, if she "pulls a fast one" as our Federation friends would say, I will retreat behind the station's shields – but only *after* the traitor's ship is destroyed."

It wasn't much of a concession, Arrhae knew, but it was something. "Please come back safely, Empress."

They stopped before the entrance to *Bloodwing's* gangway and Ael stopped to give the Senator one final command. "If the traitor should prevail today, make sure this station turns her ship into credit chits."

Arrhae gave her a dark smile. "It would be my pleasure, Empress."

As Ael turned to go, Aidoann gave Arrhae a quick nod. "May the Elements guide you," she said quickly, before joining her commander.

Arrhae watched them go, now alone in the corridor, sorrow filling her heart. It was clear from Aidoann's parting words that she did not expect to return. It was said with all the gravitas of one going to the gallows. Lost in thought, she was disturbed by the sound of the locking latches releasing the Empress' ship. She knew that, within seconds, the station would drop its shields to allow the *Bloodwing* to pass through.

When the moment came, she was startled to feel a familiar tingling sensation come over her. She turned to flee, but the transporter quickly emptied the hall, leaving it silent and dark.

On the bridge of the *USS Enterprise*, Captain John Harriman stared at the screen, a deep frown creasing his forehead. This mission was going to hell in a handbasket very quickly. He

was concerned that, if the Empress did not win this battle, the Starfleet ships could find themselves on the wrong side of a very hostile border.

“It is troublesome, Captain,” Ambassador Spock said, standing next to him before the conn and navigation consoles. “I had some hope that the talks would finally begin breaching the division between our peoples.”

Harriman wondered if he was referring to the Federation as a whole, or just the Vulcans. “Do you favour reunification, Spock?” he asked quietly.

“I do.”

The simple phrase brought a curious look from the veteran captain, so Spock elaborated. “I know that, at this time, there is not only a gulf between us culturally, but also a lot of bad blood. However, with the passing of time, even old foes can eventually become ... friendly.”

John knew he was talking about the Klingons. It had been years since the Khitomer accords had brought peace between them. It was an oft-strained relationship, but at least they were no longer living with Cold War conditions between them. “We all appreciate your efforts bringing about the détente between us and the Klingons, Ambassador.”

In typical fashion, the Vulcan drew himself up and said simply: “Mine was a small role. However, I am gratified to have been able to participate in those events. I believe it is the desire of all leaders to leave a positive legacy historically. In this small thing, I was effective.”

Harriman sighed. The problem with his hypothesis was that many people had radically different ideas of what “the good

of all” entailed. All the same, he gave the elder man a nod of agreement.

Spock knew the captain was no fool. He understood the implications of the situation better than most. Indeed, if Jim was here, he might not have been playing things as coolly as this man. Thinking of his old friend reminded him once more that he had died on this man’s watch – a stigma he knew the younger man would always carry with him. However, even given that smudge on his career, it had seemed to spur him on to excel in everything he did. He had risen to a level of confidence among the leadership in Starfleet that they had not erred in giving him this ship with its singular name.

His keen, if aging, eyes saw the *Bloodwing* detach from the station and move towards its tormentor. As they passed the shield barrier around the station, he heard a sharp intake of breath from the science station. The officer looked up at him, puzzled. “Captain, I have detected a transporter was used as the shields came down. The Admiral’s warbird beamed something up from the station.”

The captain’s mind raced, considering the different possibilities. They could have been beaming up some of their own people. Perhaps. However, the Admiral may have just played one of her cards in this game of poker. Maybe she had taken hostages? “Send to the station’s Romulan Commander. We have detected a transport between your station and the “traitor’s” ship. I suggest you check if anyone, especially dignitaries, are missing.”

Spock sighed, drawing his attention. There was one person in particular they did not want to lose. Commander Haleakala-LoBrutto was over there, and her loss would be

incalculable. If the traitor had her, they dare not let the Empress destroy her ship.

Harriman said: "How can we save the Commander if we can't fire on the warbird or allow the Empress to destroy her?"

Spock drew in a calming breath. "I am fully aware of the Commander, John, and her position. Have faith. She is a resourceful woman. If there is a way to get off her ship, she'll find it."

The captain's eyes went to the science station. Lieutenant Khatri shook her head, no. "It's not on the station, Captain," she said, annoyed.

Harriman fumed. This situation was getting out of hand. "Scan the enemy warbird. I'm sure you'll find it there. Call the Transporter Room. Once you've found it, as soon as you get a lock, beam the Commander out of there."

Their resident prophet answered confidently. "Aye, Captain. We'll make it happen."

Spock shared a look with the younger human commander. They both hoped they were up to the task.

Senator Arrhae found herself thrust into a dark room. It was hardly the sort of place that a person of her station was used to. A member of the Romulan Senate should have been treated with a lot more respect even given the fact that she was on former Admiral Reen t'Khenniel's aging Warbird. All the same she considered herself fortunate that she hadn't been vaporised the moment she had reformed on the transporter pads. At this point she could only guess that the Admiral was using her as a hostage.

One thing she was surprised about was the fact that no guard had been posted with her inside the room. She supposed the

Admiral had underestimated her. The woman clearly had no idea she was actually a deep cover Starfleet plant. She searched back through her memory and came up largely a blank. At that point she loosed a string of Romulan epithets quietly at herself under her breath. “You’re getting too old for this, Arrhae,” she grumbled to herself.

Grateful that the room wasn’t in complete darkness, she began taking stock of her surroundings and was delighted to find it wasn’t just a broom cupboard. It held all kinds of goodies. It wasn’t long before she found herself a small toolkit. Chuckling to herself, she sat on the floor, crossed her legs and considered what she might be able to fashion with the devices at her disposal.

On the bridge of the *Millennium-A* Ghost’s eyes flashed with excitement. They had cracked it! “Admiral!” she said, stepping down from the science station where she had been hard at work.

Piper looked up at her. “Please tell me you have some good news for me.”

Ghost gave her one of her feral grins. She had no idea she did this every time she was about to dispatch a bad guy when she was flying her fighter. “That little job you gave me, trying to find a resonance frequency that might reveal a cloaked ship? Well, the *Enterprise* did have scans of the Romulan ship’s metallurgy, and we’ve got records going back to the dark ages of their older vessels and they haven’t changed much. If we use the main deflector to broadcast a resonance pulse, a bit like an old-fashioned sonar ping from a submarine, but a hell of a lot louder, it should rattle anything out there made out of duranium.

Fortunately, the *Enterprise* and the *A* are made out of Tritanium, so it shouldn't bother us."

Piper's eyes lit up. "Cool. How long will it take to set up?"

Caitlin smiled sweetly. "That's the great bit. No adaptation necessary. It's plug and play. I've just got to program the frequency and dial up the volume. The only drawback is it's pretty directional. It'll only reveal what's in a conical space within a sixty-degree arc in front of us."

"That's better than nothing, Ghost. Get on it and have it ready to go at a moment's notice." She watched Caitlin go out of the corner of her eye and sighed. It was great to have women like her on her team. Caitlin had put up with a lot over the years and her spinal issues were so bad that she was severely limited in her ability to fly. It was one of the primary reasons she was encouraging her to consider captaincy. She had too much to give to have it all thrown away just because she could no longer fly a fighter.

To her left, she noticed that Eliza McKennah had once again joined her out of nowhere. She gave her another one of her cherubic smiles and said: "You have the best of intentions for her, Captain, but one day you'll have to let go of her, too."

Her words stung Piper more than she was willing to admit. So many people she loved had ... left. Scanner, Manny, Crash, even Susanna. Sarda. Now, Merete was talking about retirement and moving on and Piper was starting to feel like ... what? Grandma, looking after the homestead and looking forward to the next visit and pretending to still be at the prime of her youth? Her chest tightened and a tear threatened to form in her eye. However, she savagely reigned in her emotions.

She flashed McKennah an angry look but said nothing. No! It was an accepted part of command. A good captain trains up her juniors and creates the next generation – prepares them to carry the torch, to light the flame and burn it brighter than it did before. Sure, there was a price to be paid, but the payoff was the family you created just got bigger over time.

Eliza laid a caring hand on her arm, quietly leaned in and gave her a look that seemed to peer past her retinas and deep into her soul. “If you’re so certain of what you’re doing in life, Captain, why are you so lonely?”

Aside from being deeply embarrassed that the Doctor would ask such a question on the Bridge of all places, Piper found herself without a good answer.

Her job done, McKennah turned on her heel and disappeared towards the turbolift leaving Piper wondering to herself whether it really was time for her to consider if she was on the right path.

For the first time in many years Ael felt at home, felt like she was back in her element. This was what she was born to be. This was what she was meant to do. Her first, best calling was to command a warbird. Everything else was a distraction – at least, she wished it were. However, in her heart of hearts, the Empress knew it was far from the truth.

“Detach moorings,” she ordered, as she slid into the centre seat.

The gentle clang of the electromagnets releasing their hold on their vessel rang through the hull. The ship’s pilot slid the *Bloodwing* quickly to starboard, away from the starbase and towards their prey, but only by one hundred feet.

“We are clear and free to navigate, Empress,” he reported.

Quick and ambitious, Ael thought to herself. Skilled, yes.

However, she would need to keep an eye on this one. “Tarn, bring us towards the *Razor’s Edge* slowly. Weapons, charge everything and open all gun ports.”

As her people reported their acceptance of her orders, she considered something else. “Communications, get me the starbase commander.”

Within seconds she heard: “Online.”

“Yes, Empress?” she heard the voice of the Base Commander.

“Did you receive your orders from Senator t’llhweiir?”

“Er, no, Empress. I have not seen her.”

Ael’s eyes blazed for a split second before realising something was seriously amiss. It was totally unlike Arrhae to let her down. “Scan the station. Find her!” She had a bad feeling that they were going to come up empty. Her gaze drifted to the viewscreen. So, Reen had played an Ace after all. No, she chided herself. No, she’d done what she always did before. She cheated. If Arrhae was onboard that ship, destroying it would mean the death of a friend. The nature of the game had just changed. She couldn’t just lunge, thrust and go for the kill anymore, like she had with that foolish, privileged boy. She would have to wear her down slowly so she could beam Arrhae out of there.

She turned and shared her observations with Aidoann, who could not help but add: “If that’s what the Admiral is playing at, I cannot help but wonder what else she is up to?”

Ael sighed as she considered the antique on the viewscreen. Yes, the Admiral seemed to have brought a knife to

a S'harien fight, but she was no-one's fool. What was her game?
The not knowing gnawed at her gut.

Chapter Twelve

Varra wriggled through the dark, dusty, tight conduit and sniffed. “Why did I volunteer for this job?” she growled for the tenth time in the last quarter hour.

Fortunately, her companion was patient. Vashti, being their Reman ray of sunshine, smiled to herself. “Well, I’d rather be in here with you than facing the hordes of Rihannsu that are outside the doors of the docking bay. I mean, seriously, this is the best job going at the moment.” She lifted a knee on the rubber covered conveyor belt and dusted off some of the dilithium ore encrusted there that had been biting into her kneecaps. The synthetic denim-style clothing that was given to the workers was little protection against the abrasive ore in the tunnel.

Her companion paused for a moment and wiped the dust that was slipping down her forehead, aided by perspiration, and into her eyes. “Damn. I wish I’d thought to pack a sweat band.”

Her friend gave a slight chuckle. “There’s always something, isn’t there? I can’t count the number of times I’ve gone off to buy some bread and come back with sweets, energy cells, knives, books, entertainment cartridges, all kinds of things, and forgotten the bread.”

“It is the way of the Universe, that’s for sure.” Varra sighed. “We’d better keep moving.” She focussed her eyes in the dim light and pushed aside more of the dilithium ore. She took note of the dusty markings on the walls. Her countenance brightened. They had only a few more metres to go. She glanced back at her friend. “We’re nearly there.”

Vashti tilted her head to the side. “What’s that?”

Varra jerked her gaze back in the direction they were headed. “I’m glad you’re here, Vashti. My hearing’s never been the same since the accident when we were children.”

Her friend remembered it well. It was the incident that had cemented their relationship – and had also made the four of them orphans. The mining accident had killed hundreds of adult workers while their children had been in “school”. Even the glorified creche where the children had been kept had been badly affected and many of their friends had not survived, including someone Varra had once held dear. She had come out with several broken bones and was partially deaf in her left ear. “Perhaps I should have gone first.”

Varra pushed forward through the dust hard and soon found the place they were aiming for. “If there’s someone in here with us, we’d better get this done quickly. I don’t want to be here when this goes off.”

Her comment drew Vashti’s eyes to the pouch she was carrying. It was full of explosives they had been blessed with by their unknown benefactor – and a remote detonator. They also carried two of the portable transporter inhibitors.

Another muffled sound echoed down the tube from further up the shaft. They were clearly not alone. Varra quietly swore. “I should have known they would beam someone in further up to try to head us off.”

“How far away do you think they are?”

Her answer came in the form of disruptor beams striking the walls around them. Both women pressed themselves to the bottom of the tube.

The usually unflappable Vashti growled: “Are they deranged? Don’t they know what this shaft is full of?”

A piece of rock chipped off over their heads.

“Clearly, they don’t care,” Varra said, snarling at her foes.

She made a quick calculation in her head and realised there was very little time. She turned to her best friend. “Move as fast as you can back to the docks. I’ll hold them as long as I can before I blow the shaft.”

“But...”

Varra shook her head vehemently. “Go!”

Tears welled in Vashti’s eyes as the smaller woman spun on a knee and crawled as quickly as she could back the way she came. She knew she would not see her oldest and dearest friend again, and she would have to tell T’mock his sister was dead.

Varra spared her only a glance as she left, then turned and began firing like a woman possessed. She was certain she hit at least one of her foes, but when she took a glancing blow to her left shoulder, leaving it an excruciating, smoking ruin, she knew she was out of time. If they were going to seal this final entrance into the shuttle bay, they had to blow it now. Not bothering with the remote detonator, Varra painfully took hold of a single grenade, slowly closed her eyes for the final time, and, with the name of her beloved brother on her lips, rejoined the elements.

The explosion shook the docking bay, shooting dust and debris out of the chute opening and bouncing off the roof of the shuttle, including Vashti, who went flying, spreadeagled. She landed ingloriously at the rear of the vessel, her legs dangling over the side.

The occupants of the bay ducked as if they were under attack and were startled to see their fellow shoot out of the tube,

screaming. They had no idea that she wasn't afraid for herself but voicing her heartbreak.

Krasni was the first to mount the back of the shuttle and reach her. She was covered with scrapes and bruises, not to mention a large amount of soot, and he was certain she had a dislocated shoulder, but his scans of her body did not reveal any breaks. All the same, it was unnerving to him to see her with tears in her eyes. Sure, she must be in pain from her shoulder injury, but he knew her well enough that she'd had worse, and she had laughed through it all. This was something new.

He helped her to sit up, then used his basic first aid skills to position her to pop her shoulder back in. She hardly whimpered when he heard the click, but Vashti was still crying. He gently stroked her cheek, letting some of the deep affection he held for her show, not understanding, when suddenly it dawned.

"Where's Varra?" T'mock had joined them and was looking up at the chute as if expecting his sister to appear at any moment.

It took Vashti a few seconds to find her voice. "She fought off the Rihannsu soldiers and set off the charges herself. She gave me time to get away..." Her voice choked off as her throat constricted in grief. After a moment she managed: "I should have stayed."

Their leader took a moment to internalise his loss. His love for his twin sister was deeper than most could fathom. That was the way for twins. All the same, he was also a realist. He would be joining her soon enough. He would honour her by finishing what she started. Although the ache in his heart threatened to crush him, he stood firm and gently squeezed Vashti's good shoulder. "You did the right thing, Vash. You

needed to tell us what happened so we can be certain that the enemy can't come through there. My sister made the right call." He stood up and spoke for all to hear. "What we do here, what Varra did up there, will be remembered by all generations of Remans. We do this for those who don't have the strength to stand for themselves. If not us, then who will make a difference? Who will push back against our antagonists? Who will finally say: No more!"

As one, their fellow Remans, inspired by Varra's sacrifice, raised their fists in defiance against their Rihannsu overlords. They had all lived under the cruel lash of a Romulan guard all their lives, and they were sick of it. Here, in this one moment, they were finally free to think and act for themselves, they had a taste of personal sovereignty, and they wanted more, not only for themselves, but for their families. They were going to push back, whether they succeeded or not.

The communicator chirped, summoning his attention and he waved at his fellows for some quiet. He toggled to answer and held it up for all to hear. "Yes?"

"What are you doing to my mine?" the voice demanded.

T'mock was in no mood for the man's posturing. "Commander tr'Tennensae, my sister was simply making certain that your people weren't going to try to drop in unannounced, when your soldiers did just that. The charges we were placing in the tube would have had a proximity sensor that I would have warned you not to approach, but your actions forced our hand. Now, my sister is dead, and I wouldn't be surprised if your soldiers are having a bad day as well."

As he was speaking, his friends noted his hand was shaking. T'mock was usually unflappable, but Varra's death had enraged him, and he was barely keeping it together.

Through clenched teeth, T'mock continued. "Not that I care all that much about your troops. I had hoped for a fairly peaceful demonstration here, with a minimum of casualties, but your bloody-mindedness is making that impossible. Do you want a bloodbath?" he snapped. "Is that your plan?"

There was silence on the other end for a moment, and the Remans wondered once more whether the device was malfunctioning. However, the Commander finally broke the silence. "No, I don't want that," he said tightly.

Krasni shook his head and muttered a nasty Reman epithet. "I can still hear Rihannsu troops trying to get in."

They heard some hastily barked orders and then, suddenly, the hammering sounds ceased. "Better?"

The Commander's sarcastic tone was not lost on the trio. This man was not going to be much of a go-between for them. However, there was little choice to be had. If they wanted their voice to be heard in the Senate, someone had to pass it on.

"Yes, thank you," T'mock said, trying to sound polite and hating every word. What he really wanted to do was somehow reach through the grille of the device, wrap his hands around tr'Tennensae's neck and slowly squeeze the life out of the man for the loss of his sister.

"Now, what do you want, Reman?" the Commander asked. It was clear to the rebels this man was no Ambassador. You wouldn't want this man talking to your children, that was certain.

T'mock scowled. He decided to own the moniker. "We *Remans* want a voice in the Senate. Ever since the ships arrived here from the homeworld so many years ago, Remans have *never* had a voice in the halls of government. Our people have warmed your homes, fed your people, fought in your wars, defended your homes and yet we are not given the basic right to be heard in the seat of power. There are fifty people sitting in the Senate – all of them from ch'Rihan – *none of them from ch'Havran*. It is time for that to change."

There was another pregnant pause from the communicator. By now, the rebels had come to expect this. It was clear the Commander wasn't so much a thoughtful individual, but more a slow thinker. "You're not serious." His tone was beyond sceptical.

T'mock, Vashti and Krasni deflated a little, their expressions a mixture of rolled eyes and major disappointment. T'mock placed his thumb over the microphone and said quietly: "Remember, we expected this. The homeworlds weren't built in a day." He took his digit off the mic and said clearly: "Commander, I can assure you, our intentions are absolutely serious. We have in this docking bay enough ordinance to leave a very big crater in ch'Havran. We would also cripple the energy supply to ch'Rihan. So, you see, I don't think a voice in the Senate is that big an ask."

Instead of silence, there came a sound that was part growl, part disgust. "I don't know what Universe you think you're living in, but nobody holds a gun to the head of the Romulan Senate and gets what they want. You're delusional."

T'mock chuffed, mildly amused. The man's reaction was nothing new or unexpected to him. "The Rihannsu have been

holding a gun to the Reman people for centuries, using us as cannon fodder in your wars, and as slave labour in your mines and farms. We are tired of being treated as second-class citizens in an empire we helped *found!*” He spat out the last word angrily. “Now, stop wasting your time trying to talk me out of what I am determined to do and call the Senate and tell them that, if they don’t do what I ask I *will* do what I say and cripple ch’Rihan’s dilithium supply.”

This time the reply was a sigh of resignation. “I will do what you ask, but you must know that they will not give you what you ask.” He sounded almost plaintive.

T’mock drew himself up to his full height and grimaced, letting his lower canines shine fiercely in the light. “Then let the Senate know that we are willing to die for our cause and we *will* carry out our threat if they do not do what we ask. You have three hours to respond before we destroy this facility.” He snapped the communicator shut, not giving the Commander a chance to respond with another pointless comment that might mess with his people’s heads. The die was cast. He checked his wrist chronometer and set the timer. “They have three hours. Not a minute more.”

His friends nodded. They had no illusions that, for them, this was a suicide mission. Even if they were to somehow survive this endeavour, they knew that the Tal Shiar would not let them live beyond the end of the week. However, the rest of the people in the hangar did not deserve a long, painful death at the hands of that shadowy organisation. They hoped that the Senate would listen to reason but, if not, they would be forced to act and follow through with their threat. Yes, they would re-join the Elements, but they hoped they would start a movement among their own

people, that they would find their hearts and begin to fight back against the Rihannsu and reclaim their world at the very least; at best to be considered equals within the great Romulan Star Empire.

The Senate Floor was in uproar. It wasn't so much that the senators had been called to discuss the emergency on their sister world, but rather that their personal time had been interfered with. This was an out-of-sessions meeting, extraordinary in the fact that it had to be called in the absence of the Empress.

The elderly Announcer, himself over two hundred years old yet his eyes had not dimmed, cast his gaze over the Senate chamber. He took note that all of the Senate houses that were available were represented, with the exception of Senator t'llhweiir who was in the company of the Empress at the time.

While he did his best to remain aloof of all things political, he had also been the Senate Announcer for many years. He was well aware of just how corrupt the political system was in the Empire, since the Empress had taken over, she had made some positive changes to the order to restore *mnhei'sahe*. He had also been present the day when Senator t'llhweiir had bravely thrown herself on the crystalline monster that had erupted from the senate floor years before, seemingly to rescue the Federation spy, Makhoi. Both women were honourable.

He looked around the room. Unlike this brood of vipers, who wouldn't know honour if it jumped up and bit them on the...

Senator Hathness stood up nearby and tried to gain his attention. The Announcer ignored him for the breach of protocol. It was clear he was simply trying to get things moving. Instead of engaging the rude senator, he turned and stepped over to a

nearby door to speak through it. “Is there any answer from the Empress for my request for her holographic attendance?”

The Centurion looked him in the eye with a steady gaze. “No, sir.”

The Announcer frowned. This was not good. Anything could happen. He turned on his heel and returned to the floor. He didn’t mess around. He took his golden staff and cracked the floor ceremonially, once, twice, three times, loudly. “The Senate is in session. We will now hear debate on the matter of the crisis on ch’Havran – and only that.” However, his last three words were practically drowned out by a cacophony of shouts from Senator Hathness’ house.

With the Empress offworld, it came down to the Announcer to bring order to the floor. He raised his voice above the rabble and said: “We will hear the report from the Imperial Navy.”

Admiral Ama t’Varranajj stepped forward, a woman appointed by the Empress herself. She felt like a piece of raw meat being thrown to a pack of wild animals. Tall, raven haired, middle-aged and fit, she had risen through the ranks by hard work and talent, and by coming to the attention of the Empress. She was concerned that her tenure in the Navy would last only as long as the Empress held her throne. In that regard, looking after the Empress’s interests was simply a case of self-preservation. “Word has come that a small group of Reman terrorists have taken control of the primary dilithium export dock and they are threatening to blow it up.”

Any further comment was drowned out as the floor erupted into cries of outrage and waving fists. Ama had seen the theatrics here enough times to know it for what it was. These men

didn't care what was happening on ch'Havran. The vast majority of them had never even visited that world.

She had. She had not only visited it, and its mines, but she had served alongside Reman warriors in the Navy. While she had been raised to think of them as less than, Ama had actually found Remans to be some of the fiercest fighters she had worked with. However, they were often difficult as they usually harboured a lot of ill will towards her people, and she understood perfectly well why.

All the same, when word came that some Remans had taken control of the export docks and threatened to blow it up, she quickly did her homework. What she discovered horrified her.

Ama caught the eye of the Announcer and silently willed him to bring the Senate floor back into order.

He got the message. With one swift whack of the staff on the floor he got the Senators' attention. The rabble quietened down.

