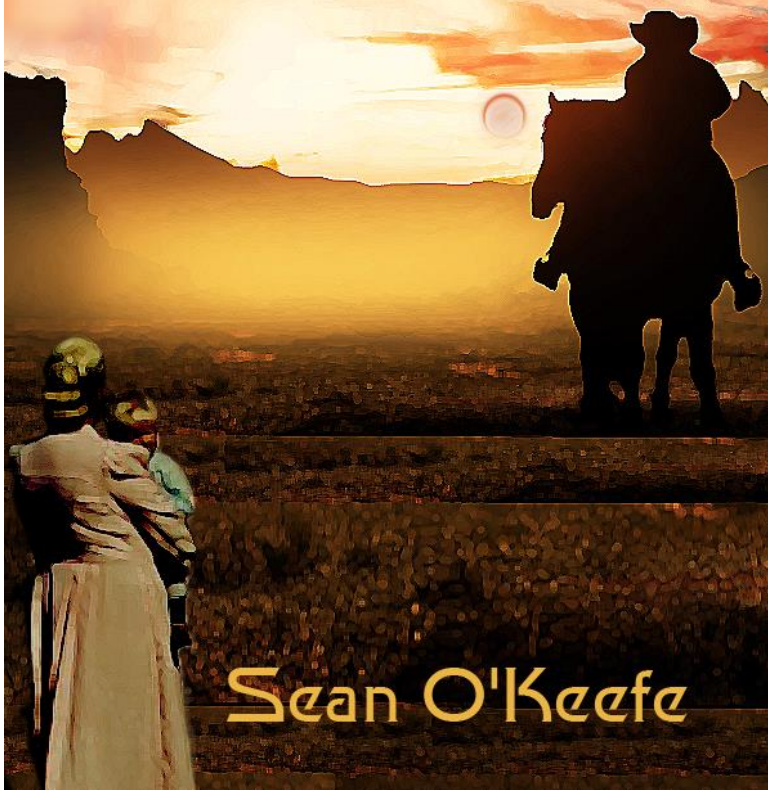


Shoot The Messenger!



Sean O'Keefe

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By Sean O'Keefe 2014©

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Revised 2022

is published by TrekkieFanFiction.com

Cover art by Edelweiss O'Keefe

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We in the Federation like to think that the future is a glorious place full of plenty and there are no starving children. It's an illusion meant to make it easier to sleep at night for those of us who have and are without want. The truth would leave us sleepless at night wondering where we went wrong.

Piper, Captain, U.S.S. Millennium

Chapter One

Piper stood on the surface of a world that should have been beautiful. The sun here had a colour that gave everything here a slightly purplish hue. It made her long for home, it was so similar to her home star, Proxima Beta.

Unfortunately, the comparisons ended there. The foliage in the region she was now inhabiting had been badly scorched. The grass she stood on crunched under her weight. What was left of it would be doing no bouncing back. There was no more moisture in the cooked vegetation.

"It reminds me of a nuclear attack," she said to her Security Chief, who was holding up a tricorder. "It certainly looks like one."

Amantasandage wiggled her whiskers at her. As a typical feline, the Lieutenant was not fond of anti-radiation baths. They tended to dehydrate her lovely, white fur. "Fortunately for us, Captain, it wasn't." She frowned at the readout. "However, I'm not sure what caused it." She snapped the cover shut. "You know, I'd be tempted to say it was a good, old-fashioned bush fire caused by a lightning strike."

Upon hearing the familiar term, the helmsman of the *U.S.S. Millennium*, Lieutenant Jason Nunn, stepped over and added his two cents. "I'd agree with that, Captain. I've seen bush fires back home in the Snowy Mountains. It reminds me a lot of what we see here."

Piper frowned, bringing her dark brows together. They were the only natural colour on her head, her hair was chemically altered to a honey blonde. Even her eyes were an artificial

emerald green. All the same, she never had any problem being taken seriously. Indeed, the whole effect tended to bring attention to her and, once she had it, nobody ever doubted her intelligence, her sincerity, or her drive.

“Every fire has a match, Mister Nunn,” she said. “We need to find it. The survivors of this town deserve to know that much.”

Understanding those were his orders, the youthful man turned and followed the trail of destruction into what remained of the forest aided by the *Millennium's* navigator, Carman Valastro.

The Captain turned and began walking up the street in the devastated town. Most of the buildings here had been fashioned from the abundance of trees in the area, so it normally would have looked delightfully rustic, like something out of the pages of an eighteenth-century textbook. Today it was nothing more than a line of blackened shells as attractive as a row of rotten teeth. It saddened her to see it this way. It had once been beautiful.

So had some of the people whose bodies littered the homes and shopfronts she was perusing. The ship's CMO, Doctor Merete AndrusTaurus had already reported they had found twenty-one bodies so far – most in a very bad way. The fire had indeed been intense. Her medical staff were helping with the retrieval of the lost, who would be given proper burials. She had seen to that. These people may have left Earth to colonise this world with the help of the original *Enterprise NX-01* so long ago, but whatever their cultural leanings, they were still human. Honouring the dead was a given.