The Admiral spoke up once more, just enough for her voice to carry in the stone-walled echo chamber. "If the Remans do detonate a warhead in the docking bay it will not only create an explosion so violent it could possibly crack the planet, it could shift its orbit. At the least, it will pollute the atmosphere for decades. At worst, it will eventually destroy both homeworlds."

The enormity of the catastrophe was such that the room was hushed as the senators tried to comprehend the scale of the situation. Curiously, she noted the Senator Hathness' face has gone an even deeper green than usual. Was it anger, or something else?

"What are their demands?"

Ama wasn't certain which Senator asked the question and she didn't really care. "The Remans' demands are simple: they want a Reman voice in the Senate."

The reaction was a mixture of derision and laughter. It was a nasty sound, full of disgust and sewage.

Senator Hathness seemed to decide he would speak for the house. "Are these backwards Remans unaware that House Mandathar has been governing ch'Havran for centuries? Their world already has a voice in the Senate."

Out of the corner of her eye Ama noted the bronze colours of house Mandathar flourish as they were mentioned. Status, it was all about status. The facts, truth, the good of the Empire didn't matter. Just the status of the Great Houses in the Senate. Well, it was time for a reminder that the Elements weren't impressed. "It is hardly a secret that House Mandathar rules for House Mandathar, not for the good of the Remans, Senator Harkness. I have served on ch'Havran, and I have seen little evidence that they have been doing anything to improve the lives of the Reman citizens on that world."

The Announcer wondered if the Admiral may have overstepped by reminding the Senate that, strictly speaking, Remans were citizens of the Empire, even if they weren't treated as such. That kind of talk could dramatically shorten one's career in the Navy.

"Thank you for your report, Admiral," Hathness said, biting off the end of the last word. "Regardless of the Reman's standing in the Senate, their position is not going to be altered by holding a disruptor to the head of this institution. Our response needs to be swift and decisive."

The Admiral wasn't surprised. Truth be told, she expected nothing else. If political change was ever going to come for the Remans it was never going to come at the point of a gun. We shoot them, they shoot us, it doesn't end in a lasting peace. It was a hard lesson she had learned in her many years in the service. Vengeance is a demon that always cries out for more blood.

Hathness continued. "I move that the Senate directs the Navy to retake the dock within the remaining time, using whatever force necessary."

Both the Announcer and Ama shared a look. It was clear that the Senator was using this situation for his own political benefit.

However, from her vantage point standing in the middle of the senate floor the Admiral could not help but wonder at the look on the man's face. Hathness was a lousy card player, it was well known. He had only gained his position in the Senate due to good, old-fashioned nepotism. Nearly everyone in this room had their place here simply through inheritance. As a woman who had earned her place in the Navy, the notion was an abomination. These people were all self-important children who never put the needs of the Empire first and it was repulsive. Ama felt a sudden desire to find a shower.

All the same, there was something in Hathness' eyes that bothered her. He was a little too eager to shed blood. She couldn't help but wonder if there was more at play here than she realised.

Before she knew it, the motion had carried, and she had her orders. Retake the docks as soon as possible – by any means necessary.

Ama knew there was little time, so she made for the door and left the senate behind. She had to get to ch'Havran as quickly

as possible. She knew who was in command of the situation there and she didn't trust him to make her a cup of tea without screwing it up.

Inside, the Announcer still had a group of grown children to govern. As far as he was concerned, the business of the day had concluded. However, Hathness had other ideas. "It is clear to me that the Empire is in dire straits that this crisis has demonstrated. I move a no confidence motion in Empress t'Rllaillieu's leadership."

The Announcer's eyes went wide in shock. Senator Hathness was completely out of order. This meeting was only allowed due to the Empress' absence in the light of the crisis. To move against her now was not only illegal, but totally dishonourable. He stepped forward, forcefully. With the Empress gone, he had to wrest back control and restore some semblance of sanity. With one, quick jab of his staff on the marble floor the clang rang out in the domed chamber and drowned out the cacophony of shouting that Hathness' statement had caused. What bothered the Announcer the most was the amount of support for his assertion.

"Senator Hathness!" he bellowed. "You are out of order!" For such an aging individual, his stentorian voice took many by surprise. He reminded many who had served in the armed forces of a drill sergeant. "This emergency session was called to deal with the crisis on ch'Havran, as I stated at the beginning."

With the slickness of a snake, Hathness said smoothly, "I don't recall that. However, the matter has been tabled."

The Announcer whirled on the Senator, his flowing green robes flying about him, fury in his aging eyes. He was not going to have any of this. "The manner and the subject were against

everything a Rihannha stand for, *Senator*. If you have a problem with how the *Empress* runs things in her *Empire*, I suggest you have the courage to tell it to her face as *mnhei'sahe* demands.”

Hathness had played out many different scenarios in his mind about how this would play out, but this was not one of them. To be put in his place by this antique in the green robes was not something that he considered. For a moment, he simply stood there, his mouth agape. When he finally realised it was time to do something, he knew the momentum had been lost. It was too late.

The Announcer was already facing the centre of the room, raising his staff in the air. Once, twice, three times it cracked against the floor. The session was over. This opportunity was past, long gone.

Hathness watched the Announcer with so much hatred in his eyes he wondered why the old man didn't spontaneously burst into flames. He would have to make enquiries to see if he could have the old man killed – no, removed. Killed was such a distasteful word.

At least the Admiral was on her way to take care of the problem on ch'Havran. That part of his plan was working out nicely. He allowed himself a small grin. Yes, nicely.

One part of the plan wasn't working out quite so well. “Why are we delayed?” Kaylor angrily snapped. “You know we're on a tight schedule.”

The pilot of the *GhiH* was well aware of the situation, and of their destination. However, the facts of the situation could not be denied. He pointed at the swirling mass of flashing colours on the main screen. “Kaylor, the ion storm is a lightyear across and

is level four. There is no going through it. Even a D-7 couldn't make it through that." He made no excuses. The facts were the facts.

However, the house of Duras wasn't always interested in facts – only results. Kaylor, by instinct, rested her hand on the hilt of her d'k tagh, but thought twice before drawing it. She needed this male to pilot this ship. Instead, she simply sneered. "Just get us to Hobus as fast as we can get there."

Having a fair idea of the consequences of failure, he stated: "Yes, Kaylor. I understand." Without another word, he turned and began calculating the shortest possible route around the storm given its current trajectory and hoped it didn't change.

Behind him, Kaylor kept fingering the hilt of her dagger. She ached to kill something. It had been too long since she had drawn blood. Perhaps she had been surrounded by the wretched Romulan p'tachs for too long, forbidden from killing any of them as Duras had his plans. At least now they were on their way to Hobus, and Duras had assured her that, once they had arrived, there would be plenty of targets to kill.

Chapter Thirteen

“This is driving me nuts.”

Piper gave her double a curious look. “What do you mean?”

“For the past year, give or take a month or two, our lives have moved along at, well, break-neck speed.” Piper Silayna, now sitting between her sister’s legs on the chaise lounge on Sustasandage’s ship, stretched her arms to get the blood flowing. “Now, we’re stuck in this tight space watching, and waiting while nothing happens. It’s unnatural.”

Piper sighed. For once, she had a moment to *stop*. These moments came along rarely. Yes, it seemed odd, even weird. But they were still a blessing. “Sis, I’ve found there are only two times in this life then things are truly calm. When I’m in Paradise, and in the heart of the storm.”

From her place on the floor where she was comfortably curled up and quietly purring, Amantasandage popped up her head and said with a touch of irony: “This doesn’t look like Paradise.”

From overhead the ship’s AI spoke with an offended tone: “I do my best with what I have. There’s only so much you can do with the space available. Dimensional transcendentalism is nothing more than science fiction.”

“All the same, something more than just plain white would have been nice. Perhaps a floral print?”

Sus’ eyes widened a little and she quietly warned: “Now you’ve done it.”

To the surprise of most of the ship's inhabitants, the white walls suddenly changed into a swirling vortex of vibrantly changing flora that seemed to be swaying in the breeze. To the humanoids, it seemed to blur the edges of the furniture, making their surroundings seem odd, especially considering the 3D hologram of the *Millennium's* bridge was still running in the middle of the room.

On the floor, Manny's purring simply intensified.

Sarda touched Piper's mind briefly. *"At least she's happy."*

Piper chuckled inwardly. *"You know she can hear you."*

"So can I." Piper Silayna's eyes darted to the Vulcan. Indeed, so did everyone else in the confined space. He had temporarily forgotten he was in the presence of a roomful of telepaths.

Sarda sighed. He was about to add something to the discourse when his eyes were caught by the sight of Krashtallash rising to his feet, the bridge about him had changed to the colour yellow. Things were about to come to a head.

Piper didn't need a word. "Scanner," she said to the ceiling. "Are the two ships in weapons range yet?"

"They will be in ten seconds."

"I still hate this," Piper Silayna said for the record.

"I know," Piper said, "but our job here is observe, deduce and return. Nothing more." With the words spoken, she found herself wishing it was going to be the case, but Piper was a firm believer in Murphy's Law. Life was what happened to you while you were busy making plans. Murphy had a tendency to come along and turn those well-made plans into chaos.

On the bridge of the *Millennium-A*, things were tense. Admiral Piper's fingernails were digging into the bottom of the armrest. A thought came to her. She glanced over at Ghost. "Have you got the "Tooth Rattler" up and running yet?"

Caitlin gave her one of her cheeky, feral grins. "Yes, Piper. This should wake up the neighbours."

This was the best news in days. Without looking, she called over her shoulder. "Send a dispatch to the Empress. Let her know that I plan on flushing out any cloaked ships in the area using a new, experimental technique that won't cause any damage to her or her ships. Hell, it may not even work. Let her know that I will stay clear of the engagement area."

Without waiting for an acknowledgement, she turned to the helm. She knew which way the ship was oriented, and that the *Enterprise* was directly above them. "Bring us about ninety degrees starboard, zero degrees Z-axis. I want a slow turn starboard while Commander Ryan turns up the volume."

"Aye, Captain," Jason Nunn replied.

Once more, Piper asked for a hail. "Patch me into the *Enterprise*."

Five seconds later John Harriman's worried face filled the screen. "What can I do for you, Admiral?"

"The rules of engagement are clear. Do not fire unless fired upon. We're here to prevent a war, not get involved in one." Admiral Piper was rock steady as an ancient mariner staring down a raging storm. "However, Commander Ryan has devised a new system that might be able to flush out cloaked vessels in the area." At Harriman's raised brow Piper elaborated. "It's highly directional, so keep the big *E* above us and you won't feel any ill effects. All the same, I don't plan on running it until the shooting

is over. I don't want to escalate this fight by flushing out the wrong people too early."

There was a certain amount of wisdom in her strategy, but also a desire for faith. Right now, there could be cloaked vessels out there just waiting to pounce on the Empress as she engaged the rebel Admiral. All things being equal, there was the possibility that the Empress was playing the same game. This was Romulan space, and you never knew just who was holding what cards. "Understood, Admiral. However, I have it on good report that Terise might be in trouble and we're watching for a window to help her."

Piper's eyes narrowed at that. This was not good news. Even over an open commlink the Romulans had no idea who they would be talking about, but the fact she was in danger changed the complexion of things. That John was aware of things and that he was on it was reassuring. She was in good hands. "I know you will take care of business, John. As always."

Harriman gave her a winning, confident smile. "Good hunting, Admiral."

"And you, Captain."

The screen winked off.

"Captain," Lieutenant Koss reported from Science. "The Romulan ships are within weapons range."

Arrhae bounced off the wall with the Emperor's opening volley. She shook her head to clear the ringing. Neither side was giving any quarter, she thought to herself. She had been on the old warbird long enough to recognise the ship as outdated technology. *She's brought a knife to a gunfight.*

The ship rocked again, and she wondered just how long this ship could withstand the beating. If the Admiral wasn't giving as good as she was getting, then this was going to be a very short fight. She realised to herself that she did not have much time in which to act if she was going to save herself. Earlier, she had managed to pry the cover off the control panel for the door, and she was fairly confident she had it figured out. With the tools Arrhae had acquired, she realised that, if she cross-connected just two contacts the door should open.

But what if it was guarded? Would she be able to take out the guard? Not likely. She wasn't as young as she used to be, neither was she as fit. She considered her tools and realised that some of them could be used for purposes other than fixing things. So, if she timed things right...

The next time the ship lurched Arrhae hit the door release and it noiselessly slid open. As she suspected, it was guarded. However, the guard was looking the wrong way. The reprogrammed electric probe her hand worked much like a taser and, with one quick jab to the spine, the soldier was out like a light.

Arrhae held it up to the light, delighted with her handywork. "Not bad," she said with pride. All the same, she divested the soldier of their disruptor and set it to stun. To herself she thought: *Once Starfleet, always Starfleet.* Then she began to stealthily move through the ship.

"Khre'Riov, the traitor was upgraded her ship's shields since she left our space. They should have collapsed after our second volley." Aidoann, standing as always at the Empress' side, gave her expert advice.

Ael wondered if it was the moment of action, or just habit that her old friend had referred to her once more by that term rather than “Empress”. Either way, it was welcome. Her loyal crewmembers around her simply smiled to themselves.

“Keep up the pressure. However, once the traitor’s shields are down, I want you to scan it for signs of the Senator. I want her retrieved before we scatter that relic to the elements.” Her delivery was as cold as the space her ship occupied.

“t’Khenniell has launched a plasma torpedo.”

“Evasive raven,” Ael ordered.

Bloodwing dropped like a stone under the path of the torpedo and dove under the *Razor’s Edge* and began strafing its exposed underbelly, hitting it hard.

Captain Piper watched the scene playing out before them. “I have a bad feeling about this,” she said, her eyes narrowed. Her double wasn’t quite so certain. “What do you mean?” she asked.

On the floor, Manny voiced it for her. “The Admiral shouldn’t have lasted this long, for one.”

A deep sigh was heard from the elder Vulcan. Spock spoke: “In all my dealings with Romulans I have found that things are seldom exactly what they appear to be.”

Piper nodded her agreement. “I’m sure you’re right, sir. I can’t imagine what cards t’Khenniell is playing, but she’s got to know she’s playing against a stacked deck.”

It was Sarda who surprised them all. “Then it is clear the Admiral must be cheating. If one goes into a game with no clear advantage, one *must* cheat.”

Piper shot him a look of “Ah, ha!” “There’s something here we’re not seeing.”

Piper Silayna added: "I just hope we see it before it's too late."

On the *Millennium-A*, Admiral Piper was close to engaging a plan of her own. "Is it nearly ready?" she asked.

Lieutenant Koss looked up at her from the Science console, his antennae twitching excitedly. "It'll be fully charged in another ninety seconds, Admiral."

It warmed the Admiral's soul that they finally had something to *do* here. On this mission they had really been along for the ride, and aside from embarrassing herself on the mat in front of the Empress, the *Millennium* had done little more than babysit the *Enterprise*. Piper detested babysitting.

"As soon as it's charged let me know and we'll make sure the sky is clear of cloaked ships."

On the bridge of the *USS Enterprise*, John Harriman sat in the centre seat and sweated under the collar of his uniform. What had started out as a watershed moment in the affairs of the Alpha Quadrant was quickly degenerating into a complete farce. On their viewscreen, two Romulan warbirds were duking it out with no clear winner in view. On one ship was the Empress whose favour they were here to curry, a woman who seemed to genuinely desire a lasting peace between her people and the Federation. It was a welcome and hopeful image that seemed to be fading fast with every torpedo blast aimed at her from her adversary.

What complicated things was the knowledge that the other ship contained one of their own. Commander Haleakala-LoBrutto, a deep-cover spy, had been taken captive. He desperately wanted to rescue her, but he faced the very real

prospect of having to sacrifice her life to save the peace she had worked so hard to create.

“How are their shields?” he inquired.

His XO checked her screens. She gave him a worried look. “Both ships have taken a beating, Captain.”

Harriman took a deep breath. He itched to take action. He felt a hand touch his shoulder, pressing down firmly with calm authority.

“You know you cannot act, Captain,” said Ambassador Spock. “As much as we would like to, *mnhei’sahe* forbids it, the Empress would never forgive it, and it would shatter any attempt we could make at this time to forge an alliance. We must let this play out.”

John nodded in total agreement. “I know, Spock. I know. I just wish...”

The hand clapped his shoulder and withdrew. “Yes, Captain. You are not all that different from another captain of the *Enterprise* I once knew. He would have felt the same. We will have our moment. We just need to seize it when it comes.”

Harriman’s heart swelled at the comparison, and he felt energized. When the time came, they would be ready.

“S’Timon, signal the *Rending Claw*! Attack!”

In the smoke-filled command centre of their warbird, t’Khenniell’s second-in-command made the call.

Hidden in the shadows in the back of the room, Arrhae waited and watched, looking for her opportunity to make her move.

The Empress paced the bridge of the new *Bloodwing*. The *S'harien*-class vessel had put up an amazing fight, but the thing she couldn't fathom was how well the aging warbird she was squared off against was faring. It just should not have lasted this long.

"Keep firing phasers!" she ordered.

"Ventral phasers are offline," came an undesirable report.

"Shields at forty percent."

"Roll minus 90° X!"

Bloodwing rolled on her central axis, ninety degrees to port, showing the *Razor's Edge* her topside phaser banks. It was at that moment that the *Rending Claw*, a *S'harien*-class Warbird, commanded by a captain that was still loyal to t'Khenniell decloaked and fired on *Bloodwing's* belly. Caught in a pincer movement, the ship was now under attack from *two* directions.

"Damn t'Khenniell!" Aidoann cried as she staggered, grasping for a hold of the back of the Empress's chair as the floor lurched beneath them.

The Empress was not to be distracted by the newcomer. "Ignore the *Claw* for now. Bring us about, nose to nose with the *Razor's Edge*. I want to hit her with a plasma bolt the first chance we get. As soon as her shields are down, we'll finish her off. When she's gone, the *Claw* will have no choice but to finish us off or turn tail and run."

The ship's pilot saw blood in his commander's eye and didn't doubt that today was, as the Klingons liked to say, a good day to die. "Yes, Empress. Acting." With all the skill he could muster, he brought the ship around in as tight a turn as he could and brought the ship's forward batteries to bear on the *Razor's*

Edge's forward saucer edge. It was a difficult manoeuvre as the other ship was in constant motion.

Piper gave Sarda a quick grin. "You called it."

Aboard the *Millennium-A*, Admiral Piper called: "Energise defence fields. Raise shields. Do *not* arm weapons. Our standing orders are not to fire unless fired upon. However, I will not sit here with our pants around our ankles like Kirk's were when Khan caught him with the *Reliant*."

Her crew didn't need to be told twice. They were quite familiar with the reference. Many of them were friends with the crew of the original *Enterprise*.

Ghost stepped down next to Piper. "The dish is charged. Ready for your order."

Piper considered the situation, then shook her head. "t'Khenniell may not be the only one playing games here, Caitlin. Let's hold off on it for now."

Ryan was a savvy card player and knew when to keep them close to her chest. "You've got it, Admiral."

On the viewscreen, Piper watched their newcomer start to pester the Empress. However, they weren't too careful as the *Rending Claw* pursued the larger, more powerful *Bloodwing* that was having none of the newer ship. As the two ships bobbed and weaved, there was the occasional miss from the inexperienced pursuer, and it wasn't long before the inevitable. A phaser shot went wild and bounced off the *Millennium's* shields.

It was all the excuse the Admiral needed to act. With a gleeful smile she said: "Arm all weapons. Battlestations!"

It had taken a few minutes, but finally *Bloodwing* had brought her forward batteries to bear on the older warbird. Now, the bridge of the *Razor's Edge* was a shattered mess of smoke and opticable after the impact of the plasma bolt, but the fire wasn't out in the Admiral's eyes. Neither she, nor her ship, were dead yet. "Damage report!" she barked out, barely coherently, her eyes streaming tears in the acrid atmosphere.

Her engineering officer reported: "Buckling to the forward hull. Damage to the port warp nacelle."

"Status of shields?" she called whilst coughing out the last of a lungful of fetid smoke.

"Down!" S'Timon called, sounding as defeated as he looked. "Another shot like the last one and we'll be nothing more than debris."

From the back of the bridge, Arrhae was nursing a nasty bruise on her shoulder where she had impacted the wall. The Empress was not taking the challenge to her rule lightly, and there was no guarantee that she was aware that she was even on this ship. Even with that knowledge, she couldn't go easy on this traitorous scum. From the back of the room, she gave the Admiral a vicious scowl, and she was tempted to shoot the woman herself, but *mnhei'sahe* forbade her from taking action. This was not her fight. All the same, with the focus on keeping the ship from falling apart and deciding on their next action, Arrhae determined now was the best time for her to make her own move.

Struggling to stay upright in her seat, the Admiral was forced to concede defeat. There was no way out for them with the ship already badly damaged. "The *Claw* will guard our backs. Prepare for warp," she ordered.

The navigator shot her an incredulous look. The damage to the port nacelle had reduced their maximum warp factor to two. They were going nowhere in a hurry. “Yes, Admiral,” he said, knowing the futility of the gesture.

Arrhae knew it full well, too. While the Federation forces might let them go, there was no way that Ael was going to. Her support ships would already be starting to gather. She glanced at Reen and could not fathom the odd smile on the woman’s face.

“Let *Bloodwing* come after us,” she muttered. “It’ll be the last thing that witch ever does.”

Now *there’s* overconfidence, Terise thought.

The unprotected ship was rocked again by a phaser shot from the Empress. Once more people went flying, but what was more disturbing was the deep, mournful note of the ship’s computer. “Antimatter containment failing. Ninety seconds to a breach.” In anticipation of the desire for the crew’s escape the computer opened the doors to the bridge escape pods.

Terise, who had gotten to her feet, didn’t need any further encouragement. The time to act had come. It no longer mattered that the people around her were probably armed. What did matter was that the ship was about to explode.

She watched incredulously as the Admiral regained her seat and began barking orders to her crew that either wasn’t dead or somewhat incapacitated. “We are not going down without a fight!” she cried.

Of course, Arrhae realised. *Mnhei’sahe* would demand their deaths anyway as traitors to the Empire and the Empress. If the ship didn’t kill them, Ael would.

The analytical part of her realised that should have already happened. The only conclusion she could come to was that they were restraining themselves because she was aboard.

Time was running out and she knew she had to act fast.

On the bridge of the *Bloodwing*, Ael gave the order: “Cease fire on the *Razor’s Edge*! Concentrate your fire on the *Rending Claw*. Let the ship’s warp core finish them off.” Her science officer had given her the report that the ship was doomed. In the silence of her thoughts, she said to herself: *Captain Harriman, get Arrhae out of there. Don’t let me down.*

Captain Harriman glanced over at his science officer. “Have you found the Senator yet?” he asked.

The officer was aggrieved. “No, sir. Her biosigns are so similar to Romulan. I can’t distinguish her from the others.”

The captain’s eyes widened. He dearly wanted to bring her home. Her knowledge of the Romulan Empire was without equal. “What about the praseodymium?” he asked.

“The high background radiation from all the weapons fire is making it hard for us to locate, Captain.” The officer’s scans revealed another problem. “The *Razor’s Edge* is losing antimatter containment. They’ve got less than a minute before they explode.”

Harriman sighed. They were going to have to do this from a distance. “Back us off to a safe position.”

“Aye.”

Terise recalled her Starfleet training and dove towards the escape pod, rolling on her shoulder and coming up in a crouch with her disruptor ready.

The Admiral saw the blur of activity in the corner of her eye, and she whirled to see that the Senator was acting like a naval officer, not a useless politician. She reached for her personal disruptor and moved to intercept, but the Senator was too fast.

Arrhae hadn't paused once, she kept moving, using her momentum to carry her towards the escape pod. She reached it in two quick strides and dove through the hatchway.

A disruptor blast sizzled into the door frame to her side. Knowing time was of the essence, Terise slapped the release button and the pod's door slammed shut, just as another blast uselessly struck it. Terise braced herself with her hands and feet as the tiny craft was ejected into space.

On the bridge of the *Enterprise*, the science officer stated: "Captain, an escape pod has been launched from the *Razor's Edge*."

Instinctively, the Captain knew it was Commander LoBrutto. "Beam out the occupant now!"

There was little time left. Her ship was doomed and Reen knew her next action would be her last. "Target the pod and blast it. The Senator's fate will be no different than ours."