With Manny at her side, the Captain kept walking. There were a few things about the situation that she still found perplexing. “How did these people get a message out? It seems like they’re stuck in the past.” She kicked a fallen, wooden signpost with her foot that read: “Apothecary” in faded, painted lettering. She hadn’t seen anything like this since her visit to Ballarat’s Sovereign Hill on a trip to Australia some years before. That place had been a living museum. The people here seemed to actually be *living* in the past. “What is going on here?”

Manny’s white, feline ears twitched this way and that. She knew both on a physical but also a mental level they were being observed by some of the survivors. She could not quite hear their thoughts, but she could in no way miss the attention that was riveted on them. They seemed overly concerned with the content of their conversation. To say it was odd would be an understatement. Since their arrival they had done nothing to give the locals cause to fear them, and yet they did.

There were local men and women tending to the dead and the wounded, dressed as they were in faded jeans and white shirts for the men and simple cotton dresses – which were all blue – for the women. Considering the trauma they had just endured they took care with their appearance – down to their hair styles. Curiously, the women all wore their hair the same way with it kept long and tied in a single braid down their backs. They were intent on their task and yet Manny could tell they were listening to their conversation as they walked down the street. Their feelings weren’t necessarily those of suspicion – more of abject fear. However, they weren’t afraid of them *per se*. It was odd.

She needed to share this with her commander but didn't want to be overheard so she slipped her tail up and wrapped it around Piper's wrist. Her touch brought them into mental contact – they were both adept at the practice and it had come in handy on many occasions to give them privacy.

Piper knew what she was up to as soon as her tail came her way. She opened her mind to hear what her Security Chief wanted to share. *"What is it, Manny?"*

At the speed of thought she related her discovery including her sense they were afraid of the *Millennium* crew directly. *"It's weird. They don't think we're a danger to them directly, and yet they're afraid our presence will bring them some kind of pain."*

Piper's brows came together as she considered. *"Perhaps it's not us they fear, but the trouble they might get into with us being here."* She patted Manny's tail fondly. Her crew were more than teammates, they were family.

Manny took this as her cue and retrieved her tail, breaking the link. She was glad they were headed towards a tent set up in the middle of town that housed a field mess. It was staffed mainly by *Millennium* crewmen who were providing food and fresh water for the locals. With the fire polluting their water supply with ash the locals would have had to travel over twenty kilometres to the next nearest source. Rather than having to truck it in on their horses and carts, Piper simply had it beamed over. There were over three thousand litres of water in the plastic tank behind the tent, but she knew it wouldn't take too long for them to go through it. Right then and there, with all the dust and ash in the air, she was looking forward to washing it down with a bowl of cool, fresh water.

The two of them collected a welcome drink and a sandwich from the servers and found somewhere convenient to sit down under the large marquee that was serving as a makeshift mess.

As Manny gratefully lapped up her water, she turned her attention to an approaching male who they had seen previously but had kept to himself. Now, his intentions were clear as he made a beeline for the Captain. Most Starfleet security officers would have leapt to their Captain's defence at what could be clearly seen as a possible threat. However, Manny Sandage was not any normal Security Chief. She had scanned his thoughts as he approached and found no malice, only confusion. He seemed intent on something, that was certain, but he meant no harm.

"I see him," Piper said quietly as she appeared to be watching some of her people working. Her logical mind told her the rest as she knew Manny would have acted some time ago if there was a threat. Her faith in her was solid. The Caitian needed no tricorder to watch the people, she could do that with the power of her mind. Her talent had gotten them both out of trouble numerous times – even saved their lives.

Before the rotund, middle-aged local with his balding head could speak, Manny introduced them. "Captain, this is Elder Simon Bishop. He's been wanting to say something to you for some time, but he's taken this long to pluck up the courage."

Piper glanced at her friend and quietly chided her for showing off. As she looked back to her guest, he appeared startled.

"Are you angels?" he asked, his hands shaking. He appeared ready to bolt, but his curiosity kept him in place.

He obviously didn't know what happened to the cat, Piper thought. "Not at all, Mister Bishop. What gives you that idea?"

Once more, the older man plucked up some courage. "I have been told you appeared out of thin air!" He gestured at Manny. "And you have creatures with you that know things – that can pluck the thoughts right out of our heads. You must have been sent by Heavenly Father from Heaven to help us."

Piper recalled her youth and how her local pastor had once told her that one day someone would say that very thing to her. Chalk one up to you, she thought. It was time to burst his bubble. "No, sir. I'm Captain Piper of the Federation Starship *U.S.S. Millennium*. This is my Chief of Security Lieutenant Manny Sandage. We received a distress call from here and came to assist. I'm sorry we weren't able to get here sooner. We might have been able to save some more lives."

Simon was troubled. "I appreciate your heart, Piper, but I can't accept that. We have no way of signalling people from a distance. The best we can do is send a letter on horseback. You must be mistaken."

Piper's eyes narrowed. There was no mistaking the voice she heard. It was of a frightened young man crying out in terror. "The fire is coming! Please help!" he had screamed. It was a simple matter to triangulate the signal and put the ship into high warp. Even then, it had taken them over an hour to get here and she feared whoever had called out had already been lost. Upon arrival they had scanned the planet and found the settlements – including one that was on fire.

It had already been too late to save the town's victims, but she had been able to dispatch their shuttles to shower the

affected area with fire retardant. It wasn't long before they were out, and her people were on the ground.

While Epsilon Scorpius III wasn't technically a Federation world, it was in their sphere of influence and Piper was never the one to turn down a cry for help. She had a long history of rushing in where angels fear to tread.

It was clear to Piper that Simon was not trying to challenge her and that his information was simply incomplete. She offered him the chair opposite him. "Please, Simon, sit down."

For some reason the man paused as if there was a problem, then he almost reluctantly sat down. He did not pull his chair forward and kept a small distance between him and the table, as if he wasn't certain he should be fraternising with them.

He gave her a tight smile. "I assume you're this group's leader, *Captain*, by these people's deference to you. Is there a man you report to that I can discuss this situation with?"

The corner of Piper's mouth twitched up in a mixture of annoyance and mirth. Misogyny isn't dead, she thought. "No," she said simply.

"Ah," he said cryptically. "So, you're definitely not from Heaven." His eyes widened at the possible implication of that statement. "Are you from the *other place*?" he said, as if ashamed of even mentioning its existence.

Piper knew where he was referring to. "No. As I said, we're from the Federation, a coalition of planets that Earth is part of." She took a sip of her water before continuing. "I looked up a little of your history. Your people came here on the original *Enterprise* one hundred and sixty years ago from Earth. Yours is a religious group that sought to create a new colony and it was

clear back then you wished to be left alone. We did so. We're only here because we were asked." A thought came to her, and she realised why the reference hadn't been recognised. Their arrival had been a full year before the original Federation charter had been signed. Archer had still been in command of the *Enterprise* before becoming an Admiral after the Federation had been formed. "A lot has happened since your arrival here."

Next to Piper, Manny had been purring. "Cait was one of the first to join once the original charter was written. It appealed to us and our peaceful nature."

Simon gave her a look that said he very much doubted her intentions. Her leonine visage could be intimidating to the uninitiated. Indeed, Amantasandage was capable of terrible violence, but only when needed and appropriate. These days the still youthful Cait divided her time between her duties to Starfleet and her family that travelled with them.

The elder turned back to Piper and frowned. "I mean no disrespect, Captain Piper, but we were brought here by the Prophet centuries ago. He watches over us and protects us. I know nothing of "Earth" other than what I've heard in myth, or this enterprise you speak of."

Inwardly, Piper sighed. History was replete with examples of doctored history. Sorting out the truth was sometimes akin to a fisherman untangling a messed-up fishing line. Sometimes it was simply hopeless. She wondered whether it was pointless to argue. She forgot her security chief was not the one to pass up on a fight.

"How do you explain how the Captain, indeed many of our people here, resemble you so much?"

Simon simply shrugged. "Adam fled his home world millennia ago and seeded his kind wherever he went before he ascended to become our Heavenly Father. Fortunately, he left the Prophet to watch over us."

Before Piper could open her mouth, Manny countered with: "Where does my kind fit in, then? How about Vulcans or Andorians?"

Simon appeared almost bored with the conversation. "I don't know, Miss Sandage, and I'm sorry, I can't comment on the others as I have no idea who they are. All I can say is that God is infinitely creative."

Neither of them could fault that reasoning. Both had been brought up on worlds that believed in a divine, benevolent Creator.

Piper was curious about something. "This Prophet you mentioned. Are you telling me he's at least two centuries old?" It was hard for her not to sound incredulous.

Simon simply nodded. "Yes, he is. He is immortal. He does not age. He is divine."

It sounded like a mantra. Piper wondered whether he repeated it to himself every night before he went to bed. "I'd like to meet this Prophet," she said casually. She didn't put too much stock in the Prophet's *immortality*, but there were plenty of examples of species with long lifespans. If one of them had taken up residence here and was taking advantage of the locals there would be a reckoning. There were few things that made Piper's blood boil more than a shyster.

At that, Simon appeared particularly uncomfortable. "I do not think that would be wise, Captain. We are already under judgement. I don't want to compound our sins with him learning

you are aiding us.” It all came together in his mind then. “If he did not send you, then it is true we cannot trust your intentions. You might be devils for all we know. It is said he can disguise himself as an angel of light.” His eyes glazed with barely controlled panic. He backpedalled and nearly fell off his chair in his bid to make an escape. “I must consult with the others.” With those final words he fled.

Piper laid a hand on Manny’s arm, keeping her in place. She knew the Cait simply wanted to put the record straight, but she knew the only thing that would do that would be their actions; they always spoke louder than words. “Let him go.” With that said, she stood up and addressed her people.