At Weapons, her officer needed a moment to target the tiny shape. "Targeting," he stated, then: "Locked."

"Fire!" Reen demanded.

Committing a Romulan Senator to the Fire was not something even a declared traitor like he could take lightly. Their

caste system was so entrenched in their mental DNA that to do so was unthinkable. For a second, he paused. All the same, his loyalty to the Admiral and the cause were stronger. “Firing,” he stated as he pressed the button.

On the viewscreen the ship loosed a bolt of phaser fire that obliterated the tiny pod.

It was their last action as the ship’s antimatter containment shields collapsed. It took only a fraction of a second for the matter and antimatter to combine and volatilize the entire vessel, leaving only coin-sized fragments to travel outward at almost relativistic speeds.

On the bridge of the *Enterprise* Captain Harriman needed to know. He hit his chair control button and called: “Transporter Room, do you have her?”

The reply was more than welcome. In stilted Federation Standard he heard: “Commander Haleakala-LoBrutto reporting for duty, sir.”

Harriman’s smile lit up the room, but then something else caught his attention. Bright blue, *Federation* photon torpedoes were lighting up the midnight sky. They were being fired at the new interloper. “What the hell is going on out there?” he asked.

Sulu checked the Tactical scope. “The *Millennium* is converging on the new Romulan warbird that was firing on the Empress. During the melee a wild shot bounced off her shields...”

John gave her a dour look. “And that gave her all the excuse she needed to go after him.” A genteel man, he uncharacteristically muttered a few obscene epithets under his breath. “If she wasn’t an Admiral...”

Demora just gave him an embarrassed, thin-lipped smile. She wasn't going to touch that one. Her eyes tracked back to the screen where the *Millennium* was taking fire from the new ship. "Your orders, sir?"

An old saying came to him. "In for a penny..." His eyes narrowed in extreme irritation, he ordered: "Take us in."

"What the hell does she think she's doing?" Sustasandage watched the image playing out before them in amazement. "I thought this was supposed to be a mission of peace." She looked at the younger versions of Piper sitting next to her with an accusatory eye. "What is running through that woman's mind?"

Piper Silayna's hand went to her breast reflexively. "Don't look at me! I haven't a clue."

Piper, on the other hand, did have an idea. "Right now, I think that other version of me is simply ... unhinged. The other half of herself—Sarda—had been torn away from her and she was feeling lost without him, yet she was still haunted by the spirit of the man she held within her that she was unwilling to give up. It was a little like split personality disorder with a big dose of PTSD thrown in for good measure. There is no way that woman should be the master of a starship right now, but I think she's been doing such a great job of wearing a mask that she's got everyone fooled."

Sarda sighed. It was a sound so full of sorrow, so full of despair that Piper could not help but reach out to him and entwine her fingers in his own. Piper continued: "We may not have asked for this connection between us, Sarda, but you make me a much better person because of it. I'm always stronger with you by my side – and I'm always glad to have you in my heart."

Through their touch, Sarda could feel the true depth for her affection, and love, for him. There was no confusion, no misinterpretation of her meaning. He completely understood her intention. He gave her fingers a gentle squeeze in return. "Thank you, Piper. I have been, and always shall be yours."

Nobody noticed the tear that formed in the corner of Spock's eye as the elder Vulcan's chest tightened at the repeating of that old Vulcan term of affection.

"Stop this now," Eliza said, her hand squeezing Admiral Piper's arm. "This is not the time and place for this."

Piper gave the doctor a dismissive wave. "Not now."

The fiery redhead was not going to be dismissed so easily. She stepped right into the Admiral's line of vision. "No, I will not be put off, Captain. We are deep within the Romulan frontier. If other Romulan ships in the area see you firing on a Romulan ship, they may see it as an act of war and this mission of peace could turn into all-out war between the Rihannsu and the Federation. Is that what you want?"

Piper drew in a calming breath. Logically, she realised, this was not the path they had set out on. "No." She met the doctor's gaze, sucked in a lungful of air and let it out slowly, calming herself. "Status of the warbird?" she asked.

"Their shields are at ten percent," Ghost answered from Tactical.

"Open hailing frequencies. Perhaps they will be interested in discussing terms."

Ghost glanced over at Carman, who returned the look. They were both of a mind that the mission had turned into a giant SNAFU.

Krashtallash watched the battle from the bridge of the *Millennium* in amazement. What should have been a peace summit between two Alpha Quadrant powers was quickly degenerating into a complete debacle. He tapped his fingers on the chair arm and wondered, how long would they have to sit here, watching this appalling moment in history before they finally discovered the missing piece of the puzzle. Then they could at least leave this miserable place and put this behind them.

That was the part that bothered him. He knew that there was no way out of this for him. They were on a fact-finding mission, nothing more. Once the Captain had discovered what she needed to know, she – and maybe Suzette – would travel back in time and pass on that knowledge to another version of themselves to prevent this from happening again. There was no need for him to play a part in that.

So, once Susanna and Suzette – he still often thought of them as such – left, would they simply wink out of existence? Probably. After all, this entire timeline was doomed once they departed. The whole idea was to make sure this sequence of events *never took place*.

Crash, first and foremost, was a being of duty, but he was also a father – and a new one at that. He had four brand new kits in his quarters, with his wife nursing them right now. He found he had to deliberately push them from his thoughts, otherwise his decision-making paradigm became clouded and there were times it was even hard to breathe.

He shook his head, making his ears wiggle a little. He focussed his eyes on the *Enterprise-B* and wondered once more what had become of her forebear. She had been a fine ship.

The new interloper had taken a beating from the *Millennium-A*, no surprise there, and – in a fit of pique, no doubt – fired off a final salvo of torpedoes before going into warp. The torpedoes were aimed at the *Bloodwing*, but the *Enterprise* had placed herself in harm's way and they had bounced harmlessly off her shields.

“Ah think that is the end of that,” Scanner said, standing at his side, also watching the screen.

Captain Krashtallash looked up at his brother-in-law. “Don't your people also have a saying about speaking too soon?”

Judd grimaced. “Oops. Let's hope you're wrong about that.”

From her place at the helm, Emu Armytage shook her head sadly and thought to herself: *No, he isn't.*

As fate would have it, Melisandra was having her own navigation problems getting to Hobus. Her path was being impeded by a class four ion storm. Fortunately, she was able to skirt it without too much hassle. She didn't mind ion storms all that much. If used properly, they were as good as a cloaking device. All that natural background radiation masked one's presence beautifully.

It took her a couple of hours, but soon the storm was at her back. However, it was her custom to wait and look around, like a rabbit peeking out of its hole, before venturing out into the void once more.

It saved her life.

She watched as a small, Klingon scout vessel met a much larger, D7-class battlecruiser, bristling with weapons ports, ready for a fight. It wasn't alone. There were four of them.

Her first thought was: *What the hell are they doing in Romulan space?*

Their presence here was an act of war. Sure, neither side liked the other. In fact, they despised each other. However, at this point in time, they were not in open warfare with one another. These ships could change things completely.

It wasn't long before the four battleships oriented themselves and took off into warp. Melis took note of their vector and gasped. They were headed for Hobus! This changed everything! She knew she had to get this information back to Jessica as soon as possible. The mission was at risk if the Klingons were going to gate crash it.

Her eyes came back into focus as she noticed movement. The scout ship was still out there. In fact, it was moving her way. She had been spotted!

"Felgercarb!" she spat. Acting without thinking, she threw all her skills piloting her shuttle into the fore and dove into the storm.

Admiral Piper took a deep breath. The Romulan ship had disappeared into warp, and she was happy to see it go. Let the Empress's people take care of it.

All the same, she was concerned that, now that the situation seemed to be settled down, there might be another trap, lying in wait to be sprung.

"Helm," she said. "Prepare to bring us about. I want the ship to be spun on a spherical motion, so as to scan the sky quickly, and effectively, with our cloak buster."

As Jason rushed to fulfil her order, Caitlin stepped down next to Carman and handed him a chip. She had already taken the

liberty to create a program. “Just make sure we don’t fire it at anything friendly,” she said, cheekily.

He winked at her, letting his eyes linger on hers for an extra second. “No problem.”

He dropped the chip into the slot and called up the program. With a glance over his shoulder, and a nod from his captain, he activated the program.

Below, the ship’s huge deflector dish began doing a lot more than just deflecting debris from before the moving vessel. It began emitting a high-intensity frequency designed to resonate duranium plating. Any ship made out of the material, whether cloaked or not, would be shaken badly by it, and its presence revealed.

As luck would have it, the very first place they pointed their vessel was the portion of the sky the *USS Millennium* was parked in. Having no idea what was about to happen, it came as a great surprise when their ship felt like it was about to shake apart at the seams.

“What the hell is that?” Captain Krashtallash wasn’t the only one who said it, or variations on the theme.

Several systems failed simultaneously, notably the most sensitive ones. First and foremost among these was the cloaking device.

As if by magic, the space she occupied was no longer empty. Where there was once void, there was now a Starfleet Dreadnought.

Admiral Piper jumped up from her seat. “What the hell is that doing here?” she said. “Disengage!”

Caitlin obediently shut down the beam.

“Identify!” the Admiral ordered.

Caitlin leaned over her console. She looked. And looked again. “I don’t believe it.”

Piper shot an annoyed look at her. “Report, Commander!”

Ryan drew in a deep breath, then said: “NCC-2001. *USS Millennium.*”

Chapter Fourteen

Within an hour, Admiral Ama t'Varranajj arrived in orbit of ch'Havran on her personal warbird, the *Falcon's Grasp*. She stood behind the firemaster, who had the doors to the shuttle bay in the screen's crosshairs. She knew that all she had to do was give the order and this little insurrection would be over.

"Give me a full scan of the dock," she ordered.

Her science officer, Lieutenant Tafv tr'Anhwi was already on it. "Scanning," he said.

Ama stepped over the large space and looked over his shoulder. He didn't feel intimidated by her presence. The bridge of the *Falcon's Grasp* was one of the few places in the Imperial Fleet where one didn't spend their time looking over their shoulder, wondering when the commander was going to kill you or throw you in the brig – or worse. Admiral t'Varranajj was a brilliant leader who had brought together a fine team who worked together well, like an old-fashioned timekeeper.

"What have you found?" the Admiral asked.

The Lieutenant gave her a disgusted look. "A nightmare, Admiral. The space is littered with fissionable material. If we bombard it from orbit, we will blow ch'Havran out of it – and us with it."

Ama pursed her lips. "Let's not do that." She drew in closer to the display. "Put this up on the main viewscreen."

"Yes, Admiral." With a few deft touches, the image quickly moved to the main viewer, where they could make use of the much higher resolution display, and the fact it could be manipulated.

Together, the two of them stood before it and began pulling the shuttle dock apart, piece by piece.

"I see they've done a pretty good job of covering the area with their transport inhibitors," Ama observed.

"Yes, Ma'am." Tafv pointed to the squarish tube coming out of the top of the bay towards the rear, under the awning the shuttle was parked under. "I see the feeder tube for the shuttle has been damaged by explosives. There has been a cave-in here."

Something caught Ama's eye. She grabbed the area with her fingers and expanded it. "I see the tube hasn't been completely blocked."

"Yes, Admiral. However, the remaining space is too small for any of our troops to get through."

Finally, the Admiral had reason to smile. "We don't need to send in troops. I take it that all of the exits were blocked off as soon as the rebels took control of the docks?"

"Of course, Admiral." Lieutenant tr'Anhwi was beginning to wonder where this conversation was going.

Ama pointed to a spot just beyond the reach of the transporter inhibitors in the feeder tunnel. "I want you to beam in several canisters of Hartraxion gas on a thirty-second timer. It'll filter down the tube and into the cavern. It will overcome the Remans quickly. If I'm right, the Elements are with us, and the leaders are standing right underneath the outlet. They will not know what happened to them. If we're fortunate, some of them will live so we can execute them."

The Lieutenant bowed, smiling at the simple elegance of her plan. "I will see to it now, Admiral."

T'Varranajj gave her blessing with a simple nod and watched him go. He was an efficient young man and she had high

hopes that he would one day command a warbird of his own. She just hoped it was in an empire still run by Empress Ael.

The senator from House Mandathar was a boor and everyone knew it. T'mock stood on the shuttle's ramp and listened to the man's platitudes through the communicator's grille. He could not help but feel that he was being played.

"Senator, for all your polite words of remonstrations, the fact is that for hundreds of years my people have had to live under the lash of Rihannsu rule. We have been treated as second-class citizens in an empire that we, strictly speaking, are supposed to have a say in. You sit in a senate and speak, but we never hear *what* you say, so how can we know that you're speaking on our behalf at all? Never mind that you and your family live in your lovely mansion on the sunny side of ch'Havran and we live in a hole in the ground stadia underground so far from Eison that most of us have forgotten what it feels like to have sunlight on our skins." T'mock was frustrated, and he wasn't afraid to let it show.

He looked about him to his fellows and he saw support in their eyes. Especially Vashti and Krasni's. They had all been through so much together, especially now his sister was gone. Varra, how was he supposed to go on without Varra...

For a moment he closed his eyes in grief, so he didn't notice that some of his people had started slumping to the ground. He hadn't even realised that his own thought processes had begun to get muddled. Indeed, by the time he opened his eyes again, it was just in time to see Krasni and Vashti fold up like accordions and drop to the floor.

In his mind, he knew this was the end of his rebellion and he willed himself to reach for the detonator he had threatened to

use against his captors. Yet, for all his planning, he had never anticipated he would be overcome by nerve gas that would rob him of his ability to move, or even think. His last thought was of his sister and how he had failed her.

It had taken nearly fifteen taxing minutes, both on her shuttle and on all of her skills as a pilot, but Melisandra finally managed to shake her pursuers in the ion storm. She hoped they had blown up, after all, she had come close to losing her own life many times herself in the cosmic nightmare.

If there was one thing she was good at, it was spacial relations. In a three-dimensional space, she always knew which direction was up. So, when she exited the storm, it was on the side that faced the Romulan-Federation border. As soon as she was clear she opened a secure, encrypted channel to the *Challenger*.

Jessica Holmes appeared on her screen, looking like the worried human she was. Over the years, Jessica had done her best to teach her what it meant to be a friend, and Melis believed she understood. After all, she wouldn't dive into a class four ion storm for just anybody.

"What's up, Melis?" she asked. "This is a bit sooner than I expected."

Her answer was a green-skinned grimace. "If you call four Klingon D-7 battlecruisers headed to Hobus something to worry about, then I should make the call."

She knew she had the captain's attention. "You're sure they were *Klingons*. Not Romulans. They did sell a bunch of their older ships to them a couple of decades ago."

Melis smirked as she toyed with her favourite knife. “I know the story. The officers who were responsible for the deal were executed years ago. The ships were melted down and turned into warbirds.”

Jess’s eyes became ovals. “Oh. I should tell Starfleet Intelligence that one.” She brought herself back to the present with a shake of her head. “OK. Thanks for the heads-up. I’ve got a call to make. Get yourself back here as quickly as you can. You’ve done enough.”

Melisandra gave her a cool smile. “I’ll see you soon.” She cut the communication, then turned and looked over her shoulder. The back of her shuttle was empty. There was no way she was going to return to Federation space empty.

In her ready room on the *USS Challenger*, Captain Jessica Holmes looked at her viewscreen and tried very hard not to scowl. It was time for her best poker face.

She was reporting directly to Admiral Nance via tight-band subspace transmission. In this situation, she had decided to go as high as she could. “Admiral, I have it on very good authority that the mission to Hobus is a complete bust. The *Enterprise* and the *Millennium* are about to be attacked by four Klingon D-7 battlecruisers.”

The Admiral gazed out at her from his side of the screen with a look that bordered on distrust. He was aware of Jessica’s reputation, that she was a woman who could get the job done, but that she didn’t always tell you everything you needed to know, either. “Where did you get this information from?” he asked, clearly doubtful.

“A very reliable source,” Jessica said, doing her level best to sound convincing.

The Admiral wasn’t so sure. “If you were a used flitter salesperson, I’m not sure you’d be making any money today. How can you be so certain?”

Holmes’ left eye twitched, the only indication that she was *very* annoyed. “Admiral, I would trust this source with my life. If she says that there are four Klingon battleships on their way to gate-crash the *Enterprise’s* party, then they are. They could be tearing down their shields right now while we’re debating this.”

Unlike the captain, the admiral didn’t have to mind his temper. “Stand down, Captain. The fact is, I cannot authorise an armed incursion into Romulan space – even if it is to rescue the *Enterprise* and the *Millennium*.”

Holmes was shocked. “But, sir! Spock, Harriman, Piper, they’re all out there with no backup!”

To the captain’s surprise, the admiral let a little of his own frustration show through. “Don’t you think I care about that, Captain? They’re all invaluable to the Federation, and to Starfleet!” He paused to take a breath and reign in his obviously raging temper. “However, I cannot and will not sanction a rescue mission into Romulan space. Especially that far into it.”

Jessica was not going to be that easily put off. “Admiral, I was under the impression the *Farragut* and the *Firebrand* are on station at the neutral zone waiting for the call from them in case they *do* get into trouble.”

The Admiral had to give her that point. “Yes, they are. But only if they receive the call. Until then, the answer is no.” Without further argument, he signed off. “Admiral Nance out.”

Captain Holmes was shocked, but not surprised. She had been dealing with pencil-pushing bureaucrats all her life. She preferred to act now and ask for forgiveness later.

She stabbed her finger down on the call button on her desk. “Get me the *Farragut*.”

On the bridge of the *Bloodwing*, Empress Ael i-Mhiessan t’Rllaillieu sat and watched as the *Rending Claw* launched a final barrage of torpedoes. She knew that her own shields were in very poor condition. Her strategy of hunting down the *Razor’s Edge* had scored the death of that ship – but had come at a cost. The *Claw* had managed to do a lot of damage to what remained of her own, and they were down to ten percent. This final salvo might just return them to the Elements.

At her side, Aidoann had managed to drag herself off the floor, a gash on her temple oozing green down her cheek. She could see the endgame; it was clear in her eyes. *Mnhei’sae* demanded that this battle be fought and won by themselves. They had fought a good fight. They would die well.

Yet it was clear in her eyes that there was regret there as well. Ael understood. She had always known. She gave her a brief smile. They had seconds left.

“Empress!”

On the viewscreen before them something amazing had happened. The Federation starship *Enterprise* had interposed itself between the *Claw* and the *Bloodwing*. The torpedoes flared brightly as they exploded on its shields, shaking the massive vessel, but it was clear the ship was mostly undamaged.

“Why did they do that?” Aidoann asked in wonder.

Ael was beginning to understand. She remembered Arrhae's words in her bunker only days before. Words of self-sacrifice and service. These were thoughts that she understood as a soldier, but the Rihannsu notion was still to protect only *us*. Starfleet helps and protects *others*, not just themselves. She had heard reports of it. She had seen it herself when Kirk had helped her in the past, but she had believed it to be only certain individuals who exhibited such ideals. However, now she was beginning to understand it was a much wider-held ideal.

"Because they care," she said, feeling shaken to the core. Quietly, sincerely, she added: "We matter to them, even if they don't matter to us." She paused and realisation struck home. "That's why, one day, they will win. One way or the other, their ideals will win."

The Sub-Lieutenant at communications turned and reported. "Empress, priority communication from ch'Rihan. It's from the Announcer. He says you are needed back in the Senate immediately. A vote of no confidence has been attempted."

Ael sat bolt upright in her chair. An attempt had been made on her right to rule the Empire. She turned to the engineering station. "How soon can we be at warp?"

The Sub-Commander serving sighed. She hated giving the Empress bad news. "Empress, our energy reserves are extremely low. It will take about a half hour before we can achieve warp, even if we save all the energy we draw from the singularity for propulsion alone."

Ael gritted her teeth. If she was anything, she was a pragmatist. However, she hated having to wait, especially when she felt the thrai with its teeth at her throat. "Understood. Do what you can to expedite things."

“Empress,” Aidoann said. What caught Ael’s attention mostly was her old friend’s tone of “what the?” She was gazing at the viewscreen into the distance, where a new ship had suddenly appeared. It was a Federation starship. “What is that doing here?” the security officer asked, part in wonder, and part in confusion.

Her tone both worried and concerned the Empress. She turned and looked into her friend’s eyes. They were glazed over, and she was swaying from side to side. “Someone get the Centurion down to the medical bay! Now!”

A guard near the door sprinted over and marched Aidoann straight out over to the lift and out of sight. Trying to put her oldest friend’s problem out of her mind, she turned to the newest development. “Identify that ship.”

The officer at science blinked. “Empress, the computer identifies it as the *USS Millennium NCC-2001*.”

Now it was the Empress’ turn to look confused. Her gaze moved from one ship named Millennium to the other. “How can both of them be here? I read the report of the original’s destruction. Admiral Piper herself reacted when I mentioned the death of her first officer.” Ael didn’t realise she was processing out loud. A notion came to her, an idea that shocked her to the core. This was something she had never hoped to see in her lifetime.

“Is it a spirit?” she heard one junior officer whisper to another.

“No,” she said, with all the authority she could muster at that moment. “That ship is from the past. It shouldn’t be here at all.”

“Damage Report!” Captain Krashtallash called as he batted away a small cloud of smoke that was threatening to get in his eyes and obscure his vision. Never mind the fact it was burning his sensitive nasal passages.

“Coming in now,” Judd replied from the Engineering station. “We’ve got minor outages across the ship. Nothing major, thank God!” This was then followed by some choice cuss words. “Ah spoke too soon! The cloaking device is offline!”

Crash fairly leapt out of his chair. “Get it back up!” he shouted.

From her place at Tactical, Ghost shook her head. “The cat’s out of the bag. The Romulans are targeting us, and the *Enterprise* is hailing us.” She gave the Caitian a wan smile. “We’ve been well and truly spotted.”

Crash froze in place. This was one contingency they had not considered. He did not believe it was his call to make. He gave a deep sigh of resignation and said: “Captain Piper, I don’t think we can just pretend we’re not really here.”

On the time ship, Sustasandage seemed ready to freak out. Having heard the report from the *Millennium’s* bridge, she stood and was about to speak, but Manny had been paying attention. She leapt to her feet and grabbed her descendant by the paws and pushed her down to the floor.

“Don’t you dare!” she roared with such vigour that everyone in the tiny space gave her the room.

After a beat, Piper asked: “Lieutenant?”

Without taking her eyes off Sustasandage, Manny angrily said: “She was about to beam us all out of here and leave.”

Both Pipers turned testy eyes on the future Cait and said in unison: “Why?”

Sus sadly, angrily made her case. “It’s standard procedure when a mission’s been as busted as this one. We should minimise the damage to this timeline as much as possible. My leaving will simply make this ship’s appearance seem like nothing more than a possible sensor echo or ghost once it disappears. The longer we linger the more damage we create.” She said it without malice, but it was clear she was very agitated as her tail twitched to and fro.

Piper Silayna said: “And that would mean that all we’ve done so far would have all been for nought.” She slitted her eyes, giving vent to her pent-up feelings of anger and loss. “I haven’t fought cyborgs, rogue time agents, Orion pirates and fruitcake future Romulans with massive ships just to have you piss off on us. No. We might be outed, but we can yet salvage this mission. I’ve made a career out of making lemonade out of lemons. This will just be business as usual.”

Her sister put her hand on her shoulder and gave it a squeeze. “Right on, Suzette. OK, we’ve gone from being bystanders to participants, but we may yet figure out what causes the star to go nova. We just need to be vigilant. It’ll come to us.” She then gave Sustasandage a steely-eyed glare. “And then you can take that knowledge back to the future and make sure this never happens again.”

The female on the floor was clearly torn. Her training as a time agent was warring against her faith in the people around her and her dedication to the task they had sworn themselves to. “How can you be so sure we can make this work?” she said, sounding as nervous as she looked, her black fur standing on end.

Spock answered that one serenely. “Captain Sustasandage, it is a simple case of “damned if you do, and damned if you don’t”. The *Millennium* is exposed, and if there is any hope of salvaging this mission, it is to carry on with the assistance of our other selves.”

Sus’s fur flattened somewhat, and she settled down. “Okay, then. We’ll do it your way.” She stood and addressed the ceiling. “Scanner, rephrase us and beam us *all* to the bridge of the *Millennium*.”

An instant later, Piper found herself standing next to Crash. “I have the Conn,” she said.