“Listen up!” It took three seconds for silence to fall. “The locals are afraid of us and don’t believe we are who we say we are. That’s OK. Just keep helping them anyway. If, in the end, they want us to leave, we will. Carry on.”

The crew returned to their duties and Manny added so only the two of them could hear: “Only after we get some answers.”

Piper nodded. “Damn straight.”

Chapter Two

The *Millennium's* First Officer, the Vulcan, Sarda, ran a hand through his brassy hair and had to admit he was frustrated. Seated at the Science Station – his usual hangout – he glanced over his shoulder at Krashtallash, who was seated in the centre seat. It was where he would normally be at this time of day. However, Piper had left him to make some inquiries with the Federation archives.

Oddly, there appeared to be little information about this particular group. He had to admit there was plenty of information regarding their religion: a variation of Mormon Fundamentalism. Since the organisation's dropping of the doctrine of polygamy there had been many schisms in the religion. The colony below had taken their beliefs to an extreme and isolated themselves here to keep themselves "pure" in their faith. At least, that's what the archives said.

As for the people, there was little information. Even in Jonathan Archer's day, there had been a fair amount of digital tracking available to the authorities to monitor illicit behaviours. However, this sect in particular had been isolationist in the extreme. Before they had left Earth, they had lived in a large compound in Nevada that was walled off to outsiders. Few people ever entered and fewer left.

They were not bothered by a government that had learned from the tragedy of Waco and others like it. As it was clear anyone could leave at any time, none were considered prisoners. As such, they were left to live the lifestyle of their choice. If some wanted to live a simpler way of life, who was the government to say: No! With the rise of same sex marriage, the

next, obvious step had been taken, allowing polygamous and polyamory marriages. It would seem as if the Fundamentalist Mormons had achieved a victory of sorts.

Yet they remained isolated. Odd.

Sarda tapped in a command and brought up the Captain's logs from the original *Enterprise*. While the Captain's personal logs remained off limits – as a person's private thoughts should be – the ship's logs were often quite illuminating. Especially Jonathan Archer's. As the humans would say it: he wasn't the type to mince words.

So, he wouldn't be disruptive to the others working on the bridge, he put a transdador in his ear and was about to listen to the audio recording – he found them more enlightening than the simple, written word – when he realised he was not alone. Lieutenant Commander Krashtallash, using his amazing stealth as a large, black feline, had chosen this moment to join him unannounced.

"Archer was one of my favourite Captains," he said. "As soon as I realised you were looking into his logs, I had to join you."

Never one to miss an opportunity to teach the younger officers, Sarda offered him a chair. Crash did what he often did. He sat on the floor, his tail hovering behind his head. Crash glanced over his shoulder at the helmsman who nodded that he understood the message: Call me if you need me. He then placed his own earpiece in his ear and Sarda began playing the recording.

"Captain's Log, April 15th, 2160. Starfleet has tasked us with escorting a ship load of colonists to Epsilon Scorpius III. No surprise there, we've done this a couple of times so far. The

thing that annoys me is that I can't get a straight answer out of anybody. If I try to speak to the women, I get nowhere. None of them will talk to me. The men all defer to their "Prophet." It was clear to Crash and Sarda both that Archer had no faith in that designation. "If I ask them a question, they get this weird glassy-eyed look and simply repeat what I've already heard from others. I'd swear they were all brain-washed.

"Anyhow, to make matters worse, the "Prophet" won't speak to me, either, other than to check on our progress. I'm just glad this trip is only going to take us a week. These guys creep me out."

Crash wiggled his whiskers as he did when he was intensely curious. "What kind of humans *are* these?" he asked incredulously.

"Not all humans are as rational – or even as intelligent – as those we serve with in Starfleet," Sarda thought back. "Some of them have proven to be easily manipulated."

"Foolish?" Crash offered.

Sarda considered for a moment, then replied: "Not necessarily. Some are simply weak willed. I find that most simply give up seeking the facts and allow themselves to be constantly swayed by the notions of another."

"They put too much emphasis on the opinions from an outside source rather than examining the issues and coming to their own conclusion." Crash nodded thoughtfully. "The humans aren't alone in that. During the civil war on my own world, I found some willing to follow the revolutionary, Luther, simply because they were disgruntled. They did not fully consider the ramifications of their actions and blindly followed him – all the way to prison." It didn't take much for him to recall the looks on

Luther's faces after he and his sister foiled their plans. With a flood of pride, he added: "They'll be enjoying a comfortable cell for some time to come."

Sarda turned back to the screen. "I believe part of the problem lies within the religion of the people involved. It would seem they believe in a "Prophet" that will guide their community and that he receives his instructions directly from their deity. Such a person could easily abuse their position and bring his society into complete subjugation." He didn't want to admit it, but he felt for these people. They were like lost pet sehlat that had wandered from their homes only to be found by a savage lematya.

Crash bared his teeth in disgust. While he sympathised with the misguided people below, his was a people who refused to be dominated. A recent attempt on his own world had resulted in a very short civil war. One he had led. "Such people are worse than filth. A Cait would tear his throat out if he tried that on my world."

The Commander didn't doubt it. He had seen what remained of a Klingon who had made the unfortunate choice of taking Crash's sister hostage and use her as a shield. His death had been swift and very messy at her brother's vengeful hands – more correctly, fangs. Rather than comment further, he called up the next log, which happened to be logged on the day of the colonist's arrival.

Once more the late Jonathan Archer's voice sounded in their ears. "Captain's Log, April 25th, 2160. Well, we finally made it. Not that it took that long to get here as I asked Mister Tucker to push her right up to Warp 4.5 and keep her there. The sooner we unload this boatload of coo..." There was a brief pause.

“...colonists, the happier we’ll all be. A more uncooperative, secretive bunch I don’t think I’ll ever meet again. They could do with a few lessons from Commander T’Pol on everyday decorum.” Archer paused again for a second, as if collecting his thoughts. “I do have some misgivings, however, for this colony. I don’t know what it is about this “Prophet” of theirs, but he holds a whole lot more sway over these people than I like. He’s practically a dictator. I’ve noticed he’s managed to intimidate a number of my crew, which is saying something given what we went through chasing down the Xindi. Those violet eyes of his seem to reach out and not let you go.

“The sucker heals fast, too. He was accidentally sliced by chef during the evening meal. He was taken down to Doctor Phlox but by the time he got there the wound was already knitting. Weird. Anyhow, *Enterprise* has achieved geosynchronous orbit above an excellent site for their new civilisation and we’re preparing to have them disembark on the modified shuttlecraft we brought with us. I know I won’t be the only one glad to see them go.”

Whiskers rustled in annoyance. “Is that all?”

Sarda considered the recording before offering: “It wasn’t wasted time, Lieutenant Commander. We have at least discovered a distinguishing mark regarding the “Prophet” – one his descendants possibly share.”

Crash’s pupils dilated as he realised. “Violet coloured eyes are very rare for humans, aren’t they?”

Sarda’s blue eyes looked off into the distance, his thoughts on his Captain. Even from this distance he could almost hear her thoughts. It was like hearing her voice whispering in another room. Their psychic bond was incredibly strong so he

could still feel her presence from orbit. In a way it was like knowing he was never alone.

The downside was that it was a bond he should have shared with a Vulcan mate – not the accidental bonding with a female who did not see him as a potential marriage partner.

His companion knew that look. The Vulcan was once more reaching out to Piper in his thoughts. Their link was known to a select few who could be trusted with the information. If it got out Starfleet would probably separate them; not because they would be thought of as a married couple but rather their link could be used against them by an enemy as leverage. It was foolish thinking, Crash thought. Their bond made them a formidable team. “Out of range?” he asked quietly.

Blue Vulcan eyes met green feline and Crash got all the answer he needed. The answer was yes. Crash said: “I’ll let the Captain know what you’ve found.”

Sarda nodded almost absent-mindedly. There was something else bothering him about this “Prophet”. He went back to the recordings and began listening to them again.

Doctor Merete AndrusTaurus was missing her children. She knew they were receiving the best of care and attention from the *Millennium’s* roving Ambassador-at-large cum schoolteacher, Susanna Llash – Krashtallash’s mate. All the same, it hadn’t been long since she had weaned Little Piper and Rogen and, like any mother, she felt their absence keenly. Knowing they were with another of the ship’s mothers gave her a modicum of comfort, however, and she had seen just how attentive Susanna was to her children. In a way, it was odd to

see her rapidly growing children interact with the Llash kits. They were so unlike in many ways, and yet, as Scanner liked to put it: "Kids are kids. They don't care about anything but play'n."

Standing in their make-shift morgue wasn't exactly lifting her spirits, either. Lying on the floor covered by white sheets lay over twenty badly burned bodies. The cause of death for each one was fairly obvious; however, Merete was a thorough woman. Over the years she had learned to take nothing for granted. One-by-one she scanned each body, making notes as to their age, sex and DNA profile for identification purposes. She worked on the corpses as others from her ship continued to uncover them.

The tent flap was pushed aside as another body was brought to her. She saw it was on a litter being carried by the ship's Chief Engineer, Scanner, and his "off-sider", the young, buxom redhead, Ensign Jenny Rapid. The two of them were the best of friends – but that was all. Everyone knew who his wife was, and *nobody* was going to mess with the *Millennium's* formidable Security Chief.

"Got another one for ya, Doc," Scanner drawled.

Merete gave a small snort at her old friend's statement of the obvious. "I can see that, Scanner," she said drolly. "I'll be with you in a sec." Even as she said it, Merete realised how much her human friends had rubbed off on her. Being of the Palkeo Est, she may have looked like them, but her people's idioms were practically non-existent. They just weren't that flowery with their speech.

Scanner realised this and flashed her a cheeky grin. "It's another weird one, though," he said.