Crash nodded. “You have the Conn.” He stepped back and took over the communications board. “*Enterprise* is still hailing, Captain.”

Piper took a deep breath. Once more unto the breach... “Put them on screen.”

The chime of connection sounded and a face she was unfamiliar with appeared. He seemed youngish, but there was something about his eyes that said he had seen things that he wished he hadn’t. Choices that had to be made. He was a peacemaker, but Piper saw that he could be a man that could get the job done. A good man in a tough situation, she thought.

“This is Captain John Harriman of the *USS Enterprise*...” The man’s eyes narrowed as he took at the woman on the screen. “You’re *Captain* Piper alright, so you’re definitely a woman out of time. What brings you here, *Captain*?”

Piper gave him a polite smile. “I’m afraid that’s need-to-know, Captain. If it hadn’t been for, well, *whatever* my other self did a short time ago, you would never have known we were here

and we would have been on our merry way. It wasn't our intention to involve ourselves in your activities."

Harriman may have seemed affable, but he wasn't about to be put off easily. "All the same, Captain. It's not every day a ship from the past appears out the blue. Especially when there's another ship nearby with the same name. I can't help but wonder what you would be taking a trip into your *own future* to discover. Anything you learn would contaminate your own timeline."

Piper didn't like where this conversation was going. She kept her eyes on the screen but fired off a thought to Manny. *Make sure your husband gets that cloaking device fixed as quickly as he can.*

She didn't need to check that the message was passed on. She simply *knew* that Manny was on the move. She levelled her most serious gaze at the other captain and said: "Captain Harriman, I can assure you that our mission here is of the highest priority." She took a step towards him for emphasis, her eyes never moving from his. "There *is* no higher priority. The fate of the galaxy hangs in the balance."

Captain John Harriman was caught between a rock and a hard place. Here he was talking to Captain Piper, knowing damn certain that *Admiral* Piper was going to call in at any moment and take over, and after that, all bets were off. The woman on the screen was years younger than the Admiral, that was clear, and what he could see of the bridge behind her was out-of-date. He could also see, in the background, Captain Krashtallash, a being he was familiar with. The last time he'd come across him he'd been the master of the *T'Plana-Hath*, hadn't he? What was he

doing here? If they were people from the past, perhaps he had served under Piper before taking that post.

One thing he had noticed, this lady was much surer of herself, much more settled than Admiral Piper. Perhaps whatever had happened in her past to knock her off balance had not taken place yet?

“Captain, I would like to take you at your word, but you’ve arrived at the worst of times. As you can see, we’re deep inside the Romulan frontier on a mission of peace and your presence here could be misconstrued as an act of war.” There, that should help her put things in perspective, he thought.

Instead, Piper tilted her head to the side and gave him a look that simply said: ‘Duh.’

To both of their surprise, another being appeared on the viewscreen, aided by someone who was a dead ringer for Piper, except when she turned he had a shiny, artificial cheekbone, jaw and right eye. The elderly gent she was helping raised his head and shocked all present, especially the man behind John’s left shoulder.

“Spock!” John said, recognising the much older Vulcan. “What happened to you?” he asked.

He ignored the Starfleet officer and engaged his younger self. “Spock.”

Having regathered his wits, the middle-aged Ambassador Spock looked at his much older self and respectfully said: “Yes.”

“You were correct in your assessment regarding the Admiral’s state of mind. She must be relieved of command immediately before she commits more errors which will jeopardise this mission. Upon your return you must take her Mount Seleya. Do you understand me?” His words were serious

but measured. He neither raised his voice nor was forceful. He simply stated what needed to be done.

The younger Ambassador nodded. He knew he had the authority, given the situation, to make it happen. "I understand. Do you have any further suggestions?"

To the surprise of all, Spock said: "Yes, I do. I recommend you put Captain Piper in charge of the *Millennium-A* for the time being. She is best suited for the task."

John spun on the Ambassador. "You can't be serious. The Admiral will never stand for it."

Spock looked at him serenely, committed to his course. "She will have to, Captain. I have been aware that the Admiral is not herself. My older self has confirmed it. If we leave her in command, this mission will end in disaster. We must act now to save what we can."

As if the Universe was conspiring to make John's life more complicated, the comm's channel whistled. "Incoming message from the Empress, Captain. She's demanding to know why the other *Millennium* is here – and out of its time."

Harriman gave Spock a small smile. "She's a sharp one, isn't she?" he observed.

The Vulcan nodded quietly. "Yes, she has never missed a thing as far as I can recall. A formidable ally. I would never want to make her an enemy."

Message understood, thought Harriman. "Onscreen."

The image switched from the *Millennium* to the *Bloodwing*. "Empress," Harriman said, with a polite smile.

"Captain, are you ready to tell me why there are *two* ships named *Millennium* in our skies?" Ael was in no mood for niceties.

John kept his eyes on the screen. He knew his body language well enough to keep them right there. Don't look left. Don't look right. Either could be seen as being evasive. "They inform me they are here for nothing more than observation. Apparently, they were taken by surprise by the Admiral's cloak buster and revealed. I can assure you; we had no idea they were here at all."

Ael looked from John, who she had only just recently met, to Spock, who she had a long-standing association with. They had known one another for well over fifty years. Vulcans were known for their stoicism, but she didn't believe he had ever lied to her. "Spock?"

The Vulcan never wavered. "As the Captain said, Empress, they have no hostile intentions, and we did not know they were present until their cloak failed."

The Empress was not moved, or impressed. "All the same, Captain Harriman. I gave permission for your *two* ships to cross the Neutral Zone. I did not give permission for cloaked vessels to join you. As soon as the other *Millennium* is capable, I want them gone – preferably back to whenever they came from."

"I will pass that along, Empress," Harriman said. "*Enterprise* out."

Ten minutes later, Ambassador Spock, Sa'avik, Captains Piper, Piper Silayna and Harriman beamed over to the *Millennium-A* to have a chat with the Admiral who, strangely, had stayed silent during the entire exchange. This was after a very brief visit firstly to the *Millennium* by Harriman, Sa'avik and Spock, the latter who had quickly met his older self and mind-melded with. At the speed of thought, he had updated his younger

and, now completely aware of the situation, was guiding the *Enterprise* captain on the best course of action.

They hadn't been challenged in the transporter room where they had been met by Ghost Ryan. Both Pipers were struck by the age difference in their friend, but now was not the time for chit-chat. The Commander, they noted, simply nodded at them all and took them up to the bridge.

"Nice to see you're doing well, Ghost," Piper said, with a touch of charm as the lift was moving.

Caitlin looked at her, more than little surprised. "I haven't heard you talk like that since..."

The younger Piper sighed. "I know. Since Sarda died."

Ghost reacted. She reached out and slapped the emergency stop button next to the door, bringing the pod to a jolting halt. "How could you know that if you're from the past?"

Piper Silayna answered. "Our travels in time have had us meet an older Spock who filled us in."

Caitlin looked at her askance. "And *you*. I can understand her," she pointed at Piper, "being here from the past, but how can another variation of the Captain be here at all?"

Piper widened her eyes and gave her a hopeful smile. "Would you believe I fell down a rabbit hole and I found her there?"

The lady from the Emerald Isle looked up at her and almost laughed – almost. Instead, she gave her a toothy grin. "Okay, I'll give you that there are more things in heaven and earth..."

"...than are dreamt of in your philosophy." Piper gave her old friend's back a scratch, in exactly the same spot that she had the very first day they had met. "My double is from a

different timeline and we're both here to rescue the future – a future that may be at risk if the other me on the bridge keeps putting her foot in it.”

Caitlin was now certain she was dealing with *her* Piper, even if she was about twenty years younger. She could trust her. What depressed her was the realisation that, right now, she probably trusted her more than the Admiral in the nerve centre of this vessel. She reached behind her and restarted the lift. “Okay. Let’s do this.”

Chapter Fifteen

On the bridge of the *Millennium-A* the air was so thick the crew were finding it hard to breathe. Even Carman Valastro, who had a long history with the Admiral, was wondering what was going to become of the meeting with the people who had boarded the ship and who were currently on their way to the Bridge in the turbolift. They had not made clear their intentions.

Ever since the other *Millennium* had appeared on the viewscreen, the Admiral had seemed even more out of sorts. Everyone knew that she had not been herself since the destruction of their original ship about eight months ago, especially since that ship had taken their first officer, Sarda, with it. It had been an open secret that the Admiral and he had been psychically linked, practically since their very first mission together on that ship. They had been closer than friends, dearer than family. Some had wondered if they had been lovers, but even her dearest confidants knew better than to ask.

All the same, Carman knew grief. He was well acquainted with that demon. Before he had served with Piper, he had been married and has lost his pregnant, young wife in a flitter accident. It had come back to haunt him years later when he'd had to relive the experience through the tormenting schemes of a demented alien bent on torturing him to death in his memories. All the same, he knew that if you didn't deal with grief, it became a cruel master.

He didn't need to see Piper to know that she was not in control of her grief, it was in control of her. If it hadn't been for his respect for her and his desire to not ruin her career, he might

have acted already to ask her to step down for a time to get her act together. He wondered for a moment if he had the right priorities in mind. He really should be putting the ship and fleet ahead of his loyalty to his captain, but this was Piper, not just anybody. They had *history* – and a lot of it. Anything less than his best felt like betrayal.

The turbolift door shooshed open and Carman turned to see who was joining them. Out stepped Ambassador Spock, followed by Captain Harriman. No surprise there. They were followed by *two Captains Piper?* And Sa'avik? Okay, *one* Captain Piper he could understand, given the circumstances, but *two* of them? And what was with the prosthetic?

He turned and looked at the Admiral. She was staring at the viewscreen. She hadn't even turned to see who had come in. What was going on with her?

Suddenly, without preamble, she stood up. "Come with me," she said, deadpan, then she led them all into her ready room.

The Admiral took her seat behind the desk, reminding one and all whose ship this still was. Ambassador Spock stepped forward and folded himself elegantly into a chair opposite her, his simple, but elegant robe with its Vulcan symbols of authority on display making way for his strong frame. The others stood behind him and maintained a united front.

"What have you come to say, Spock?" the Admiral said, trying to sound friendly, but not quite pulling it off. Inside, she was anything but relaxed. She looked up at the faces behind the Vulcan and took them all in quickly. John, Sa'avik, she knew, but the two younger versions of herself bothered her. Neither of them sported the right hair with their burgundy bobs, and one of them

had clearly been badly injured at some point so that she'd needed a new eye. What bothered her the most that, whatever temporal shenanigans were going on here, it was seriously messed up if there were *two* alternates involved. She rubbed her temples. Temporal mechanics always gave her a headache.

As usual, at times like these, Doctor Eliza McKennah joined them unbidden. To the Admiral's delight, nobody seemed to mind. The doctor might be a pain-in-the-ass, but she could be a source of comfort as well when she needed someone to back her. "I'm here for you, Piper," she said quietly, giving her a small smile.

To the Admiral's annoyance, the Ambassador ignored the psychologist. "I am aware that you have been struggling with the emotional and psychological fallout that comes with the loss of your first officer, Sarda..."

Across the room, all of the telepaths felt the Admiral's emotional recoil to that bald statement. It was clear her feelings were dynamite and could be touched off by the tiniest spark.

Spock continued. "Sarda must have informed you, at some point, of the importance of coming to Mount Seleya on Vulcan so you could surrender his katra. It must be tearing you apart."

The Admiral looked at him coolly. "I don't know what you mean, Spock. Sarda didn't mind meld with me before he died, so he couldn't have passed it on to me before..." Her throat tightened and she found she couldn't quite finish the sentence.

Behind Spock, Piper's tolerance for her older self's behaviour was starting to grow thin. Piper Silayna took her hand and together they shared a brief exchange. They were so well

versed at doing so that the entire conversation took no longer than two seconds.

“Do you believe this BS?”

“I think you just can’t understand how an older version of you could have become this messed up.”

“Okay, that too, but who does she think she’s kidding?”

“Have some faith. Spock will get her to see the truth.”

“It’s either that or I go Rambo on her.”

Both women chuckled together inside their mind.

Spock continued. “We are all quite aware that you and Sarda were joined in an accidental marriage bond and had been for many years. Captain Piper here has confirmed this to me, and the fact that she still has this bond with her Sarda who is aboard the other *Millennium* right now.”

Once again, Admiral Piper was not able to keep her emotional angst from being broadcast to the other telepaths present, and she knew it. Inwardly she cursed. Her eyes betrayed her as she cast an envious glance at her younger self.

Captain Piper spoke up. “Sarda and I are already that much a part of each other that we can not only anticipate one another’s thoughts, I can practically know his mind when he’s not even around. We’ve discussed it, and with other Vulcans – *as you know* – and we’ve come to the conclusion that we’re a part of each other. We carry a part of each other’s soul – our katra. When Sarda dies, whenever that happens, I will have to go to Mount Seleya and surrender that to Vulcan so he can have a future in the katric archives where his knowledge and experience will not be lost. And as I’m a part of him, *I won’t be lost either*. What we have is a blessing, not a curse.” She stepped forward forcefully.

“That’s why I can’t understand why you’re being so selfish and keeping him to yourself.”

The Admiral flinched. “How dare you!”

“She’s right you know,” said Doctor McKennah, in her sweet, friendly tone, her huge pile of red hair barely under control. “I’ve been trying to tell you for ages.”

Admiral Piper glared at her. “Shut up!”

Eliza would not be silenced. “These people are your friends. They’re here to help you. You should be listening to them, not pushing them away.”

“Shut up, Doctor!”

Captain Piper was looking at the Admiral quizzically. “Who are you yelling at?”

Her older self glared back at her in angry wonderment. “Surely you remember Doctor Eliza McKennah, Elise McKennah’s twin sister!”

Piper turned and looked at the empty air that the Admiral was addressing and thought back. “Piper,” she said, addressing the Admiral. “I remember Elise McKennah well. She was a great shrink, but as far as I can recall, *she had no twin sister.*” To prove her point she addressed the ceiling. “Computer!”

“Working.”

“Confirm that the late Doctor Elise McKennah of the *USS Enterprise, NCC-1701*, had no twin sister.”

Within seconds, they had their result. “Confirmed. Doctor McKennah had no siblings.”

Admiral Piper’s eyes went wide in shock, and she fell back in her chair. “How can that be? Who the hell have I been talking to all this time?”

Frustrated, Piper sliced her hand through the air where she believed Doctor McKennah must have been standing. Sure enough, nobody was there.

From the Admiral's point of view. Piper's hand passed straight through Eliza's left shoulder. The counsellor gave her an almost loving smile, then her face, indeed her entire form changed into that of Sarda. Her eyes went wide, and her hand went to her mouth. "What have I done?" she asked, heartbroken, imploring.

Seen only by the Admiral, Sarda gave her a brief, sad smile. "I showed you the doctor because I hoped you would at least listen to her. You weren't listening to me, Piper. Now, hear the voices of these people and step down while you get the healing you need. Take me home."

Tears streaming down her face, the Admiral finally realised just how selfish she had been in not letting Sarda go, and just how wretched she had become. She looked about her at the others assembled with her, Spock, John Harriman, Sa'avik – one of her oldest and dearest friends – and these two other, younger versions of herself. It was like looking into a mirror and finding that you didn't like what you had become. Even the wounded version of herself was more together than she was.

Piper stood up, drew her uniform top down to straighten herself, then reached up and unclasped the admiral's badge from her shoulder strap. With great dignity, she placed it on the desk before her, then looked up into the eyes of her younger self.

"Computer, recognise Piper, Admiral. Authorisation code Echo-Lima-India-Sierra-Alpha-two-zero."

"Recognised," it responded.

“I surrender control of this vessel to the command of Captain Piper, present, who will give you her command codes. I also resign my commission as of this stardate.”

“Recognised.”

Captain Piper was surprised by the turn of events, but not so much that she was unwilling to supply her own command codes. She did so and took official command of the *Millennium-A*.

The Admiral gave a simple nod to those present, unwilling to wipe away the tears still staining her cheeks and unashamed of them. She was much more ashamed of her behaviour. As she was moving to leave, Piper took her by the arm.

“Go and see Merete, Piper. She’ll take care of you until you can get to Vulcan. Maybe you can put this behind you,” she said, trying to put a positive spin on things.

Her older self gave her a wiser almost-smile, which was more of a grimace. “You don’t get it, Piper. There’s no coming back from this.” With that said, she turned and left the room.

The people left behind looked at one another silently, all quietly lamenting the sad sunset of a brilliant career. For it to end like this was a tragedy.

Piper vowed to herself that it would not happen like this again. Not if she had her way.

As if on an agreed, silent cue, they all rose and began to make their own preparations to leave. Harriman let Sa’avik and Spock leave first and the door close behind them before he took a moment to speak to both Pipers.

“Captains, there’s something I need to mention to you before I go. While I don’t pretend to know, or even understand

what brought you to this time, I'm trusting you to bring the *Millennium-A* home. It seems clear that the primary mission of the peace summit is well and truly a bust, so I'm going to make immediate preparations for departure. As you know, I've got certain VIPs aboard, but they're secondary to the fact that I have a very important operative we've just recovered that I need to bring home. She has valuable intel that must be brought back to Starfleet. All other considerations will be considered secondary." He caught both of their gazes, making certain that his message was understood.

They knew what he meant. The operative had to get back to the Federation, even if it cost them all of their lives. Both women shared a brief glance and said in harmony: "We understand."

Harriman took them at their word, while also a little weirded out hearing the reply in the same voice in stereo. "Good hunting to you both," he said, before shaking their hands in turn. He then gave them a brief, charming smile then headed for the transporter room.

At was at that point Piper realised she needed to have a serious discussion with her sister.

On the bridge of the *USS Challenger*, Captain Jessica Holmes cast a worried look at her XO. She knew she was pushing her ship to the limits of her capabilities, and the ominous groaning sounds from her spaceframe were enough to have the bridge crew casting concerned glances at one another. Jessica didn't blame them. Most of those on the bridge had been under her command for a while now and were used to her impulsive nature, but, in this case, she was pushing those limits to the extreme. It would only

be natural if some of them thought she was might just be pushing their collective luck too far.

Maybe she had, she admitted to herself. But there were Starfleet personnel that needed the *Challenger* right now, not an hour from now, not a day, but right now. Some of those people had risked their lives for her in the past, and that was a debt that Jessica was going to repay.

Ellie Harrelson, her XO, had always been her anchor, the steady voice of reason that spoke in her head even when she wasn't around. That voice had saved Jessica more times than she cared to admit, but there was a time for caution, and there was a time for action. And right now ... the only voice she could hear was the one that kept screaming: "Do something!"

Well, now they were absolutely doing something.

"Have we been detected?" she asked.

Commander Ellie Harrelson looked at Jessica and scowled. "You mean, have the Romulans, whose space we've entered illegally on an ill-advised attempt at rescuing the *Enterprise* from a band of Klingons, found us yet?" She rolled her eyes. "Surprisingly, no."

Jessica gave her a tight smile. She needed Ellie on her side. "If it was you out there, all alone, I'd come for you, too. I hope you know that."

Harrelson sighed. She stepped over to the centre seat and, her eyes softening, said softly, so only the two of them could hear: "I know you would, Jess, that's the problem. I wouldn't be worth it. Even the *Enterprise* and the *Millennium* aren't worth it. They're not worth provoking an interstellar conflict over."

Jessica considered that for a moment before speaking before holding her XO's eyes with her own. "No Ellie, you are worth it... and so are they."

"And honestly, even if I thought about you and them differently, this conference is already in the recycler, Ellie. If the Klingons raid the party, and I'm worried they're already there, then all bets are off. The peace treaty is toast."

Her executive officer nodded her agreement on that point but offered one of her own. "That's possible, but how about this. What if the peace treaty has *already been signed*, and our showing up with guns blazing, without permission, destroys it? What then?"

While the thought genuinely hadn't occurred to Holmes, she quickly dismissed it. "I've never known any diplomatic mission to move *that* quickly, Ellie. No, the Klingons are going to kill whatever peace there was and the best we can do is pull our people out of the fire." She looked at the viewscreen and noticed that the last of the ion storm that Melisandra had used to disguise her trail had passed behind them. They were now in open space, making a beeline for Hobus at high warp. They may as well have put up a flare that said: "Hey, here we are!" "What's our ETA at Hobus?"

The lieutenant at helm responded: "Twenty-five minutes, Captain."

Ellie added, quietly, "If we don't blow ourselves up first."

"You're nuts!"

"I am not, and you know it. The senior staff know you, and I know they'll follow you. I need you to take over for me."

Piper Silayna looked her double, her sister, in the eye. “The *Millennium* is your ship, sis. Sarda is your first officer. Hell, Krashtallash is also a Captain by rank. Why do you want *me*?”

Piper took her by the hand and touched her mind. She showed her the confidence she had in her, the depth of her love for her crew, the faith she knew they had in her, and just how much she knew they would have in Suzette as well.

“I also need your experience. I know the crap is about to hit the fan and I need a woman who can hit the ground running. That’s you. Now, get your butt into gear and beam back to the ship.” She gave her all of her command codes. *“The Millennium doesn’t know the difference between the two of us, so it will respond to you just as it does to me. Go, lead your... our ship and help us both sort out this mess so we can go home.”*

At that moment, both of them felt an overwhelming sense that this could be it, the last time that they would be together. They pulled themselves together tightly, tears cascading down one another’s cheeks. Over the last year together, in subjective time, they had formed a bond that went far beyond sisterhood. They, too, had become a part of one another. They had shared so many adventures, had seen so many pains, they had even rescued their own mother from otherwise certain death, thereby securing their own existence. Now, here, in the ready room of the *Millennium-A*, they were grateful they were alone. They could share their feelings for one another without shame.

They pulled apart and looked each other in the eye.

Piper was the first to be able to speak. “Don’t get yourself killed, OK? We still have a job to do when this is all over, and I want to do it with you.”

Her duplicate leaned forward and kissed her on the cheek. “Back at you, sis. We’ve got a lot of living to do, so let’s make sure we *both* live through this.”

Piper returned the kiss, then they wiped their faces and tidied themselves up. Without leaving the room, Piper Silayna flicked open her communicator. “Piper Silayna to *Millennium*, one to beam up.”

Within seconds, she was gone, leaving Piper convinced she was not going to see her sister again in the flesh. It left her heart aching.

However, above all, she was a woman of duty. She pushed her feelings aside for the time being. Her ship was only a thousand kilometres away, and that was close enough for Amantasandage to hear her thoughts through the emptiness of space. She fired off her loudest beacon for her Tactical Officer to hear. She came right back.

“Yes, Captain?”

It took her all of a moment to explain her intentions to her friend, who she knew would pass it on to Sarda and Krashtallash.

“What’s the status of the ship?” Piper asked.

“All ships’ functions are up and running.” To Piper’s “hearing” Manny felt delighted.

“Good, let my other know I want you to cloak but stay on standby. Oh, and for God’s sake, don’t stay where you are!”

She could feel Manny’s laughter even from this distance. *“Yes, Captain. I’ll make sure she gets the message. I’ll be listening if you need anything.”*

“Thank you, my friend.”

Piper's eyes came back into focus, and she took a deep breath. Time to take on the beast, she thought. She stepped through the doors and onto the Bridge.

The eyes of the crew engaged her. Many of the people present were individuals she was familiar with, others she was not. It almost surprised her that Jason Nunn was at the conn. It had been a while since she had seen his face, and it shouldn't have surprised her that he would have been present in this timeline. Caitlin had clearly aged, but she was grateful that the woman's back injury hadn't permanently sidelined her as Merete had predicted years earlier. It pleased her to see Commander's bars on her shoulder.

Carman Valastro was also wearing Commander's bars. She was greeted by a black Caitian female who reminded her of Crash. Could this be one of his grown children?

Valastro stepped up to her as Piper approached the centre seat. "Captain?" he asked.

Piper nodded. "Yes, Carman, I'm Piper. From about twenty years ago. I can't tell you everything that's going on, but I can tell you that the Admiral has had a breakdown and she has resigned her commission."

The statement brought a sudden, amazed intake of breath from most on the bridge, except one person. Caitlin had always been a keen observer. To last this long as an ace pilot, she'd had to be. When the Admiral had stepped out of her ready room earlier and disappeared into the turbolift, she had noticed the missing rank insignia – and immediately understood the implications.