Her curiosity piqued, Merete narrowed her slightly tilted eyes and lowered her tricorder. "What do you mean?"

The engineers shared an almost embarrassed look. It was uncomfortable for either of them to speak ill of the dead. "It was weird that they were huddled in the lounge areas of their homes. It was as if they were afraid of the fire but not willin' to run from it."

Jenny chipped in: "Yeah. With Hell on Earth coming their way you'd think they'd run for the hills rather than wait around for the fire to find them."

Merete tipped her head to the side. "Just this one?"

Scanner shook his head, no. "Most of them seemed to be just sittin' there," he said, mournfully. "Ah know that if a fire was headed my way, I'd either boogy or be out there with a hose." He looked around him at the dead. "There's no way ah'd be waitin' for death. I'd be out there spittin' in his eye."

The Doctor had to concede the point. It was odd. "Strange doesn't add up to conspiracy, Scanner," she said.

"We've seen odder things than this."

"It's still weird, though."

Merete gave him a small smile. She knew her friend didn't like losing arguments. She let him have this one. "Yes, it's weird." She followed them as they made their way over to one of the few spaces left and lowered the body to the ground. Together, they removed the sheet and gently picked up what was clearly a young child who had been found in the foetal position. They placed her on a small tarp and were about to replace the sheet when Merete held up a hand to stop them.

While they had been handling the remains Merete had taken the opportunity to scan them. What she found disturbed

her. She leaned over and tried to check the child's face, but the heat had practically solidified the body. The face was tucked into its chest between its arms.

"No," Merete said quietly, her chest tight. As if the fire wasn't enough. "That's just not fair."

Scanner touched her shoulder, concerned. "What is it?" he gently asked.

The Doctor looked him in the eye. "This poor little girl was murdered." A thought came to her. "Was she alone?"

Judd shot an enquiring look at his second. "No, she wasn't," Jenny said through a tight throat. This assignment was one of the hardest ever for her. Space battles were easy. Recovering the bodies of dead children was agony. "We found another three children and who we think were their parents."

"Take me to them." Merete was determined.

A short time later the Doctor stood in the burnt-out lounge of a large, single storey house that had once been made from a mixture of wood and mud brick. The roof had been thatched, but the fire had removed nearly all trace of its existence, opening the home to the fading light of day. "Don't touch anything!" she ordered the crewmen who were working the site. The stocky woman was not to be trifled with. They put down everything and stepped back, revealing the remains Jenny had described. "This is a crime scene," Merete said.

Protocol had its dictates and the crewmembers followed them to the letter. They left the house and stood outside, waiting for instructions. Jenny accompanied them, leaving Scanner to assist the Doctor as she bent to examine the corpses.

Merete did her level best to maintain an air of clinical detachment. She had seen more than her fair share of horrors

in her days, but that hadn't hardened her to them. Being a mother herself she was particularly sensitive to the sufferings of children. She reminded herself that, right now, she was the only one who could speak for them considering their unjust end.

She ran her med scanner over each one and found the results were the same as for the little one back in the morgue. They had all been poisoned with cyanide.

She straightened up and marvelled to herself at the complete inhumanity of the situation. In a place that should have been a safe haven these poor people had been horribly killed. Had the fire been set to cover the crime? she wondered. If it had, whoever had done this deserved a fate far worse than death. The normally pacifist Palkeo Estian saw red. Right then and there she would have been happy to exact justice with extreme prejudice.

"What is it, Merete?" Scanner asked, surprised at the fury in the sweet woman's face. He knew that it took a whole lot to get the healer this mad.

Killing two birds with one stone, the Doctor flipped open her communicator. "Doctor AndrusTaurus to Lieutenant Sandage."

The ever-efficient Cait answered in a heartbeat. "Go ahead, Doctor."

"Please come to these coordinates. I've found a whole family dead from poison. I need your people to do a forensic analysis." Merete's comms unit was rattling a little as the Doctor shook with rage.

"I'll be there in a minute," came the cool reply.

Scanner smirked to himself. He knew his wife wouldn't even take that long. He was right. She arrived thirty seconds later.

Chapter Three

Once more Jason tried – unsuccessfully – to dust some of the ash off his jacket. Every footfall seemed to kick up more of the bloody stuff and the more he walked the filthier he was getting. He was grateful that at least his boots and slacks were already black. However, his white uniform top and blood-red jacket had seen better days.

It had been two hours since the Captain had sent him on his little mission. It had been far from a hard walk through the undulating terrain as the ground clutter that would have normally slowed him down was all gone – consumed in the fire. All the same, the fire was only a few hours dead, and they still found smouldering logs here and there.

Jason stopped and scanned the area ahead once more. It had been almost a ritual that, after five minutes of walking he could check the landscape ahead. Carman wondered if he was concerned about native carnivores that might have survived the fire. He could imagine they would be very cranky. He was tempted to ask once more if his companion had found anything, but he bit his lip. If there was something worth reporting Jason would voice it.

As if guessing his thoughts, Jason said: “Nothing.” He sighed. “I should have gotten the *Millennium* to beam us over to the seat of the fire.”

Carman, the consummate optimist, said: “If we had we wouldn’t have been able to report in those areas that were still a danger. Sometimes there’s no substitute for being on the ground, walking it through.”

There were times when Carman's cheery disposition got on Jason's nerves. This was one of them. This fire was a little too close to home for Jason. He had lived through one in his youth. Given the technology of the twenty-third century, one might think they were a thing of the past. However, during summer lightning strikes often started blazes that quickly got out of control before a coordinated response could be organised. Even with the automated fire suppressions units, a blaze could quickly gather strength. There was nothing like a day with the temperature in the forties centigrade with the wind blowing over one hundred kilometres an hour to make you quake in your boots.

Such conditions had ravaged the countryside many times over since European settlement. Jason had been a boy living in Mansfield on a day trip to Mount Buller on horseback when the conditions unexpectedly deteriorated. A storm had swept in, and several lightning strikes began spot fires that quickly coalesced into an inferno they had barely outrun on their horses. When they finally got clear their mounts were so tired, they practically dropped, exhausted.

Not to mention that Jason and his father, Stephen, were wiped out as well. Walking their horses, they found a small creek where they watered the horses and refilled their canteens. They didn't say a word to each other for the rest of the day. However, Jason could never forget the haunted look in his father's eyes.

Years later he had confided in him that he had never been as scared as he was that day. "Son, I wasn't so afraid for myself," he had said after a few beers had loosened his tongue. "You know me, I'm not normally scared of fire. It's just that that day it felt like the Devil himself was chasing us through the bush

and Hell was followin' 'im." His father had teared up then and there, which surprised Jason because he could never recall another time when that had happened. "I was prepared, you know. I'd lived, I'd done things. I would have hated dying then and there, but when it's going to happen to you there's usually no choice in the matter." At that point his father had fixed him with a heart-felt stare. "It was just that you were there with me, and I couldn't help feeling I should have known better than take you out for a ride on a day like that. Like, if you'd died young like that, that it was all my fault. If I'd ended up in Hell that day, I would have deserved it."

Jason had been shocked by his father's candour and by how deep his guilt had been. Still only fifteen, he had put his arm around him and clapped his shoulder. "Don't worry about it, Dad. We're still here!" It was the best he could do as he, even today, didn't really understand. He wasn't a father.

Although technically he was. He had recently come to the knowledge that the *Millennium's* bartender, Gillian, was in fact, his daughter. An alternate version of himself had travelled back in time and had a completely different life, including marrying an Argelian woman and having a bunch of kids – including their vivacious bartender. She had kept the knowledge to herself until they passed the time when he was to have made the journey back in history. Only then was she confident to share the information without fearing damage to the timeline.

With the revelation that Gillian was actually Gillian *Nunn*, Jason was left wondering what to do with the information. It was weird. She was his biological daughter, but *not* his daughter.

"I just can't wrap my head around it, man," Jason said without realising he had spoken out loud.

His friend knew immediately what was on his mind – he had heard all about it. Often. He had to admit it was becoming a little tiresome. As a widower, he was very familiar there were things that happened in life and the only thing you can do is accept the fact and move on. Deal with it, seal it then make a meal. “I wouldn’t worry about it, my friend,” he said. “Gillian has already told you that her father is back on Argelius. You just happen to look a lot like him. Let it go.”

It wasn’t going to end there, he knew.

“It’s like, I’m a dad, but I’m not. I have no real connection with Gillian.” Frustrated, Jason picked up the pace.

Carman shrugged and followed. “Perhaps you’re not meant to,” he said. “She’s given you the boundaries and that should be the end of it. You remain the brash young Lieutenant and she the older, and wiser, bartender.” He couldn’t help the little jibe.

Jason shot him an annoyed look. “As if it wasn’t complicated enough without realising my own daughter is *older* than I am!” He turned his gaze skyward. “I hope you’re having a really good laugh about this!” he said bitterly.

Where Carman came from, people didn’t take challenging the Almighty lightly. He couldn’t help coming to His defence. “I don’t think that’s what He’s doing, Jason,” he said respectfully. He didn’t want a lightning bolt to come down out of the sky and reduce them to ashes. His people were a superstitious lot he freely admitted to himself. “I’m sure what happened was for a good reason.”

“How do we know that for sure?”

His friend had to be honest. "I don't know. I just know it's not a good idea to go poking a stick at the dragon if you're not prepared for the consequences."

A noise disturbed them. A rhythmic thump-thump that Jason recognised instinctively. Horses. They were distant at first but rapidly came closer. Suddenly, out of the lingering smoke appeared two men on horseback. To Jason they appeared to come from his very own memories. As they neared, they resolved into the forms of a man and teenaged boy wearing oil-skin jackets and even Akubra styled hats! The image held Jason transfixed in disbelief.

Realising his friend was dumbstruck, Carman said: "Who are you?!" as they thundered to a stop only two metres away.