Piper found herself quickly encircled by her three highest ranking officers. They didn't look particularly friendly. It was

clear they had their suspicions. “Just to be clear,” she said, in that voice they all knew so well, “I have assumed command of this ship as of ten minutes ago, with the full understanding and acknowledgement of her previous commander. Captain Harriman and Ambassador Spock will verify it, if you insist. If you have any further concerns, call Sickbay and speak to the Admiral herself.”

The three commanders were stopped in their tracks. They weren’t about to call the Captain on *that* one. If the Admiral was still on board, and available to answer queries, then there was nothing to question.

Piper smiled, and the gesture warmed the hearts of those assembled before her. This was the Piper of old, a woman they sorely missed. A person who had died with her first officer, so many months before. “Now, who’s in charge of what around here?”

“Empress!”

Ael turned in her chair. As a woman of action, she detested waiting. Never mind the word from the medical bay was not good. Aidoann had been bleeding intracranially. They were not certain the Centurion would survive. After so many years of service to her empire, she knew the price of being a survivor was watching her fellows fall, one by one. However, there was no prize for being the last one standing. The only thing you hoped for was that it wasn’t pointless.

“Report!”

“We now have enough power for the journey to ch’Rihan. It won’t be at maximum warp, but we will be able to maintain warp three.”

Ael sighed. It would have to do. The trip would take a bit longer, but they would at least get there. “What is the status of the older *Millennium*?”

The view on the main screen shifted to the oldest of the Federation vessels present. It hadn’t moved since it had appeared. As if in answer to her query, it suddenly swivelled on its axis and began sliding away from the station. Then it shimmered... and was gone.

“Track it!” she called. She was not enamoured with the idea of cloaked, possibly unfriendly vessels flying around Rihannsu space.

Her science officer frowned at the screen. No matter how many different modes of scanning he applied, nothing he tried seemed to work. Embarrassed, he said: “I apologise, Empress. They don’t appear on any scan. They may have gone to warp.”

Ael flattened out her lips in angry annoyance. “You might hope so, Sub-Lieutenant, but if I know Piper, she’s not going anywhere. Not until she gets what she came for.” In her mind she added: *Whatever that might be. After all, what could a ship from the past possibly want from this moment from their future? If they’re not here to take an active part, or to disrupt it, what in all the Elements could they possibly gain from being here?* The thought threatened to give her a headache.

Regardless of Piper’s intentions, it was time for them to make a move. “Navigation, take us away from the station five hundred kiloluads, then engage warp drive. I want to see the light of Eison tomorrow if we can.”

“Yes, Empress!”

Ael noted it seemed to please her crew that they were on their way back to the homeworlds. Well, she thought, there was nothing like the light of her home sun.

As the ship peeled away from the station, she heard her ever-efficient comms officer informing them of their departure but being careful not to disclose their destination. *Bloodwing* never broadcast *that*. The image on the screen shifted and she felt herself relax. Even though this attempt at a peace treaty with the Federation had been aborted, the door had been opened a crack and light was shining through.

A few moments later, she felt the grav plates shift as the impulse drive shut down in preparation for warp drive. At that moment, something peculiar happened. Nothing.

Then she heard cursing from the officer at helm.

“What is it?” she ordered, concerned.

Before he could answer, a life-sized hologram of Reen t’Khenniell appeared in the centre of the bridge, and damn her if she wasn’t smiling. “Hello, *Empress*,” she sneered. “I just wanted to say this final word to you, you miserable pretender to the throne. I’ve locked you out of all your ships’ systems and set course for the centre of Hobus. You’ve got about five minutes before the outer skin of the ship melts anyhow, so I wouldn’t worry too much about that. I hope you enjoy the fires of Erebus. You’re going to get an early taste of them.” With that final word, the image winked out.

The cussing voice turned to worried. “Empress, the navigation computer has locked us into a course for the star.” As he was speaking, he was madly tapping away at the keyboard. By now he was beginning to lose composure. “I can’t get control!”

Empress Ael i-Mhiessan t'Rllaillieu looked up at the viewscreen as she found her ship turn on its axis, the screen filling with the bluish light of the giant star. She felt the ship's deck plates shift as her ship went to warp.

Chapter Sixteen

John Harriman watched the *Bloodwing* begin its journey out of the system on the *Enterprise's* main viewscreen. "I would say our job here is done," he said, knowing he was quoting one of his beloved movies, but not quite sure which one. "Let the *Millennium-A* know that we're heading back to Federation space."

He could hear his orders being carried out as he stepped down past the captain's chair and up to the navigator's console. "Plot us the quickest course for the Federation border and engage warp drive as soon as its available."

It took only a moment for his orders to be carried out. He wasn't happy about leaving the *Millennium* behind, even momentarily, but their precious cargo had to be returned to the Federation. He had no idea what Captain Piper was up to, but she was still Starfleet, and that was good enough for him.

After a nod of acknowledgement from his first officer, Demora Sulu, that all was in order, he said: "Execute."

As the crew went about their duties, Commander Terise Haleakala-Lobrutto stood in her new Starfleet uniform for the first time in so many years and watched as her Empress flew away. It was a moment filled with sorrow for her, as she watched her former life soar off in a different direction. However, for one who had spent most of her life living under the raptor's wings, she had learned one valuable lesson. In life, it was better to spread your wings and fly, and now it was time to fly home. In her heart, she said goodbye to the Rihannsu. She gripped the railing encircling the bridge and looked towards the future and wondered how her

favourite baseball team was faring. Perhaps, soon, she would find out.

Terise watched as the stars turned into streaks and she knew they were at warp. Nothing could catch them now.

She reached up and ran a finger over the tips of her ears. She knew there would be people who would suggest changing back to her previous appearance, but she decided against it. She'd had them for so long, why change now? Besides, she realised it might help her in the long run. After all, she had so much to teach the Federation about the Rihannsu. So much to teach about the Romulan Way.

Standing next to her husband on the bridge of their lead battlecruiser, the *Bloodthirsty*, Kaylor glared at the viewscreen as she watched the cursed *Enterprise* disappear into warp. With a glorious victory over both the Romulan and Federation flagships having just slipped from their grasp, she let out a curse. "Not now!" she cried. "Not when we're so close!"

Duras was not so easily dismayed. The *Enterprise* was never his primary mission. It would have been an extra cup of bloodwine, nothing more. The real prizes were the Romulan Empress and the Federation bitch, Piper, who had one too many times gotten in the way of his schemes to seize control of the Klingon Empire. It was if she had been born to complicate his life. After today, she would cease to be a problem.

"Keep us on a stealth approach," he said. "They have no reason to expect us, so no active scans, the *Millennium* is Starfleet's newest ship and will most likely have their latest sensor pack. She will no doubt pick up any sensor scan. I want us to encircle both ships and attack simultaneously. Don't worry about

the new version of the *Ingram*-class cruiser, they dropped the mega-phasers on this model, according to the latest intelligence reports.”

Kaylor gave him a toothy grin. Her husband had clearly thought this out well in advance. “Q’plah, Duras!” She turned and snarled at the comms officer. “Send that on a tight-beam, directional burst to the other ships.” Today was going to be a glorious day! She could practically taste the blood on her lips.

Hobus began looming larger on *Bloodwing*’s viewscreen. Ael’s crew had spent precious moments trying to override the ship’s systems. It was clear that the late Admiral’s people had done their job too well. There seemed to be no getting out of this. The Empress considered her options and there appeared to be only one.

“All hands, this is your Empress. Get to the nearest escape pod and abandon ship!” Her next action took many by surprise. She toggled a switch on her chair arm, which put out a broadband call. “This is the *Bloodwing* calling the Federation starships, we require your assistance. Our ship has been sabotaged and is on course for the star at Warp One.”

So stunned were her people that she would actually ask for help that most of them had stopped in their tracks, staring at her.

She glared at them. “What are you looking at?” she shouted. “Get off this ship!”

On the bridges of the two starships named *Millennium* two women named Piper were doing the same thing. They were

watching the path of the *Bloodwing*, wondering if their vision they had seen so long ago was about to become a reality.

On the *Millennium-A*, Piper came to a sudden realisation. She recalled a conversation she'd had with Spock days before and gave an unexpected order. "Raise shields. Battlestations."

From his position at Navigation, Carman looked back at her, wondering if he'd heard her rightly and partly because he didn't quite trust her yet. "Ma'am?"

Piper snapped to her feet. "You heard the order, mister!"

Around her, the crew moved to make it so. The lights turned crimson, and she noted the ship's status boards all showed a state of readiness. Excellent.

"Warm up the tractor beam."

Again, Carman was wondering what was going on, but he wasn't about to question the Captain's orders twice. He passed on the order.

On the viewscreen, Piper noted the *Bloodwing* did something odd. Instead of turning on a course for the Romulan homeworld – she had guessed its general direction – it turned towards the sun. She knew what was going to happen next.

"Set a pursuit course for the *Bloodwing*. Match course and, as soon as you can get close enough, grab it with a tractor beam."

From the Conn, Jason Nunn reported, "Captain the *Bloodwing* has gone to warp."

Piper wasn't surprised. "Overtake and match her speed. We need to make sure that ship never gets to the sun."

That statement raised the eyebrows of everyone in the room. Suddenly, it dawned on them all why this Piper was here, even though they had no idea how she might have learned it.

Jason hadn't earned his stripes in the fleet as an ace pilot for nothing. He brought the massive ship around in a graceful arc and took the ship to warp three. They overtook the *Bloodwing* in seconds and moments later they had matched velocity to get close enough for a tractor lock.

All the same, they were all looking at the viewscreen, worried that the star was getting awfully close for comfort.

To their surprise, the *Bloodwing* started shedding escape pods. Clearly, they knew they were in trouble. The trust level on the *Millennium-A's* bridge was high as they realised their new captain knew well ahead of time what was coming – and prepared for it.

“Drop ventral shields for the tractor and put me through to the Empress.”

To Ael's surprise, the viewscreen snapped on and a much younger image of Piper appeared – and she was wearing a Starfleet's *captain's* insignia. A fast thinker, she realised this woman must be from the other ship. Before she could speak, she could feel her ship jolt as it was grabbed by a tractor beam. The sounds of structural torque could be heard as the larger vessel began tugging it away from its intended course.

“Empress, I gather you've lost helm control,” Piper said, not bothering with the usual pleasantries.

Ael understood that now was not the time for useless explanations. “Yes, the *Bloodwing* has been sabotaged by t'Khenniel's people and put on course for the sun. My people cannot break the encryption locking out the computer.”

Piper seemed to consider the problem. She looked over her shoulder. “I'm going to beam over a couple of people, if you

don't mind. They might be able to help. Is there anyone still on board you want beamed over here?"

Aidoann. Ael realised that the medical bay probably would not have been able to evacuate the most critical patients. She told Piper of their plight.

The captain nodded. "I'll have them beamed right over."

The Empress took a second to glance down at her stats screen on her chair arm. It showed a marked deviation on their course. The *Millennium* had already succeeded in dragging her ship off their heading for the sun. As she watched, the angle kept increasing. Inwardly, she began to relax.

Behind her, she heard the sound of a transporter. She turned and looked and saw a large, black feline with an engineer's case, and an Andorian chan wearing Lieutenant's bars carrying a tricorder. The two of them immediately split up, the cat disappearing down the corridor at a run, the chan taking a chair at a science console.

On the screen, Piper said: "I've been told we have your doctors and wounded." She paused, as if not sure she should ask. "Do you want me to bring you over as well?"

Ael shook her head. "As long as there's a chance we can save this ship, no."

The human nodded her understanding. "I'd probably do the same thing if I was in your shoes." She frowned. "What?" She turned away from the screen. "You've got to be kidding." The screen went dark.

Sitting in his chair on the bridge of the *Bloodthirsty*, Duras savoured the hour. Years of preparation had culminated in this moment. He finally had the two women in this galaxy he

hated the most in his sights and neither of them knew he was coming. He would rather have done it face to face with his d'k tagh in his hand so he could plunge it into their hearts, but this would have to do.

At his side, his wife, Kaylor, just grinned. "Glorious!" she said, over and over. "The *Millennium* appears to have the wretched Romulan ship in a tractor beam."

Duras finished the thought for her. "Which means both of them have their shields down," he said. "This will be a quick fight."

"It will be a slaughter!" his wife said, delighted.

After all of the time and effort he had put into this moment, it seemed like a bit of an anticlimax to Duras if both ships were destroyed in the first thirty seconds. However, the Romulan Senator, Hathness, had assured him that his efforts here would cement their relationship and that, once the deed was done and the change of regime was over, their support would be formalized, and they would back him in his take-over of the Klingon Empire. You kill mine; I kill yours, was the old Klingon proverb.

Enough savouring, Duras thought. "Q'plah! Decloak and begin firing!"

The *Odysseus*-class starship was ready for battle, with everything charged, including its mega-phasers, which Admiral Piper had insisted be retained in this particular ship, so that as soon as the Klingon D-7 battle cruisers decloaked they were ready for them. One function of the ship's shields was they could be selectively deactivated, so only one small portion around the

tractor emitter was down, while the rest of the ship was protected by her trinary shields.

When the four D-7 class battlecruisers decloaked, they immediately opened fire. Two of them focussed their attention on the *Millennium*, the other two on the *Bloodwing*. It was their undoing.

While the two that opened fire on the *Bloodwing* scored hits on its warp nacelles, dropping it out of warp, the ship's computer immediately reacted and raised the shields. This protected the green-tinged vessel, but also had the unwanted side-effect of cutting the tractor beam.

The two ships that opened fire on the *Millennium* found their shots had no effect on the massive ship's trinary shielding and were unprepared for its already charged phasers – and megaphasers. The massive energies, supplied directly from the *Millennium's* warp core, impacted the Klingon's shields sending them into the ultraviolet, causing both ships to rock badly.

Now that they had followed the *Bloodwing* and secured from warp, their options became many and varied. From her place at the rear of the *Millennium-A's* bridge, Rebecca “Emu” Armytage said one word: “Scramble.”

At the rear of the great starship, the two huge clamshell doors quickly slid open as the pilots, who had been sitting in their fighters, lined up ready for battle, flew out into the void. The *Millennium* was at peak readiness, with *everything* prepared to fly, including its runabout. As soon as the word was given, the ship's two squadrons of fighters began pouring out of the rear of the starship, followed by its heavily armed runabout and ten shuttles. The *Millennium* was open for business.

From her place on the bridge of the original *Millennium*, Piper Silayna sat in the centre seat and watched the melee, concerned. She was worried for Piper, but she knew that ship she was on was built for a beating. She was more worried for the Empress, but she was also aware she was a resourceful woman. All the same, what bothered her the most was her dream. It was clear that ship falling into the sun was a *very bad thing*. These Klingons attacking right now were a gigantic pain in the ass.

Standing at her side, Sarda asked: “What are your intentions?”

There was something in the tone of his voice that, even though she didn’t know him that well, suggested he wasn’t just thinking about her alone. “*We* are clear that this ship is to stand by and stay out of things unless absolutely necessary. We’ve already complicated things enough. Piper needs to play this out and figure out what we came here to learn.”

“And then?”

She gave him a tight smile. “Then we complete our mission. For one, we tell Sustasandage what we’ve learned so the Time Agents can clean things up from their end.”

Sarda inclined his head, ever-so-slightly to the side. “How will you complete yours?”

Piper sighed. “We will use the Guardian to go to the past to make sure this doesn’t happen twice.”

Bronze, upswept eyebrows shot up in mild disbelief. “You are putting a lot of faith in this plan,” he said.

His new captain brought her mismatched eyes around to face him properly. She told him what she believed. “This whole mission has been on faith, Sarda. It’s brought us this far. It needs to carry us through.”

“Faith is not logical.”

Piper Silayna chuckled to herself at that one. “I’m sure Surak had to have a certain level of faith that his philosophies would be adopted by the Vulcan people over time, or what would have been the point? T’Pau needed to have faith in Jonathan Archer that they could carry out the plan to restore Kir’Shara to the Vulcan people. Vulcans are not without faith, Sarda.”

Sarda seemed unsure of what to do with that thought.

Coming to the rescue and fixing problems was in Jessica Holmes’ nature. What was also in her nature was finding peculiar ways of making it happen. Fortunately, an idea had come to her. After all, what was one little ship going to accomplish against *four* Klingon cruisers?

Ellie Harrelson stood at her side and kept shaking her head. “You’re out of your mind,” she said again. It was becoming a mantra.

The captain of the *Challenger* checked her chair display. Her guests were falling behind a little. “Helm, make sure we don’t lose them. Time to Hobus?”

“Two minutes.”

Jessica smiled to herself. Not too far behind. “Scan the system. I want to know what to expect.”

The answer took a moment. “Captain, there is a large space station, but no ships in orbit. However, there are six starships about one AU from the star. They scan as... one Romulan warbird, one Federation starship, *Odysseus*-class and four D-7 Klingon cruisers, and a ... runabout, and a number of Starfleet fighter craft.”

Captain and XO shared a shocked look. “Where’s the *Enterprise*?” they asked in unison, each dreading the worst.

“Scan for debris,” Holmes ordered. *Oh, God, I hope we’re not too late for them.*

“We’re still too far for a detailed scan,” was the reply.

Damn. “Send to our escorts. Scan the system and tell them: ‘I told you so’.”

On the *Bloodwing*, Hopetallash had her hands full working alongside the remainder of the Romulan engineering crew who had chosen to stay with the ship and try to figure out what had become of their newly insane computer systems. Fortunately, they had been given a short reprieve. The first shots had damaged the ship’s warp nacelles. The *Bloodwing* was now limited to impulse drive alone. However, she could exceed .5c with that – they had simply bought themselves time.

With the ship once again free of the tractor beam, Hope found that the computer’s deranged nav system had once more put them on course for Hobus.

Being the sort of engineer who thought outside the box, Hope had decided to tackle the problem from a different angle. Her attitude was simple: pull the plug. Her problems increased when she found that the ship wasn’t powered by anything that she was familiar with.

The Sub-Commander in charge of Engineering, Varok, looked at her as if she was a complete moron. “Our superior Rihannsu engineers have devised a way of tapping into the energies of a quantum singularity. They found a way to create a temporary, forced singularity and we harness the energies it

releases from the event horizon when we trickle in small amounts of matter.”

Hopetallash was no dummy. She knew of V404 Cygni and other systems where the black holes they contained released ridiculous amounts of energy as the matter was being annihilated. However, the whole notion carried enormous risk. “How do you keep the singularity from eating us as well?” she asked, the scientist overcoming the sceptic within her.

Varok was pleased to give her a tour. “Our earlier models did have issues with the odd runaway singularity. Some of our warbirds simply vanished whilst on patrol.”

Hope made a disgusted face. A runaway singularity suddenly eating the ship it was supposed to be powering was a horrifying notion. She was certain she was in for some sleepless nights in the coming days.

As Varok could not read Caitian expressions, he missed it completely. “However, we overcame this shortcoming by installing self-contained shielding for the device. As long as it runs, it will continue to internally supply power to its own shielding that not only protects us from it, but also contains it. The only two channels open to it are the ports that allow ingress and egress of matter and energy.”

A good thing black holes aren't intelligent, Hopetallash thought to herself. *It just might figure a way out of that*. Hope did see a flaw in the design. “You can't possibly require just the right amount of energy you need at any given time. You must have a way of storing it for use for flight, etc.”

The Romulan gave her her due. Perhaps she wasn't as stupid as he thought. “Yes, you are correct. Right now, our

capacitors are at..." he glanced off to the side, "fifty-three percent, and dropping."

At that moment, the floor shook again from another strike on their shields. Varok swore under his breath. "Cursed Klingons!" he shouted. "As if we didn't have enough to worry about."

Hope's eyes were drawn to the Engineering console, her mind turning over and over. "Varok, are you telling me that this ship's power source has shielding powerful enough to protect you from a black hole and you from it – and that extends to the machinery that houses it. So, if this ship was destroyed, the singularity would survive?"

Varok seemed pleased. "Yes, the computers that control the device are secured by a fractal encryption code. Even if an enemy were to recover it after a fight, they couldn't use it."

Hope gave him a look of derision. "Not if someone left it running. It would continue to suck in whatever it was being fed and emitting energy. Whoever found it could enjoy all that lovely, cheap energy."

Her Romulan host shook his head, no. "We could shut it down from a distance."

The female Caitian narrowed her eyes as she considered that thought. "How? Subspace transmissions won't work that close to a singularity, neither will UHF or laser. Are you telling me you'd use VHF?"

Varok shrugged. "Twenty-seven megacycles, to be exact."

The pieces fell together in Hope's mind. "Now I know we need to shut down this ship's power plant," she said, determined.

Varok was not so sure. “Why?” he asked.

Hope pointed at the panel that housed the singularity. “Because if that monstrosity falls into the sun it’ll begin to eat it. In a matter of time, the drive will destabilise it and the star will either collapse or it will go supernova.”

“How can you be so certain?” Varok said, partly the arrogant Romulan, partly convinced.

Hope crossed her arms and looked him in the eye. “My uncle once told me all about how his ancestors loved the old Citizen’s Band radio – 27 megahertz. It was particularly susceptible to interference from *solar* activity, QRN, I think he called it. If this thing gets anywhere near the sun, you won’t be able to control it because it will never hear you over the noise.”

Varok gulped. “Then we had better “pull the plug”, as you would put it.”

At that moment, the ship was rocked by a massive explosion. The two engineers were flung against the consoles like rag dolls, and both slid to the floor, very still.

Chapter Seventeen

Stepping carefully through the remains of what, until recently, had been the main docks of ch'Havran, Ama t'Varranajj, Admiral of the Imperial Navy had to admire the tenacity of the Remans. Their corpses still littered the floor, the room only just having been declared safe after the nerve gas had finally broken down into compounds that were no longer harmful. It took only an hour for it to do so.

Marvellous stuff, she thought. *You could kill off the entire population of a planet, then move in that afternoon.* She stopped herself. Upon self-examination, she realised she had been spending too much time in the presence of certain Rihannsu senators. They were beginning to rub off on her. It gave her the creeps.

The sounds of restoration were heard as the Rihannsu maintenance parties worked on fixing the doors, which had been fused shut by the rebels. Reman workers had only just arrived to start cleaning up the mess, but they had strict orders to leave the bodies alone, and nobody was to come anywhere near the shuttle.

Ama used her long, slender legs to avoid the many Reman dead who remained clustered near it and stepped over them lightly. She felt for them, truly, but there was only so much she could do for the neglected and downtrodden people of this world. The people here on the floor had found out just how pointless armed resistance was. Not too many of them were armed, she

found, but what she did find, when she reached the shuttle, was disturbing.

She had begun her inspection of the area from the outside and worked in. Now she was near the centre, she was finding more and more Remans who were armed, and they all had one thing in common.

As Ama stepped up onto the ramp, she knelt next to a Reman female and took the disruptor from her hand. It slid from her fingers and her hand fell with a slap against her exposed midriff. Ama turned the weapon over in her hand, then looked at the communications device on the female's belt. It had the same red insignia on it. The small grenade she found in her pocket was the same. Ama was about to move on and examine another body when she noticed something peculiar about it. The fingers were moving, ever so slightly.

The Admiral stretched out her right hand and clutched the Reman woman's exposed elbow and felt for the soft spot where she knew she might find a pulse. It was weak, but there was one.

"The Elements never cease to amaze me," she said under her breath. She turned and called: "Medic!"

A Medical Sub-Lieutenant raced over at her call. "Yes, Admiral."

Ama indicated Vashti on the floor. "This female is still alive. Have her transported up to my ship and, if the doctors can help her, have her prepared for interrogation."

As the medtech worked on Vashti, Ama felt a pang of sympathy for the young female. She might have been better off dead. She turned and called: "Make a thorough scan of the rest of the bodies. Make certain they are actually dead."

The Admiral knew she was doing Vashti no favours saving her life. She was much better off with the Elements.

The pressure of the object in her hand brought her attention back to it. She looked at the disruptor and said to herself: “Now, Remans, where under Eism did you get a Klingon weapon?”

She watched as the techs beamed out with the Raman female. She knew she was unlikely to get any useful information from her. However, her next duty was clear. She had to report her find, and it was no doubt going to cause an uproar in the Senate.

With the formal thud, thud, thud of the golden staff, the Announcer called the Senate to order. What they had to discuss was of the highest importance. It had better be, the old man thought. This was fast getting tiresome without the Empress to keep things in order as, once more, his attempts to contact her had proven fruitless.

Once the Senators had finally taken their seats, the Announcer felt a pang of sadness at once more noting the absence of Senator t’llhweiir, who was still in the Empress’ company. He opened the floor. “The senate will now hear the report from Admiral t’Varranajj.”

Ama hadn’t wasted any time since her discovery on ch’Havran. The Raman female was a long way from being healthy enough to question, and she still believed she would gain little from her anyway. What she had learned *had* to come to the attention of the Senate, but what bothered her was whether certain elements already knew of it. After all, how did a small band of Raman rebels gain access to Klingon weapons? There was no

way the Klingons could have accessed the Remans directly. She doubted alien connections could have made it possible, they would have never gotten past the Tal Shiar. That left the Rihannsu, and the people with the best access were those in the Great Houses, or the Tal Shiar themselves – or both – she didn't discount that possibility, not for a nanosecond.

What she was hoping to gain was some insight from this little game she was playing. Her report might reveal some of the players.

“After a short delay, the small insurrection on ch'Havran has been dealt with. The players are deceased” – she kept that card close to her chest – “and the docks are now being restored to functional order. I have it on good report that they will be back to full operation within seventy-two hours.”

There were positive murmurings from around the room, but she noticed a pair of very curious eyes coming from Senator Hathness, as if he was expecting more. Perhaps he was the player she was looking for. If he was, she must remember to make certain to engage him in a game of chance some time. She would take him for every credit with that face.

“What I found disturbing, Senators, was the fact that the Remans were all armed with these.” She held up a deactivated Klingon disruptor, as no weapon of any sort was allowed in the chambers, with one exception, of course. She took the Klingon communicator out of a pocket and held it high, then passed them to the Announcer, who showed them to the Senators. They could clearly see the markings. The surprise, and outrage, was loud, and getting louder. Cries of “Vengeance!” and much worse, including some epithets that were new to Ama's ears, were being bandied about.

She noted most were surprised, but Hathness wasn't. Once again, he was a poor card player. Ama almost pitied the man. He was never going to get very far in politics if he was going to be so easy to read.

Then it hit her. He had gotten this far in politics because he *was* this easy to read. Hathness was nothing more than a puppet, dancing on someone else's strings. It was then that she realised who was pulling them, and it was nobody in this room. They were all spoiled pretenders to the throne. The true power was behind the throne, and it had always been the Tal Shiar. She could almost see the strings as Hathness waved his arms around in mock hysteria.

"We must have vengeance against the Klingons!" he cried, along with his fellows.

It was at that moment that Ama's communicator buzzed on her hip. She ripped it off and put it to her ear. She knew that it would have to be urgent for anyone to bother her here, of all places, while the Senate was in order. What she heard floored her.

She held up a hand for silence. When it didn't come within seconds she looked to the Announcer. Her eyes were pleading, and he got the message.

Bang! Bang! Bang! "Silence!" he called. "Can't you see the Admiral has something urgent which she needs to report to you about!"

Ama's eyes were wide in shock. "I've heard from the Hobus starbase and from two of our Warbirds. The Empress' ship, the *Bloodwing*, has come under attack by four Klingon battle cruisers, while she was on a peace mission with some Federation representatives. They have come to her aid, but right now they're fighting a pitched battle and it could go either way. It seems the

Empress' ship has been damaged and can't fight back. Oh, Elements, this is not a good day for the Empire!"

To her surprise, there were a good many Senators who didn't seemed the least bit sorry that their Empress was in trouble. In fact, they seemed delighted. Ama was right, it wasn't a good day for the Empire, not a good day at all!

Senator Hathness chose that moment to rise to his feet and said in his most imperious tone, "It seems that the Empress has fallen victim to a plot against her and against the Rihannsu Empire by our eternal foe, the *Klivam*ⁱ. They have tried to destabilise our economy and our way of life by raising up the disaffected on ch'Havran – which at the very least would have damaged our energy resources and mineral supply, but it could have ended in the destruction of our entire solar system if they had detonated their devices! Now, they seek to finish the job by chopping the head off our political body by trying to assassinate our beloved Empress. Now, if the Empress hadn't been off at Hobus trying to make peace with the *Federation*" – the word dripped with scorn – "she might have been present to manage the situation to prevent these failures. At the very least, the Klingons would not have dared attack her on the homeworlds! Perhaps this is not the time to be thinking of peace but preparing for war!"

The Admiral realised the man's statement was so full of fallacies it was not funny. However, she knew the people here were gullible enough to believe most of what he was saying – or just use it as an excuse. After all, many of them were more about the appearance than the substance. That was the nature of politics, after all, wasn't it?

Ama wondered that, even if the Empress should somehow survive this day, whether she would still have a throne to return home to. Perhaps not.

Chapter Eighteen

The *USS Challenger* dropped out of warp one hundred kilometres away from the fracas, closely followed by two old-style Romulan warbirds that Jessica had managed to pick up along the way.

Jessica stood and viewed the three-dimensional map of the firefight on the main viewscreen and quickly chose her target. It was clear the *Millennium* was holding her own, but the Empress' ship was coming under heavy fire. If she was going to get the Romulan warbirds off her back, she was going to have to give them a reason.

Reaching up, Holmes quickly marked the four Klingon ships. "Alpha, Beta, Gamma and Delta," she stated out loud, so her crew could follow her designation of the targets. "The Romulan ships are R one, two and three." One being the Empress' ship and two and three the following warbirds. "Bring us into flanking position of Gamma. Our scans show that his shields have already been weakened on the starboard side near his nacelle. Let's hit him hard there." Captain Holmes turned to her helmsman. "Bring us in at full impulse power, and make sure you don't get in the way of any of the *Millennium's* fighters." She shook her head in wonder as the screen was filled with flying dots, whizzing this way and that. "I keep forgetting that ship carries an arsenal."

At the same time, her XO had been co-ordinating with the comms officer. "Let them know we're going after Gamma, and if they have any better ideas to let us know. Oh, and if they have

any notions of how to get the Romulan warbirds off our backs, that would be a great help.”

Commander tr’Janara had been enjoying a relatively uneventful day studying the ion storm that had been passing through their space when it had been rudely interrupted by a Federation starship, of all things! Its captain had claimed to be on a mission of mercy to Hobus, and that the peace mission there was under threat from a Klingon attack force.

Of course, he had never heard anything so preposterous before in his life. He certainly wasn’t going to stand for a Federation starship being this far into their territory, so he assumed it must be some form of espionage and took off after them. His was an older warbird, but he was confident he could catch the mad female in the sleek, Federation starship. What bothered him was the fact that she seemed to go out of her way to attract the attention of *another* warbird on their way to Hobus.

That ship had also joined in the pursuit.

There were several things that had bothered him about this situation. Both Rihannsu vessels were older models, that was why they were being used as science and cargo ships – far behind anything close to a battle line as they were not up to modern specs. The starship they were chasing was fairly new and yet they managed to keep pace with it, as if they *wanted* them to follow them.

It was as if the female actually believed her story. The woman was clearly *nohtho*ⁱⁱ, no questions about it. Neither of the ship captains had heard anything about a peace mission, and why it would be taking place all the way out at Hobus made no sense whatsoever.

However, when they dropped out of warp under the bright, blue light of Hobus and saw the many, buzzing lights of Rihannsu, Federation and Klingon ships, her story was beginning to look more plausible. All the same, the Rihannsu had a saying: “Distrust and verify”.

“Call the Empress’ ship. We must know what is going on here.”

Duras was watching the main viewer and beginning to wonder what went wrong. The shield strength gauges of all four of his ships were slowly declining, and now he found that he was no longer facing two ships, he was facing five *and* thirty-one flying pests that were draining their shields at an alarming rate.

“Status of the *Millennium*’s shields,” he ordered.

There was a moment’s hesitation from the tactical officer. Duras, infuriated, turned and glared at him. “Their ship has trinary shields. They have only lost the outer layer.”

Infuriated, Duras slapped his chair arm. “Concentrate your firepower on the *Bloodwing*. I want that ship vapourised!”

“Yes, sir.”

Kaylor pointed out: “We’re out of position for a clear shot, Duras.”

Her husband saw it. Annoyed, he said. “Z minus 2 kellicams.”

On her tactical display, Piper saw what was happening as clear as day. Alpha could see he was getting nowhere firing on her, so he was going after the weaker target. “Place us between *Bloodwing* and the flanking Klingon warbird,” she said. “Our

shields can take the beating. Hers can't. Bring us about, nose to nose with that ship and hit it with everything we've got."

Piper stood in the middle of the bridge, a rock-solid force in the centre of the storm. Around her, officers raced to get the job done. She could see Jason Nunn manoeuvring the ship into position, whilst swinging the vessel around. Behind her, she could hear Caitlin charging up the main batteries, while Emu kept her fighters flying and returning to the ship if they were damaged.

All the while, she realised their relative position was drawing ever so slowly closer to the star. They were running out of time.

As the Klingon ship kept moving, trying to find a place to attack, the *Millennium* found its optimal firing position.

"Let 'em have it," Piper growled.

The *Odysseus*-class has *three* forward firing torpedo launchers, five phaser pods on the top and bottom of the saucer and megaphasers on both warp nacelles. The ship opened fire with all of them *simultaneously*. The Klingon ship reeled as if it had suddenly run into an invisible brick wall. Caitlin kept the barrage going, wearing down the enemy ship's forward shields until they collapsed. Now totally exposed to this merciless hail of energy, the forward pod of the ship exploded like a microwaved egg. The ship, now nothing more than a headless chicken arcing energy in all directions, spun off towards the star. Piper let it go. There was little chance there would be survivors in that wreck.

She turned to the comms officer. "Open hailing frequencies." She received a nod. "This is Piper, in command of the *USS Millennium* to the Klingon ships attacking us," she said coldly. "Who's next?"

“You’re got to hand it to these guys,” Ellie Harrelson said grudgingly. “They don’t give up easily.”

Her captain shrugged. “You know what a hundred thousand Klingons have said before. Today...”

“...Is a good day to die,” the entire bridge crew said in unison.

Both Captain and XO had a dark chuckle at that one. It was good to break the tension with a little humour.

“Status of shields,” Jessica asked.

“Down to fifty percent,” their tactical officer replied.

The captain frowned. She had hoped that a little sanity might have prevailed after Piper’s pronouncement over the open airwaves. After the *Millennium* had made mincemeat of the D-7 that had tried to flank the Empress’ ship, she had hoped the tide had turned. However, it seemed to make the Klingons even madder.

The three remaining Klingon cruisers redoubled their efforts to destroy the *S’harien*-class warship, while trying to fend off the myriad of flying pests and the *Challenger* – especially as the *Millennium* now had nothing better to do.

Now, it appeared the Romulan commanders were taking a page out of Piper’s rule book and following her example. They were moving to interpose themselves in the line of fire to protect their Empress.

Jessica leapt from her chair. “No!”

However, it was far too late to do anything about it. Even though both warbirds were firing back at their oppressors, the two vessels were woefully out of date and underarmed for this battle. It took only moments for their shields to collapse and for the

Klingon's weapons to play over the naked hull plating of the two ships. They exploded in two-part harmony.

Rocked by their brave, but pointless, sacrifice, Jessica slumped back into her chair. It was now down to the two Federation starships and their fighter craft. The sad fact was that, even though she was the commander of a heavy cruiser, the *Challenger* was now operating as a support and escort craft for the *Millennium*, which was a space control vessel. It wasn't that the *Challenger* didn't carry an impressive amount of firepower, she was actually one of the most durable and capable designs ever produced by Starfleet. However, ships like the *Millennium* were a completely different standard, essentially a cross between the twentieth century analogue of battleship and aircraft carrier. She had capabilities that a ship like the *Challenger* couldn't match.

Jessica realised it was time to put in a call to the big gun, and for one of the first times since she had taken command, the *Challenger* wasn't it. "Hail the *Millennium*."

"Captain, the *Challenger* is calling."

It was a weird enough day, Piper thought. I never expected to have support from a ship that's a dead ringer for Jim's out in the middle of nowhere at a time like this.

"Line us up for the next Klingon ship and give them the same treatment. If that doesn't get their attention, nothing will." She then turned to the comms officer. "Put the Captain of the *Challenger* on screen."

With the chime of connection, the image of Jessica Holmes appeared on the viewscreen. Piper didn't recall meeting her previously, but the intelligence in the fit, young woman, with

short, dark hair was unmistakable. “How can we assist you, *Millennium*?”

Piper looked down at her tactical display and sent it over to Jessica wirelessly. She tagged the remaining Klingon vessels. “I’m going after Gamma here and I’m going to give him the same lesson I gave his friend. I want you to go after Delta here” – it was the ship furthest from hers – “and I want you to royally piss him off. Do whatever you have to to get him off the *Bloodwing*’s ass. I’m going to sick the fighters on Beta.”

Jessica nodded and gave her a gallows smile. “Happy hunting, Captain,” she said.

“And you, Captain,” Piper said confidently. “We’ll have a drink when this is over.”

Holmes gave her a friendly wink. “You’re on.”

As the *Bloodwing* was slowly dying around the Empress, her captain had never felt so helpless before in her life. Her whole life hung in the balance, hinging on forces completely out of her power, and it infuriated her. For twenty years she had held a position of nearly absolute power in the Romulan Empire, and now she was the prize in somebody else’s contest. This was not the way her story was supposed to end.

There was one thing she was impressed with, however. Her people had built a very sturdy ship. It had stood up to the pummelling the Klingons had dished out so far and the shields had yet to fail. The *S’harien*-class had a new, regenerative form of shielding that was powered by this ship’s quantum singularity. It should continue virtually indefinitely – theoretically. That was what the engineers had said.

Practice was another thing entirely. On her very first mission, a *S'harien* had nearly been bested by a Klingon, and it had taken many redesigns to get it working as well as it was today. All the same, the cracks were showing. Although the shields were still holding, the mechanisms keeping them up were very close to overload, such were the energies being directed at them. You can only dissipate that much energy into space at one time. The only reason they had nearly failed in their earlier fight was the repeated use of plasma bolts. Even her new shields couldn't contain them. Fortunately for her, Klingons didn't use *them*.

The smell of burning insulation and opticable was hanging in the air. Ael knew it was only a matter of time before something important finally blew and her ship was nothing more than floating debris.

There were few people left on the ship who could help. The Andorian lieutenant from the *Millennium*, Koss, was still working on the computer, trying to break the encryption on the lockout that had them still trying to fly into the sun. It was nice to be protected from the Klingons by the shields, but they were not going to be sufficient from the forces within a star once they arrived.

Realising there was little she could achieve here, Ael decided to see if she could help in engineering. Telling Koss where she was going, she headed down the corridor and, five minutes later, she arrived to find the room a mess. Panels were blown out, control surfaces were dark, and the only two people on duty were slumped on the floor, possibly dead.

She stepped forward and checked on Varok first. Knowing a lot more about Rihannsu physiology, she checked for

a pulse. She didn't find one. She closed his eyes that were staring into nothingness, then turned her attention to the Starfleet officer.

"Where do you look for the pulse on a cat?" she asked herself. She felt about the being's paws but didn't find anything. It did seem to still be warm, but that could have just been the fur. She felt around the joints but got nowhere. Then inspiration stuck her. She forced open an eye. The creature's pupil dilated. She was alive!

The light seemed to switch on something in Hopetallash's brain. She began to stir. Ael let go of her and stepped back to give her space.

Hope looked up at her and blearily asked: "Did you get the number of that truck?"

Ael had no idea what the odd being was on about. She was none the wiser that Hope had spent a fair amount of time watching old earth movies with her uncle Judd.

The feline shook her head, and instantly regretted it. She gripped her skull with both paws as if it would stop it from exploding. Stars danced before her eyes. "Ooooh. That was a baaaad idea. Let's not do that again." She opened her eyes once more and looked at Ael. She closed one eye, then opened it. "I'm supposed to know you, aren't I?"

Ael realised the explosion must have rattled the Commander's brain more than just a mild concussion. Worst case scenario, she might even be bleeding intracranially, like Aidoann.

The thought of her old friend was a distraction that she didn't need at that moment, and she had to drag herself back to the present. She looked about the room for a med pack. She found one on the wall and opened it. She located a diagnostic

scanner and ran it over Hope's skull. She just hoped it would work on aliens.

The readout was concerning. "According to this, you have a bad concussion, Commander," Ael said, genuinely worried. This female was possibly the only hope for saving not only this ship but those still aboard him.

Hope sucked in a deep breath and tried to clear her thoughts in the same moment. Her mind was a blaze of pain, but she knew that right here and now there was little she could do about that. She still had a job to do. She slowly got to her feet, with Ael's help, and took stock of the situation. As she took in the contents of the room, her memories started coming back to her. She looked sadly down at Varok and gently shook her head. "Poor man." Hope began tapping on different computer surfaces, but nothing was responding. She turned to the Empress.

"Excuse me, Ma'am, but are these interfaces geared for Romulans only?"

Ael looked at her in surprise. "No," she said. "Not as far as I know." She stepped over and tried the interfaces herself. She got no response, either. She tried several different surfaces, and nothing came online. "Why is that so important?" She asked because there was something in the Caitian's voice that told her the matter was urgent.

Hope turned to her and told her what she'd told Varok. Ael was stunned by the notion that her people might have accidentally created a device of mass destruction.

"Empress, we need to get these systems online so I can turn your singularity off. If I can't, and this ship *does* fall into the sun, then it's only a matter of time before the Hobus star goes supernova."

Her statement was said with such gravitas that Ael was galvanised into action. “Then let us see if we can get these consoles working again.”

As Captain Holmes ordered the *Challenger* angle towards the ship designated “Delta”, she mulled over in her mind Piper’s words. “Send this on as powerful a signal that we can generate to Delta so that he cannot miss hearing it.”

“Channel open, Ma’am.”

“You turn from battle, coward, to seek a lesser foe. Do you not remember blHnuchⁱⁱⁱ, you act under the naked stars, each seeing and remembering your quvHa^{iv}!! You cannot hide from their view ha’DlbaH^v!! Turn and face me if you dare!!”

Ellie stepped up next to her and grimaced. “I take it that was less than complimentary? The universal translator choked on some of that.”

“Well, if you consider a formal challenge given to a coward to redeem his honour in blood, then yes, it was uncomplimentary.”

“Oh,” replied Harrelson.

“Well, Captain Piper did say to piss him off,” Jessica said. “That should definitely get the job done.”

It took all of five seconds for the ship marked “Delta” to shift position and start coming after the *Challenger*. “Take us on a bearing...” she looked down at her chair display. “135 mark 43. Warp three for forty-two seconds.”

“Aye, Captain.”

The *Challenger* swung about gracefully and quickly slid into warp for forty-two seconds. The Klingon ship was quick to follow. Jessica watched her scanners.

“They’re right on our tail,” Ellie observed, sounding as worried as she was.

Jessica smiled to herself. “Good. I want them looking at our butt and not ahead.”

On the forty-second second, the ship dropped out of warp, right in front of the Romulan space station. Its Commander had been told that, for the duration, all Federation vessels were to be considered ‘friendly’.

Klingon vessels were not.

Romulan space stations are very well armed. As soon as the D-7 dropped out of warp the station started firing on it. It was all the pilot of the *Challenger* could do to keep their ship out of the way of the hail of fire.

They dropped down below it and added some of their own.

“High stress turn to port, fire as you bear,” Captain Holmes ordered.

The *Challenger* pivoted on her axis like a ballerina, using high energy IM Pulses in opposing directions to push the bow to port and the aft to starboard. As they bore, all six of *Challenger*’s heavy phaser banks shredded through the remains of the D-7’s shields, until she turned fully to face the Klingon ship and streams of photon torpedoes, glowing a brilliant blue, erupted from her forward launchers towards the stunned D-7.

The photons struck directly on the head of the Battlecruiser, penetrated inside and detonated, causing a cascade of explosions which obliterated the forward half of the ship until nothing was left but the spinning flaming remains of her engineering hull. Now brainless and mostly harmless, the

Romulans did not cease their attack. They kept firing until there was nothing remaining but pellet-sized pieces of metal.

“Well, maybe he wasn’t a blHnuch, just a qoH^{vi},” Jessica said to no one in particular. “blHnuch’s live longer.”

Holmes toggled her comms for a general hail. “*Challenger* to the Romulan station. Thanks for the assist.”

The reply was dark. “The only good Klingon is a dead Klingon. Just bring our Empress back and we’ll call it even.”

Jessica nodded to herself. “We’ll do the best we can. *Challenger* out.”

Gamma exploded in a huge ball of gas and plasma. Seeing it go gave Piper no pleasure. She had hoped that the Klingons had gotten the idea the first time round. She ordered the ship’s bow turned on Beta and, to her surprise, the ship broke off. It quickly pushed up and over the Romulan vessel, and disappeared into warp.

Carman stepped up next to the Captain. “I guess he didn’t want to be the next one on the menu,” he said darkly.

Piper grimaced. “I’m not certain there are a lot of warriors deserving of Sto’vo’kor today. Firing on a ship that can’t shoot back is hardly honourable.”

Valastro nodded his agreement. “You’re right about that.” He scowled at the section of the screen where he had last seen “Beta”. “Perhaps it’s not that good a thing that they got away.”

Piper leaned back to get a better look at her XO. “Are you sure you don’t have some Klingon blood yourself?”

Her response was a half-hearted slap on his chest and a “Q’plah!” Then Carman returned to his duties.

The Captain stood. “Recall the fighters. Bring everyone home.” This part of the mission was one she hated. The pilots always did a great job, but they didn’t always come home.

Emu stepped up next to Piper. “I’ve already recalled, Captain. The conditions outside the ship were beyond their tolerance two minutes ago. The *Cork’s* back in the bay as well, as are the remaining shuttles.”

Damn. There was another word she hated. *Remaining.* That meant death certificates that had to be filled out. After all these years of command, it was the one thing that she hoped she never got used to.

Hang on. “How close are we to the sun?” Piper asked.

In answer, Caitlin turned on the viewscreen – polarised. The sun covered the entirety of it. Their view took in the *Bloodwing* as well, and they could tell that the hull plating was not only glowing, it was red hot!

“Get me the Empress!”

On Hope’s hip her communicator chirped. She ripped it off and flipped it open. “Hope here.”

“Is the Empress with you?” she heard Captain Piper ask.

Ael took the device from the Commander and stepped aside so she could work. “I’m here, Captain Piper.”

“Empress, have you had any luck getting control of your ship?”

“None, Captain.” Ael had never had such a sense of complete failure as she did at this very moment.

“Empress, I need you and Hope to get in an escape pod and leave that ship right now, before it’s too late. Our ship is near its hull tolerance as it is.” Piper sounded very worried.

“We can’t, Captain. Your people found that if this ship falls into the sun without shutting down the quantum singularity drive it will eventually cause the sun to go supernova. We must do that first.”

There was a silence for a moment, causing Ael to wonder if they had lost the connection. Then Piper came back and said: “Can Hope shut it down in the next thirty seconds? Realistically?”

The black Caitian sat up from under the console where she had been working and shook her head in sad resignation. “No, I can’t. I’m sorry.”

“Then don’t worry. There is another way. I just need you both to get out of there *now*. Trust me. Get out NOW!”

Piper was so insistent, and so confident, that they took her at her word. The engineering section of a ship was always prone to disaster, so it always had escape pods handy. Fortunately, there was one left. As the Empress and Hopetallash raced to get in and strap themselves into the seats, Hope called her ship.

“What about Koss?” she asked.

“He got out two minutes ago. Don’t worry about him. Just eject. Now!”

Ael slammed home the eject button and the escape pod burst free of the ship, out past its shields, and straight into the path of a tractor beam put out by the *Millennium*. The ship quickly swung the pod into the rear, open hangar bay, then pushed herself out, away from the sun as fast as her impulse drive could go.

It took ten minutes at full impulse, but soon they were clear of the star’s gravity and hard radiation.

However, they did have a ringside seat to watch the *Bloodwing* as she fell into the Hobus star, never to be seen again.

An hour later, the *Millennium-A* rendezvoused with the *Challenger*. It was time for a meeting with the Empress, Captain Holmes, Hopetallash, Piper and Commander Carman Valastro.

The five sat around a round table officer's lounge, where they had been assured privacy, to discuss the situation.

Piper spoke first. "As you all know by now, I'm here from the past, but what you're not aware of is why. I can now tell you." She took a deep breath and began her condensed tale.

"It all started with an explosion. About eighty years from now, the Hobus star explodes. That resulted in a Romulan going into the past, who made some massive changes. He so corrupted the timeline that entropy was increased to the point that all of creation was threatened. Now, we managed to put that right – mostly – but we never did find out what caused the explosion in the first place. We figured, if we could prevent the star from exploding – and its destruction causes most of this galaxy to be torn apart, by the way – then we can stop the first domino from falling. However, our time here has proven that the first "domino" wasn't the star at all. It was the *Bloodwing* falling into it." She turned to Hopetallash. "You had something to report, Commander?"

"Yes, Captain." Hope's whiskers twitched in sorrow and her tail flicked to and fro – a demonstration of her internal strife. "I discovered that the *Bloodwing* was powered by a forced quantum singularity drive that has the unique property of having self-contained force-fields and mechanisms that protect it from without and from within. They protect us from being eaten by its gravity, and it from external forces. It's the latter that's the problem, as they're strong enough to withstand the forces inside a star, and they're powered by the singularity itself. It has a very

narrow channel that allows the ingress of matter that feeds the drive, and the same for egress that powered the ship. The star doesn't care about that part. However, the ingress part will continue to slowly eat the star. The singularity will eventually gain in size to the point where it will no longer need to be "forced". It will be self-sustaining, then all bets are off."

Those present made a variety of disgusted faces. It was a grim outcome indeed.

Piper chipped in at that point. "I have it on good report that the star will go nova and eventually take out not only Romulus and Remus, but most of the star systems in this sector. A chain reaction will continue with stars falling out of their orbits within the galaxy to the point where the Milky Way will literally tear itself apart."

Piper's companion's faces reminded her of her own when she had first heard of the fate of the galaxy after the Hobus explosion: sheer horror.

"It all began here?" Ael asked, horrified. "Surely a supernova can't explode with enough force to start destroying other star systems, especially in the time frame you're suggesting."

"What my source has suggested is the possibility of a subspace element to this explosion. That's why the shockwave seems to travel faster than light. That's why, when an attempt was made to intervene before the wave destroyed Romulus, it failed. They simply ran out of time." Piper shrugged, saddened and amazed at the same time.

The Empress was not to be put off so easily. "Surely something can be done to avoid this catastrophe."

Piper gave her a sheepish grin. "Well, yes and no."

The Empress gave her an annoyed look. “What do you mean?” she growled. She had little time for dissemination.

“I came here to learn why this star failed. I hoped to find out without it actually happening, but...” She grimaced. “At least all is not lost and now I know. The next step is to go back and make sure it never happened in the first place.” Her tone was enigmatic, and deliberately so. She could not tell the Empress *how*.

Ael was smart enough not to ask. She got the undercurrent in Piper’s tone.

“Now,” Piper asked, “why did the Empress’ ship go nuts and try to fly into a star? I did hear from one of my people that, when the rebel Admiral arrived at the station here, that some of her people may have boarded your ship while it was docked there. Is it possible they were the ones who messed with it?”

Ael’s arched eyebrows shot up. It was the first she had heard of this. “Someone boarded my ship while it was docked?”

Piper nodded. “Yes, Empress. My people were watching. They saw two people in Romulan uniforms come out of a dock what wasn’t being used and head down towards your ship, then come back not too long after and leave the same way.”

The Empress nodded. The shock of the day’s events was passing, and she was now beginning to think clearly. “Yes, of course. The traitor even went so far as to use a hologram to announce her intentions.”

From the other side of the table, Jessica Holmes gave a dark chuckle. “Oh, if I’d only just grabbed T’Fawn when I had the chance.”

Piper coughed politely. “Excuse me?”

The commander of the *Challenger* flipped an errant strand of dark hair out of her eyes and gave a sorry smile. “You see, several days ago, I was sitting in a lovely café at Galorndon Core looking at this woman I thought was Vulcan who said her name was T’Fawn and there was something about her that just didn’t feel right. I’m here because I followed that feeling. I just wished I’d grabbed her then.”

Piper looked Jessica in the eye. “Seriously? I need the place and the stardate.”

“Why?” Jessica asked.

“Because that may have been the first domino to fall.”

The Empress tapped the table with a knuckle. “I am glad for you, Captain Piper. The fact remains that my ship has fallen into Hobus. As you said, in about eighty years this star will go supernova. Are you telling me that we have about that long to prepare for that? That there’s absolutely nothing else we can do about it?”

Piper shrugged. “What can you do? If you try to explode the star you just wind up having the same result, just earlier. If you try to drop a singularity into it to eat it, you wind up with the same result. Catch 22. The only other option is to somehow go into the Hobus star and fish out the singularity, but the technology for that simply doesn’t exist.”

There was silence around the table as those assembled considered the ramifications of her statement.

There was one question Piper had been considering ever since she had arrived in the “future”. She looked at the others in the room and caught their eye, one by one. “I won’t lie to you. I don’t know what will happen to you once I make the jump back to the past. Will this timeline simply cease to exist once I make

the changes? I don't know. I am telling you all this because you have a right to know. I believe you should be prepared for what is to come." She caught the Empress's attention alone. "Ael, you need to begin to evacuate Romulus. Even if the people don't believe you, you've got eighty years to save them."

Even though the Empress bristled a little at the use of her first name, she knew that Piper was simply driving home a point. We're all in this together.

She turned to Carman and Jessica. "You guys need to return to the Federation with the same message. When Hobus explodes the devastation will be extreme. Start making preparations for exodus to another galaxy."

The two Starfleet officers exchanged an amazed look, then turned back to Piper.

Jessica was perturbed. "Captain, I'm happy to take the warning back to the Federation, and I remember my course in temporal mechanics. I'm aware that this causality could cease once your return to the past. But if you think I'm going to sit on my hands and put all my eggs in one basket, you don't know me at all.

"This timeline might not end. In which case, we've got eighty years to work on a solution. Yes, we could manage to save several thousand by sending generation ships to another galaxy, or we could save trillions upon trillions of lives and fix it right here and now. I don't know how, but we have lots of brilliant minds back at Starfleet who can put their heads together to come up with something. *That's* now our mission."

"This timeline?" Commander Valastro asked.

"Yes, this timeline," Holmes replied. "Maybe, Captain Piper, you manage to go back to your time and fix what went

wrong, but I've heard there are two of you – from two different timelines – which suggest the possibility of two concurrent timelines coexisting. Just because you leave doesn't mean we're going to vanish. You may have found the domino you were looking for and fix what went wrong in your timeline, but this timeline might continue with us here, and we've still got a problem to fix. We can't simply depend on you to save us. As long as we're here, we've got to work on saving ourselves."

Carman felt the need to defend his captain. "And if the fix fixes this timeline as well?"

Jessica shrugged. "Then we lose nothing. All of this will have never happened and the only person who will remember it will be Captain Piper. We'll simply be who we are, in Captain Piper's original timeline." Her frustration vented, Holmes added: "Mind you, Piper, I'd like you to tell me about this one day, if you can." With one final word she added: "I just know that we can't just sit around hoping that she is successful. No disrespect to you, Captain," she said with a nod to their host.

Piper sighed. "None taken. I know that what I've just shouldered you with is an enormous ask. The fate of the galaxy is now in your hands. I've given you all the data you need to take to your governments as proof of what's to come. Let's just hope it's not going to fall on deaf ears. I pray we all find success."

Ael nodded. "May the Elements guide us."

Piper looked to Jessica Holmes. "I have one more job for you, Jess. I need you to run the Empress back to the Station for me, along with her wounded and crew. I've got another job for the *Millennium* to do."

Holmes nodded and gave her a quick smile. "Any time."

Piper gave one more look about the room. “Does anyone have anything they wanted to add?”

The five present looked about them, but nothing came to mind.

Jessica simply said: “I’ll send that info to you as soon as I get back to the *Challenger*.”

Piper smiled and shook her hand. “Thank you, Captain.” She turned to the others. “Thank you all for your help. All things being equal, we’ll prevent this from happening again the first time.”

Four hours later, on the far side of the Hobus system, two ships named *Millennium* cruised side-by-side. Before Piper transported back to her own ship, she stopped by the sickbay as she had a few, brief questions for the Admiral, who was willing to help. Piper touched her mind, and for a fleeting moment she saw the older woman’s torment. She saw the moment she lost her first officer. She wondered how she had gotten this far. As they parted, she wished her well, then briefly visited her friend, Merete AndrusTaurus, and said a quick hello and gave her a hug before leaving. It didn’t feel right visiting this ship and not doing so.

Afterward, as she walked down the hall, she was joined by Carman Valastro. She thought she had an idea of what he wanted to discuss. She was wrong.

“Captain, I know you’re going back to the past and you’ve got to leave someone here in charge, and that would naturally fall to me,” he said. He gave her a slightly embarrassed smile, which lit up his handsome, middle-aged Grecian face. “You know what I’ve discovered in the last six months under, well, you?”

Piper shook her head. "What?"

"I don't want to be captain." He smiled, having gotten that off his chest. "I don't mind being the support, the helper to the captain, but I don't want to be the one with the responsibility of running the whole ship. I don't need that stress, thank you."

She had to admit it, Piper was surprised. "Really? I thought that Command was what you were reaching for all this time."

Carman gave a slight shrug. "Me, too. But I've found that I don't really want to be captain after all. XO, fine. Just not lochagos^{vii}. So, if you're going to nominate someone, I suggest Caitlin."

Piper stopped short in the hall, about ten metres away from the transporter room. "Are you certain? You've got seniority."

"There's seniority, and there's seniority. If Ghost hadn't gotten herself busted, she'd have made captain years ago. She deserves it."

Piper snickered at that. "You're right about that. I just hope she's past slugging people."

Carman grinned. "Mostly."

Piper considered the notion. He hadn't had much time to observe Ghost in the here and now, but what she had seen had impressed her. Never mind the woman had a sharp mind and great leadership qualities. If anyone should know her well enough to vouch for her, it would be Carman. He had been working with her for twenty years now. She winked at him. "Okay, then. It's a done deal."

They walked on again and, when they turned into the transporter room, they found themselves confronted by most of

the senior staff. Hopetallash, Caitlin Ryan, Doctor Merete AndrusTaurus, Jason Nunn and Emu had assembled to see off their new captain. One by one, starting with Emu, Piper shook their hands, bidding them farewell. She could not help but wonder if any of them would still be here tomorrow – at least, in the same fashion.

When Piper got to Ghost, she stopped. She looked down at the diminutive ace pilot and said: “Commander Caitlin Ryan, I’ve discussed this situation with Carman, and we’ve come to the mutual decision that you should talk over command of the *Millennium-A* as captain.”

To her credit, Caitlin’s eyes immediately went to Carman. “But Carman...”

“You and I talked about this. You know I don’t want the big chair,” he said from the heart.

A tear slipped down her cheek. “But I don’t want to go over your head. It’s not fair.”

Carman stepped over and slightly past Piper, who moved aside for him. He took Caitlin in his arms, and she wrapped hers around his torso, much to Piper’s surprise. She hadn’t noticed the wedding rings on their fingers. “You’re right for the job, Caitlin.” He swept his arm out to take in their fellows. “Everyone here thinks so, too.”

Their friends all nodded and smiled. “We’re all behind you,” Emu said, cheering her.

Piper took this as her leave, shaking her head and wondering if she was seeing just another window into the future. She wouldn’t have pegged Carman and Caitlin pairing off!

The captain gently cleared her throat. She took a memory chit out of her pocket and gave it to Ghost. “Here’s my command

codes and everything you need to know.” She spoke up for the room mic. “Computer, recognise Piper, Captain, transferring command of the *USS Millennium* to Commander Caitlin Ryan as of this stardate. Piper, Alpha, sigma, phi, seven-three.”

The computer queried: “Does Commander Ryan accept command transfer?”

Ryan looked up and smiled. This was the culmination of years of hard work. “Yes, I do.”

An hour later, Piper was home on her ship, and she and Piper Silayna were prepared for their next step in their mission. They were joined by the only others who were aware of its proximity. They realised that, without it, they could not have gotten this far.

Piper had spent ten minutes explaining to Sustasandage the cause of the Hobus explosion. She promised that, when she got home, that she would do what she could to prevent the events that took place from her end. She had also promised to drop Spock back where he belonged in the future. Piper had shaken her paw and bid her farewell.

Her own crew, she would miss. Both she and Piper Silayna had spent a half hour hugging and saying goodbye to friend and family as they prepared for their return trip.

Krashtallash asked: “Shall we set course for the Guardian’s planet, Captain?”

Piper had just smiled. “No need.”

He had wondered at that, but let it go.

Now, on the hangar deck, he had been invited to follow his sister, Scanner, Sarda, Merete and Spock as Piper and Piper Silayna, who were now wearing their favourite jeans, t-shirts,

leather jackets and boots took their leave. Both sported duffel bags over their shoulders, full of simple necessities they would need where they were going. Piper unlocked the door to Ghost's private space for her fighter, the *Spectre*. There, nestled behind it, was the Guardian of Forever.

"What is *that* doin' there?" Scanner asked, shocked.

Piper Silayna smiled to herself. "We thought it was the timeship what was maintaining out temporal stability in this timeline. It never was. It was the Guardian. Once we realised that, it became okay for Piper to take over as master of the other *Millennium* without worrying about disappearing. Its influence isn't limited."

"But how did it get here?" Scanner asked, unsatisfied.

Both Pipers looked at one another. "Don't ask me." They looked up at the massive stone donut. "Guardian, how did you get here?"

"I was needed," was all it said.

Susanna shared a look with Suzette. "And that's all you're going to get for an answer."

Merete was still puzzled. "If the Guardian's sphere of influence is that much greater, what happened to the *JR*?"

Scanner shrugged. "Perhaps they simply weren't needed for the plan."

Sarda nodded. "Logical."

Judd drew an imaginary line in the air with a grin of delight. "That's one point to me! I finally get a "logical" from points!"

Piper sighed. Some things never changed. She turned to her Vulcan friend and held up her hand in the V-salute. "Live long and prosper, my friend."

In her mind, she heard: *"All my love, Piper. Take care of yourself."*

She knew what was bothering them all. They simply didn't know if they were all simply going to vanish once they stepped through the portal. Piper didn't know either. She gave them a brief smile. Now she had everything she needed, and it was finally time to go, she was finding it hard to take that last step.

She felt a hand take hers and she turned. Piper Silayna, Suzette, was leading her towards the portal, which was active. "It's time to go, Sis," she said.

"Are you ready, Guardian?" she asked, suddenly unsure.

"I am ready," it replied in its deep, enigmatic voice.

Holding hands, they stepped through together.

Part Three

Epilogue 1: Revelations

It should have been all over, but somehow it wasn't. Piper found herself standing – no standing was the wrong word. In fact, she wasn't even truly sure she *was* Piper. Everything was so peculiar.

She looked about her and saw only dazzling colours. Up, down, left, right, it made no difference. It was all the same. She felt like she was floating in an aurora. She found it quite disorienting, but at the same time she felt no nausea.

Suddenly, all changed, and Piper found herself standing in an endless field of emerald grass that seemed to wave in a non-existent wind. The sky was aquamarine with not a cloud in sight. Peculiarly, Piper noted there was no sun, yet there was a soft, radiant light everywhere.

She held up her hands before her face and she found no scars. There should have been the reminders of skirmishes she had been involved in along the way, but somehow, they were absent. In fact, her hands looked young, with none of the wrinkles she had picked up over the years.

Almost fearfully, she touched her face to find it feeling like she had just had a facial. It felt – youthful. She ran her fingers through her hair and found it long and straight and when she pulled it into view it was her natural Brunette, not the short burgundy bob she had been wearing for the past year.

She flexed her arms and legs and found them supple and strong. The twinge in her left knee was gone.

She checked her clothing and found herself wearing one of her colourful jumpsuits, but this one seemed to have caught every colour in the rainbow. It even shimmered as she looked at it.

Fearfully, she considered her situation. This was not what she had expected. Both she and Piper Silayna had stepped through the Guardian. Now she was alone. Had something untoward happened? She asked the question that was gnawing at her: “Am I dead?”

Instead of a direct answer she heard a friendly chuckle that seemed to come from everywhere in this place that she couldn’t even begin to describe, its beauty was beyond glorious.

She repeated: “Am I?”

Finally, the being spoke. “For you to be dead you would first have to know who *you are*,” it said. There was no challenge, only the voice of a loving father figure. In fact, it reminded her of Pastor Leon.

Her eyes widened. “I’m Piper,” she said, as if that answered everything.

“Really?” the voice said, quietly mocking. “If that’s so, who’s this?”

Their surroundings changed in an instant and Piper found herself on the bridge of the *Millennium-A*. Sitting still as a statue in the Command Chair was Admiral Piper, still looking fit for her age.

“She’s me,” Piper said.

“Really?”

Once more, everything changed, and Piper found herself in her quarters back on the *Pterodactyl*. There, curled up on the

bed was Piper Silayna, as still as the Admiral with tears frozen on her face.

“Who is this?” the voice asked.

Piper was beginning to lose patience. “Who are you?” she challenged.

Once more there was the chuckle. “Sorry, young lady, that’s not how things are done here. I asked *you* a question. I’m not so easily diverted.”

Piper collected herself, took in a deep breath then said: “This is Piper Silayna, the version of me from the Alternate Universe.”

“So, she’s you as well?”

Now she was getting confused. “No, she’s another possible me. She’s me, but not me.”

“Hmmm. She’s you.... but not you. That sounds a little crazy, doesn’t it?”

Piper gritted her teeth in mild exasperation. “Not really. People change depending on their circumstances and life’s experiences.”

“Granted,” the voice said. “But at any time in your life, would you have been anybody else but you?”

Piper realised what he was asking. Not whether she would have preferred to be someone else, but whether her identity was still truly her own. “No,” she admitted. “I’ve always been me.”

She found herself right next to her alternate, able to reach and touch her face, which she did.

“If that’s the case, then the person before you *is* you, is she not?”

Piper shook her head. “No, she isn’t. We were worlds apart in personality when we met, but I gradually came to...”

“Love her?” the voice said warmly. His voice was as sweet as a gentle caress. “Don’t worry, there are no secrets here. You love her as a sister.”

Piper clapped her arms against her sides. “Yes, I do. She’s grown on me.”

“Wouldn’t some consider that a kind of narcissism? If she’s really you, then you’ve simply developed a deep love and respect for yourself.”

Piper found it hard to be truly annoyed with the disembodied voice because, while the questions it asked were difficult for her to face, it always spoke as someone who truly cared about her. “No. It’s not narcissism. I love her as the twin sister I never had. Aren’t we like identical twins? People who carry the same DNA yet become different individuals because of their life’s experiences and choices?”

Instead of answering the question, the being said: “But you’re not a twin. And, if you’re not a twin, then you are indeed Piper, both you and the one you call Piper Silayna *and* the Admiral. You’re all the same person.”

“So?” Piper tried not to sound insolent but didn’t quite succeed.

“Then you’re not dead, young lady. You can’t be because you’re still alive.”

If it was possible for Piper’s head to start hurting it would have at that moment. Instead, all she was, was confused. “If we’re all the same person, then where does that leave Suzette and me? We’ve changed, grown. We’re no longer just Captain Piper

of the *USS Millennium* – or in Suzette’s case the *Ingram*. We became family.”

“Ah, so you’re saying that, because you became a part of something else, you’re no longer Piper as you were, but a whole new Piper? You’re basing your argument on the premise that, as you became a part of a community you were somehow transformed into another being altogether?”

Piper pursed her lips as she considered. The argument sounded weak, even to her ears. “It’s just part of it.” Frustrated, she dropped her head and said meekly: “I don’t know.”

The room around her dissolved and Piper found herself back in glory. “Ah, at last, some humility!” it said cheerfully. “You deserve a reward.”

In the twinkling of an eye a being appeared before her. It appeared human, male, in his early thirties. He was beautiful with everything in perfect proportion, but in a place of perfection anything less would have seemed out of place. His eyes captivated her with their wisdom, love and compassion. “I know you prefer talking face-to-face.”

Piper relaxed and allowed herself the luxury of a smile. “Thank you,” she said.

The being smiled back. “To help you understand what is happening here, Piper, I will tell you what you fear. You fear all you are and all you know being lost. That when your time amongst the living is over you and all you know will be gone – perhaps even forgotten.”

Whoever he was he had gotten to the heart of Piper’s problem. “It seems unfair that after all my people and I have done to right the wrongs with the timeline that we should suddenly just

wink out of existence. That all we've seen and done would be just... gone."

Her host gave her another of his enigmatic smiles. "Yes, the timeline. Your people have become quite adept at messing it up. Entropy is advanced every time it is meddled with. You came very close to the brink this time around. Hmm. I'm afraid I'm going to have to put an end to your people's time travelling. There is only so much I can undo before it becomes clear."

Piper tilted her head to the side as she considered what he had just said. "Becomes clear.... that an outside force is correcting *our* mistakes?" She narrowed her eyes. "Who exactly *are* you?"

"Later, Piper, later." His eyes took on a great sadness. "Your people have achieved much, but they are still arrogant, unwilling to open their minds. They are a people of habit, I'm afraid, and it could become their undoing."

Now Piper was afraid. "What do you mean?"

Patiently, he explained. "Every time one of your people goes back in time, they create ripples. Changes at even the atomic level have consequences. The old human adage about a butterfly fluttering its wings causing a hurricane is quite apt. Now, the natural flow of time has been disrupted many times, causing me to have to step in to make corrections."

There was something about his speech that was bothering her. "If that's the case, have you been using me to affect these changes?"

The being next to her turned and looked her in the eye. "You humans have an idea that there should be a "natural" flow of history. However, you fail to take into account entropy."

Piper's brows rose as she considered his statement. "That all things eventually move from order to chaos. How does that apply to history?"

Her friend gave her a small smile. "If history was left alone to simply play out things would move from order to chaos at an inordinate rate. You're a student of history. How many times has the human race been at the brink of destruction when something shifted, and it was averted?"

Images of nuclear wars that might have been flashed through Piper's mind, including the damage to Florida left by the Xindi weapon in the late twenty-second century. If Jonathan Archer hadn't stopped them, the Xindi would have destroyed Earth. It was only at the final hour that their plan was halted – humanity saved. So often in the final moments and through the actions of heroes on the ground in the right place at the right time disaster had been averted.

The notion brought conflicting emotions to the surface. Part of her was grateful for the being's intervention. The prideful part of her wanted the human race to stand or fall on their own.

Her host simply nodded and looked into her eyes as if he could see the conflict within her. "I am glad that you are at least considering thanking me for my intervention. Human nature does tend to be rebellious, however." He turned aside for a moment to let Piper process what she had been told. He appeared to take great delight in studying an impossibly perfect flower that she didn't remember seeing a moment before.

Piper looked back at her recent history and realised that, if she and her sister hadn't been where they were *at that time* things would have played out very differently. Their presence had averted disaster on a colossal scale. If they hadn't been at

Bozeman, there was a real chance that the *Phoenix* would never had survived her first flight without her navigational deflector *and* the simple fact she would never have taken off without their igniting the rocket's exhaust.

She remembered also, that even though they had failed to save the general population of Merrijig, they *had* managed to save the children.

Thinking of that doomed planet brought back the old anger. She turned on the being, a person who she believed she knew but was too stubborn to admit. He was looking at her with a mixture of compassion and sadness as if he knew what she was about to say. Furiously, she vented her feelings: "If you're working for the best of us all how could you let the people of Merrijig die?"

The being sighed. "There is a time for everything, Piper. If some semblance of order is to be maintained some things must die in order for the majority to live. Think about it, Piper. If Merrijig had survived what would have been the consequences?"

Piper's fists went to her hips haughtily. "Jack would have still been alive, for one. I wouldn't have had to watch Suzette cry her eyes out over him." She paused as if to gather her breath and then continued. "The children would not have had to live out their lives without their parents."

He nodded to himself. "You make valid points, Piper. However, are you aware that one of the children became the Elder of Proxima Beta? She developed a great affection for God after she was saved at the last minute by people she referred to as God's messengers. She has done great works for the people of Proxima.

"Another became a doctor who discovered the cure for Aldeberan Encephalitis."

The two were points Piper was unaware of, especially the second as A.E. had killed millions.

“Yet another went on to become the mother of the very woman who stands before me. The one who brought things full circle because she did the right thing at the right time regardless of the personal cost.”

Once more, Piper was conflicted. “Are you telling me that the people of Merrijig had to die so I could be *born*?” she said, feeling the weight of a tank on her chest.

As if in answer, Piper found herself standing on a beach. The “man” was still with her, gazing off into the late afternoon sun. Curiously, there were no shells, no seaweed. Only sand and the clearest water she had ever seen. She wondered to herself for a moment if any of it was real.

“Look at the sand, Piper,” he said quietly.

She did so. It looked just like any other sand she had seen – aside from its complete lack of impurities. “So?”

“Put your finger in it.”

Piper squatted and did as she was told. The sand was warm to the touch and enveloped her finger up to her second joint.

“Did you notice that your finger displaced the sand all around it?”

“Yes.” Slightly annoyed, Piper added: “You’re not going to go all Zen on me, are you?”

This time he simply rolled his eyes, but Piper could see the amusement in them. “Not at all. My point is not that one drop in the ocean causes desirable ripples, but that they also create side-effects. If you push against one object you need something else to stand on. Both objects are affected. There are never just two participants.”

Piper nodded her understanding. She was rewarded with a slight, but still friendly, grin. “You understand cause and effect, Piper, but you can never see the big picture like I do. I stand apart from time so I can make adjustments to keep events moving towards the most desirable outcome, but I have to do so wisely. There is always a cost.”

Once again, Piper nodded dumbly. She knew she was thoroughly outclassed by her company.

“There is a problem, however,” he said. “Your people have become too accustomed to meddling with time. Daniels, Sustasandage, and their people believe they have become the masters of time, but they have done nothing but stir up the boiling pot. As they cannot see the whole of history, they can only make adjustments and keep their fingers crossed.” He rubbed his top lip with his finger. “No, this will not do. If your people, or any other for that matter, are allowed to continue meddling with time then sooner or later we will find ourselves right back here where once again all of creation will be in peril.” He looked at her and said in confidence: “I remember a man from the twenty-first century who postulated that very scenario. He believed that if one day mankind could travel through time then all of it would be unravelled, so he chose to believe that it could never be done because he still existed. QED.”

Piper’s eyes widened as she considered the notion. It had some merit and knowing the human heart and curious streak, it wouldn’t have been long before someone would go back far enough in time to create ripples that would change the very nature of their existence. She looked over at the one she refused to name and simply said: “Granted. What do you propose to do about it considering I’ve already gone back in and forth in time over the

last two centuries? If you stop all time travel, then the things you've accomplished through me will fall apart too."

He gave her a look that said she had once more totally underestimated him. "Both can be achieved, Piper. I will protect the present timeline and what you and others have set in motion, but I need to put an end to any more meddling. For instance, the changes at First Contact and at Merrijig will remain. But, from now on, only I will have the capacity to make such alterations otherwise all is at risk."

Although she saw the wisdom of such a choice, Piper had some reservations. "What about warp drive? Aren't we messing with space/time when we go faster than light?"

"I would hardly wish to be the one who would put an end to interstellar commerce and community, my dear. It will be allowed to continue."

She voiced the unspoken exception. "But travelling into the past is over."

He nodded. "Travelling into the future is still permitted as you cannot return to what was. Relativity will be protected."

Piper smiled. Things would be all right for her universe. However, she was still ill at ease.

"You have succeeded in all you intended, Piper," he said with a measure of pride. "But you are still unhappy."

Feeling like a little schoolgirl, Piper said: "It just seems so unfair. I save the universe and my reward is oblivion. Suzette's reward is non-existence, which I assume to be the case as I don't see her anywhere. And what of Hopetallash? Will she survive without my intervention?" Her chest tightened at the thought the young Cait might not live at all.

"I assure you, Hope will always survive, Piper."

“Pun intended,” Piper quipped, trying to cheer herself and failing dismally.

Her host stepped over to her and put his arm around her. At that moment she felt more love and acceptance that she could ever recall. “Piper, you are forgetting one thing about your existence.”

Piper sighed, a sound that came up from the depths of her soul, full of angst and pain. “Yeah, I know, I’m already there.”

She was surprised that *he* shook his head. “No, Piper. I asked you who you were and the best you could give me was a moniker. Are you the same person as the Admiral? Are you Piper Silayna?”

With a certainty that came from her heart she said: “No.”
“Why not?”

Piper thought back. “They’re not me because we’ve all lived entirely different lives in completely different timelines. Our lives, our very being, have diverged many times over.”

“So? How does that make you different from one another?” The question was gently plying her, subtly pushing her in the direction she needed to go. “You would be you no matter what situation you find yourself in.”

Finally, Piper understood. “We’re different people because we made different choices. Piper is just a moniker, a label. I am the sum of my actions brought about by the choices I made. They’ve shaped me as much as I did them.” She paused as she collected her thoughts. “I am the woman, born of Rosanna – a child *I* saved – who left Proxima to become a starship captain. Since then, I’ve saved Cait – along with my crew – rescued the crew of the *Republic* after they were missing for years, stopped the Federation from going to war with the Romulan Empire, saved

Zephram Cochrane and his dream, rescued the children of Merrijig and restored the proper history of the Federation and mended the cracks in the Universe. I did the last knowing there was every likelihood that I would never remember what happened and that nobody else would know, either. I am the one who goes where I have to to get the job done, regardless if it's the end of the universe. That's who I am."

Her speech was received with a grin from her host. "Very good, Piper. You understand." He put out his arms and embraced her. Later she would admit to herself that she had never felt as content in her life than she did at that very moment.

She lost track of time how long she was there, but it didn't matter. Time was irrelevant. Finally, she was released, and she looked up into loving eyes. "Fear not, Piper. I will never forget your, and your friend's, sacrifices." He gently released her and stepped back. "It's time for you to go. I'm sending you and Suzette back to first contact with the Vulcans, just after you left. You now know what you need to tell yourself, so prepare a message and send it. Have faith, Piper – Susanna. I will make sure it's delivered. History will not repeat itself this time."

"Are you sending me back through the Guardian?" She paused for a moment before asking: "What *is* it, by the way?"

"A fair question. Suffice to say, it is a form for something that really has no form. And no, you're not going back through it. You're already *in* it. *I* am the Guardian of Forever."

Piper nodded, thinking she understood, but not really sure. There was so much she wanted to remember about this place and this strange being. "Who *are* you?" she asked, finally willing to take the plunge and learn the truth.

Her host just gave her an enigmatic smile. “You already know, Piper.”

2: Full Circle

Piper walked the corridor of the *USS Millennium*, her mind full of the things she needed to know and do. She was headed for her quarters where Yeoman Carver had informed her some paperwork needed signing before she turned in for the night.

She was looking forward to reaching their destination: Cait. They had been tasked with simply checking in on that world and flying the flag. While she had initially objected to the orders she had quickly acquiesced. The chance to catch up with the Llash clan and Scanner was very welcome, and she was certain Crash would not be insulted by Starfleet's orders.

Almost in sight of her quarters, Piper divested herself of her uniform jacket and threw it over her shoulder. She was looking forward to getting this simple chore out of the way so she could go to the Rec deck and relax by making Sarda jump over her Vin'tah.

She looked up and started when she saw Gillian, the ship's bartender, waiting for her. In her hands she held two packages. One small, about the size of a book, the other elongated – about a metre long, yet only ten centimetres wide.

“What did they do to pry you out of the bar?” she asked with a grin.

Gillian simply gave her a wink. “Nothing. The day has finally come when I can give you these.” She held up her charges.

Piper looked at them curiously. Their wrappings looked quite old. “What are they?”

The Argelian shrugged. “I have no idea. I just know my dad told me to save it for a certain time and place, and that's now.”

The pale woman had never spoken before of her father, and it seemed peculiar that she would do so now. To top it off, her inflection when she said it reminded her of an Earth dialect.

Piper twisted her lips to project the peculiarity of the situation. "What the hell," she said. "Let's find out together." She ushered her friend into her quarters and offered her a chair next to her personal desk before disappearing into her private head to get changed. From the other room she asked more out of curiosity than courtesy: "How is your father?"

"Dad's fine," she said. "I managed to see him when we stopped at Argelius the other day." She gave a sly smile. "He sends his regards."

Piper's head appeared around the door jamb; her brows shot up in surprise. "We've met?" Her head disappeared once more for a moment as she said: "Hang on a sec." She re-emerged a minute later wearing one of her lacy purple kaftans, her honey-blond hair loose and out of its customary ponytail. She looked the picture of relaxation. She took her seat behind her desk and gave her friend a pleasant smile. "Now, I feel human again."

To prepare her for the coming shock, Gillian reached forward, took her hand and looked her in the eye. "My father's Jason Nunn, Piper. He went back in time and met my mother. The rest, as they say, is history."

"What?!" Piper recoiled in incredulity.

Her friend sighed. "I'm pretty sure it happened in an alternate future, but the fact I'm still here says a lot. If you don't believe me, check it out. I've been going by my mother's name to keep Dad's secret."

A big part of Piper was sorely tempted, but she trusted Gillian enough to place her faith in what she was saying. “When does he go back in time?” she asked.

At that, Gillian gave her a blank look. “No idea. Dad wouldn’t say. He just gave me these things and told me to give them to you today.”

Piper turned her attention back to the parcel. Without preamble, she tore the old wax paper off and found a small, sealed satchel and an old logbook. She turned her attention to the latter first and found it to be the log of the *Pterodactyl*. What startled her was that it was written in her own handwriting. “What the hell...” she muttered.

For the next half hour, they poured through the pages, fascinated by every word. At times they were disbelieving, at others amazed. At all times they were captivated.

The last page mentioned Piper had left an article for Crash’s daughter, whom he had named Hope. She apparently had been born with a congenital heart defect, but they had not had the tech on board the *Jolly Roger* to save her. She wondered if it was still there. She also wondered: “Does Crash know?”

Not wishing to waste a moment, Piper requested a real-time, tight-band subspace call be placed to the *J.R.* for Crash. Her Comms officer told her it would take at least several minutes to set up and he would call her back once they were ready.

“It’s unbelievable,” Gillian said, quietly. “Is it possible?” Part of her wanted to believe, but another just refused to. She was torn.

Piper had seen enough to know anything was possible. She was privy to Jim Kirk’s recent trip back to 1986 to retrieve

some humpbacked whales that helped save the Earth from the cetacean probe. She muttered: “Yes, it is.”

She turned her attention to the satchel. It was made of metal and sported an old-fashioned fingerprint scanner to unlock it. She noted it had to be activated, saving the batteries, before opening. She flicked the switch, and the scanner gave a soft, green glow.

“Fat lot of good that is,” Piper said, disappointed. “Whoever locked this thing is probably long dead.”

Gillian shook her head, suddenly adamant. “No. Dad knew you would be able to open it. Try your thumb print.”

With all the weirdness she had witnessed, she shrugged. “What the hell.” She placed her thumb on the scanner and the satchel opened with a click. She sat back in wonder. “That shouldn’t have worked,” she said in disbelief.

Gillian chuckled. “After what we just read, it’s very possible that *you* were the one who locked it.”

Piper licked her finger and wrote an imaginary point on an equally imaginary score board in front of her face. “Score one for you,” she said cheekily.

She took hold of the case and opened the lid. Inside was an old-fashioned memory stick and a folded letter – the exterior of which had a simple note:

Read this if the video doesn’t work.

Once again, the writing was in her own hand.

Piper handled the technological relic and wondered. It was possible the unit still held its information. She placed it almost reverently on the computer interface on her desk and ordered the computer to download its contents.

Several seconds later it reported: “Completed.”

The Captain took a breath, then ordered: "Play."

The monitor on her desk winked on and two people appeared sitting before a black background.

Piper and Gillian both gasped. It was Piper; *both* of them. It was obvious, even though one of them had been injured and now sported an artificial eye.

"Hello, Piper," they said together. It was immensely peculiar to hear it said by *two* alternate versions of herself in her own voice.

"You're probably wondering what is going on," the injured one said. "You may have guessed we're you from alternate timelines, but what you don't know is that our names are now Susanna and Suzette Lee." She indicated which was which as she spoke. "We lived out our lives in the 21st century, working on the *Phoenix* project with Zefram Cochrane." Her eyes opened wide in excitement. "Cool, huh?"

Piper simply watched the video with her mouth hanging open. She knew of the Lee sister's contributions from her studies. She remembered being annoyed, along with everyone else, that there seemed to be no record of their appearance as they were notorious for avoiding the limelight.

Susanna picked up the narrative. "We've got a few things we need to tell you to prevent the disaster that wound up with us in the past, among other things. Don't worry, your actions won't change our future. We will still be here even after you change your fate to save the universe."

"Pause."

It was almost too much. Piper sat back once more to take a breather. "Computer," she ordered. "Bios on Susanna and Suzette Lee." She wanted to refresh her memory.

The machine began a litany that brought a prideful smile to Piper's face. The other versions of her had achieved much together.

She took a punt. "Photographs," she said.

"Working. There are no documented photographs of Susanna and Suzette Lee."

Piper rubbed her upper lip in thought. "Not surprising," she mused. "I'd do my best to keep myself out of the history books too."

Before she could continue, the communicator chirped. "Captain, Commander Krashtallash is waiting for you," the Comms officer reported.

"Put him through," Piper said, trying to sound as normal as possible.

Crash's face appeared on the tiny screen, the Bridge of the *J.R.* in the background. "Captain, it's good to see you."

Piper nodded. "And you, Captain." It was tradition to call the commander of a vessel "Captain" rather than his rank. "How is Susanna. Has she had the kits?"

Crash nodded. "Just this morning," he said, glowing with pride. "I named them myself."

Time to jump in with both feet, Piper thought. "How's Hope? I hear she may have a heart condition."

Crash's eyes not only widened, his pupils dilated in shock. "How did you know? The doctor who scanned her after birth told me she has a faulty heart valve. They're going to operate in a day or so when she's a little bit stronger." He stared at Piper through the vidlink as if daring her not to tell him.

Piper gave him a sheepish grin. "It's a long story, Crash, and one I hope I can tell you all about when I get there."

The Commander's eyes narrowed to slits as he suspected his captain of messing with him, but he would never disrespect her. He trusted her implicitly. "I look forward to hearing it, Captain." Someone spoke to him off screen and he nodded. In all seriousness he said: "Duty calls, Captain. Is there anything else?"

Piper just shook her head, no, feeling a little lost in the face of it all. It was clear that Susanna and Suzette were what they claimed to be, with foreknowledge of Crash's children they couldn't possibly have known otherwise.

On the screen, Krashtallash just nodded respectfully and said: "*Jolly Roger* out." His image winked off leaving Piper to consider the situation. The visage of her alternate selves returned, and Piper found herself fascinated looking at the similarities between them, and also the differences. Especially Suzette. She could not help but wonder how she had lost the eye.

Regardless of her physical condition, it appeared this woman was happy. There was something about them both that showed they were content to be where they were. She found that odd but, considering the year they had spent living on the *Pterodactyl*, anything was possible. She had to admit to herself that a simpler life had some appeal although she couldn't imagine having to live without the mod-cons she had come to take for granted.

She considered the situation and decided she wanted more to verify their story. "Computer, compare the images in the frame on the monitor with photographs dating from...." she thought for a moment, "April 1, 2063, on that are connected with Zefram Cochrane's *Phoenix* project. Look for any correlation and display."

“Working.”

Piper knew it would take a few moments to run the program, so she turned her attention back to Gillian. “It must have been difficult for you to serve on a ship with a younger version of your father serving on it. Have you ever been tempted to tell him who you are?”

Her friend shrugged. “I can’t say I’ve never been tempted, but Dad always told me that to reveal myself to him might disrupt the timeline. He used to tell me: “Who knows, you might just cease to exist”, and we wouldn’t want that.”

Mock nodding, Piper gave her a smile that told her she understood the joke and the reality of the statement. It could, indeed create a paradox. “All the same, it must have been tough,” she said, sympathetically.

“Yes and no.” A cheeky look entered her eyes as she said: “It’s been an education seeing Dad when he was young and impetuous. Right now, he’s younger than I am, and I find the fact I’m more mature than he is hilarious.”

Piper laughed, seeing the funny side of the situation. “Yeah, it’s not very respectful telling your own father to grow up.”

Gillian smiled back at her warmly, chuckling to herself. “I’ve often seen the irony in telling my own father that he’s had enough to drink and having the *authority* to take it off him!”

They were interrupted by the computer’s chirp. Four images appeared on the screen and Piper tapped it to bring them up in slideshow mode.

The first image highlighted Piper in the background of an image taken in Bozeman, Montana, dated April 5th. It included a number of locals who were working with her in the background while Zefram Cochrane stood and smiled in the foreground.

Susanna was wearing blue jeans and a t-shirt, but it was clearly Piper.

The next was an image taken the night of first contact, April 6th. The picture was of a bar, with three Vulcans clearly trying to comprehend why Cochrane was gyrating next to a jukebox. Sitting in the background at the edge of the photo was Suzette, who was nursing a drink and watching them with a look of rapture on her face.

The next was much later, the two of them featured this time in a candid shot taken in a laboratory as they were clearly testing some new equipment. Both women were noticeably older, with grey roots showing even though they had now dyed their hair burgundy and cut it into a bob. Their faces were wrinkled, and their hands had developed liver spots. All the same, there was an energy to them that was clear in the photo. Piper noticed that Lily, Cochrane's partner, was also present, looking on. Piper noticed the caption stated the image had been taken by Cochrane himself and was from his private collection.

The last was much later, with the women attending a funeral. Both were cradling canes as they sat in the second row at the service to commemorate Zefram Cochrane, who had recently disappeared as he took a private trip into deep space. Piper knew herself well enough to see the total lack of surprise on both of their faces, as if they knew this day would come. Naturally, they would have as Piper knew the very date of his vanishing – and his ultimate destiny that had been told her in a private discussion with Jim Kirk.

Piper recalled from the bio on the Lees that they had requested to be interred on Merrijig, a newly discovered world

that had just been colonised. She was unfamiliar with it and requested its status from the computer.

“Destroyed by Orion pirates, 2232. Survivors resettled on Proxima Beta.”

“*What!?*” Piper sat up bolt upright. The revelation was startling.

“What is it?” Gillian asked, concerned.

Piper shook her head as the information was assimilated. “They asked to be buried there because they *knew* the planet would be destroyed, erasing their remains from history. Very clever. However, what Susanna and Suzette didn’t tell me in their log was who was on that ship when they left Merrijig.” She put the dates together in her head and knew she had to make a call. However, she decided to put it off.

“Computer, play the remainder of the recording from the memory stick,” Piper ordered.

The Lees appeared once more on the screen and Piper watched, enraptured by this message to her from the past. Susanna said: “In twenty years you’re going to be asked to take a mission to the star Hobus where the mission will lead the destruction of that star in a supernova twenty years later. Now, here are the steps you need to prevent that from happening...”

The two Pipers led her through the many preventative measures she needed to take to prevent it, including warning Jessica Holmes about T’Fawn, the Romulan Empress about the dangers of her new ship’s energy source, and her own issues regarding her relationship with Sarda – especially in the light of his possible demise. Susanna spoke to her directly. “I know how deep your link with Sarda is, Piper, and it’s only going to get stronger over time. If, in the course of your duties – say you’re

fighting four Cardassian warships and he happens to be injured in Engineering and you can't save him – for God's sake *go to Mount Seleya* and perform the katra ritual. At this stage, it's not critical, but in twenty years' time, you'll be an integral part of one another. It'll be like cutting your heart out and being expected to go on without it. It's not possible. The only way you'll be able to go on and become whole again is to surrender Sarda's katra. Promise me this, Piper. Don't throw your career away again, like I saw you do."

Piper was shocked at the ramifications of her duplicate's statements. The future held so many possibilities, and so many responsibilities for herself and others. However, she was determined to make certain that history did not repeat itself.

On the screen Susanna's face softened and she added: "Now, don't worry about us, we will continue no matter what choices you make. We have a guardian."

Suzette placed her hand on her double's and said: "What's important is the mission. However," at this point her voice took on a tone of imploring, "you're surrounded by good people who love you and will follow you to the end of the universe..."

"Literally," Susanna chimed in.

"...so don't ever take them for granted. I did that with my people, and it was a mistake I wish I could undo. Say "hello" to Merete for me." Regret roughened her voice.

Susanna added: "Oh and thank Gillian for us for delivering this message. We couldn't have done all this without Jason and his little girl."

Next to her, Gillian looked on and brushed a tear from the corner of her eye.

Both Pipers took one another's hand and from that point on they spoke in unison. "Remember, the fate of the universe rests in your hands. Don't let us down."

The video ended and Piper found herself wondering to herself if her other versions had been able to join their thoughts much the same way she could with Sarda.

Thinking of him led her to consider how it must have been like for Susanna to go on without the link to him. That was *if* she had been linked to him in her timeline.

It was all a bit much and Piper rubbed her forehead to dull the pain. Her mind was still putting together an alternate view of her history where she herself had interceded to bring about the timeline she had grown up in.

Out of the corner of her eye she caught sight of the other item that Gillian had brought with her. Needing a distraction, she reached out and, together with her friend, they removed the wax paper wrapping to reveal an ornate wooden case. Fortunately, this one was not locked, just clasped shut. Piper popped it open to reveal a beautiful katana sword – hers from the other timeline. She took it by the ivory handle and let it slide through her grip until her hand hit the guard which was golden – she wondered if it was pure – then she inspected the blade. There were a few nicks – evidence of actual use – but the edge was still keen, and Piper knew better than to test it. Even after a century of disuse she could no doubt do better than give herself a paper cut.

Her eyes were drawn to the base of the blade where her she saw an inscription: Susanna Lee – the one they called the Piper. On the other side it said the same for Suzette.

A tear came to her eye as she thought of the two of them – the two of *her* – who could have simply let themselves remain

a mystery to the Universe, but who had taken the time to entrust her with their legacy. It was beyond considerate – it was loving. It was clear to her that, separated by time and space though they were, they still cared to let her know of their shared history and not just pass on a warning.

“What is it?” Gillian asked, concerned.

Piper gave her a wan smile. “You know, they could simply have sent me a message warning me not to go to Hobus, but instead they entrusted me with these.” She cradled the hilt of the katana in her right hand while her left caressed the logbook. “It was very sweet.” Her eyes took on a distant look as she said: “I wish I could have known them.”

Gillian put her hand over Piper’s. “You *do* know them. They’re you. They just have some memories you don’t have but have been kind enough to share with you.”

The tear reached her cheek and rolled down to drop onto her kaftan where it left a short trail before being absorbed by the fabric. She put the katana back in its case reverently. “I’ll treasure these,” she said quietly, her throat tight.

Breaking the mood, Piper’s computer chirped. The screen displayed: “Incoming call.”

Thinking it might be Crash calling her back, she ordered: “Answer.”

Her mother’s visage appeared on the screen – so much like her own – but noticeably older. She was twenty-five years Piper’s senior, but still beautiful given her age. Grey streaked her hair, which was burgundy coloured and cut into a bob. It was a look Piper was well used to, but only now did it ring a bell.

“Hi Mum,” she said with a smile. It was always good to see her mother. Their family was very close.

“Hi Piper,” her mother replied. The older woman seemed confused, as if wondering to herself whether to discuss what was on her mind. After a short moment she said: “I got your letter. I don’t know why you asked me to go down to the capital building and look at the photos on the walls, but I did. I saw the one with the ship that brought me here all those years ago.” Her eyes narrowed almost suspiciously. “I saw the captain of that ship and I knew I was right! She looked just like *you*. How can that be? I named you after her! I liked her hair style so much I changed mine! How is all this possible?”

Piper tried but failed to hide a smile. Never mind she had never sent that letter – but she was pretty sure she knew which one of her *did* – she knew she was going to face these kinds of questions often once the truth came out. She sighed to herself. That was life in her universe.

Translations

- i Derogatory name for Klingons in Romulan
- ii “Crazy” in Romulan
- iii “Coward” in Klingon
- iv “Dishonour” in Klingon
- v “Animal” in Klingon
- vi “Fool” in Klingon
- vii “Captain” in Greek.