The muscular, grey-haired local leaned forward in his seat and said: "I might ask you the same question, stranger." His voice was dry and started him coughing. He reached for a water canteen and washed away the irritation.

Carman straightened up. "We're from the starship *Millennium* and we came to help."

While the elder showed no sign of recognition, the younger's eyes widened. The reaction was noticed by both officers.

"Your words mean nothing to me, stranger," the older said once more. "Why are you on my land?" He scowled at them. "Did *you* start the fire?"

At that, the boy spoke up. "Of course, they didn't, father. You know what caused it."

Carman shared a look with Jason, who nodded. It was the voice they'd heard over subspace.

“Father” shot a warning look at his son, who had clearly spoken out of turn. “You haven't answered my question,” he growled, his tone menacing.

Jason took a step forward, putting on his most friendly face. “Look, mate. We're here to help. Our captain sent us out to find the cause of the fire – that's all. Our people put it out. If we hadn't come when we did the whole town would have been lost.”

More than anything else, it was Jason's Aussie accent that lent the ring of truth. “You're not from around here,” Father said. His own, local intonations reminded Jason of Commander Ryan's native Irish.

To lend credence to the fact, Carman thickened up his own Centauran accent, which was reminiscent of Greek. “Neither am I. We're members of Starfleet from the United Federation of Planets. I'm from Alpha Centauri and Jason, here, is from Earth.”

Everything else they said went over their heads except for that last word. “Earth?” the boy said. “You're from Earth?” Father glared at his son as his horse began impatiently pawing underneath him. “Earth is just a myth, Michael. I told you about that foolish thinking.”

Michael stood his ground without arguing. It was clear he held his belief firmly. “Father, we should offer these men our hospitality as good Christian men should.”

His father wasn't exactly sold on the idea, but a lifetime of belief swayed him. “Follow us. Our home is just over the hill. Thank the Lord the fire missed it.”

Jason watched as they turned to go and wondered why they hadn't offered them a ride. Riding two-up came naturally

to a man who was born in the saddle, and he knew that Carman was capable as well.

As if answering his question, Carman said: "He doesn't trust us. Not one bit."

"Whatever. I'll just be glad for a cuppa. Besides, we get to kill two birds with one stone."

"What's that?"

Jason grinned. "Michael seems to know the cause of the fire and I'd like to know how he has a subspace transceiver when the rest of his people don't even believe in Earth."

In the second tent to be erected in the town as a mortuary – the first had been filled – Doctor AndrusTaurus worked over the last of the family members. There was plenty of intact DNA in the bone marrow in each corpse for her to work up a decent profile. She had already identified the parents and their familial similarities to all the children. They had indeed been a family.

How they had all come to be poisoned with cyanide was the mystery. Furious at the waste of life, Merete slapped her tricorder down on the bench she had been using to perform her autopsies. A tear escaped her eye as she looked at the ravaged child before her, taken before she'd had a chance to grow up and discover the joys of life. "It's not fair," she said, angrily, not realising someone was listening.

"No, it's not," came the voice of a friend from behind her. "That's what I'm here for."

Her spirits momentarily lifted, the Doctor turned and gave the graceful, white feline a small smile. She nodded slowly

as she said: "I'm glad for that. Someone needs to speak for these people. Did you find anything at the house that might explain this?" she took in the family with a depressed flourish.

Amantasandage bared her teeth in annoyance, a gesture which would frighten the uninitiated. Not those who knew her. "No evidence to be found anywhere." Her whiskers wriggled, demonstrating her frustration. "That's the problem with fire. It all too often takes it with it."

Merete leaned back on the trolley with both hands behind her. "Do you think the fire might have been started to cover the murder?"

It was a thought that had occurred to her. Even though, Manny's tail whipped around in agitation. "I hope not. It's a hell of a way to do it. Get rid of the evidence and the town with it." She shook her head. "I don't think so, though. The fire's base seemed to be a couple of kilometres from here. Why bother with that when you can simply torch the one home?"

Now it was Merete's turn for the macabre. "To make it look like a natural disaster instead? To minimise suspicion?" Manny's pupils dilated a little as she considered the notion. Her fur bristled as she said: "You'd have to be one cold-hearted psychopath to do that." Her lip curled cheekily as she added: "I'll have to keep an eye on you in future, Doctor, if you're capable of thinking that way."

Merete's eyes turned back to the ruined child before her. "I'm the last person you'll ever have to worry about, Manny."

The Lieutenant knew it to be true. The Doctor didn't have a nasty bone in her body.

Pulling the sheet over the child's face, Manny sorrowfully said: "I hope that's the last of them."

The security officer pulled out her padd and checked her list of the deceased that was constantly updated by the Starfleet crew members working on the ground. She noted there had been no new additions to the list of discovered bodies for over an hour. "It probably is, Merete." She put it on the table and lightly touched her friend's arm. "Why don't you beam up to the ship? Your kits are probably hungry by now. Or at least missing you."

Her children, Rogen and Piper Jr, had been weened. Something that had made her life a whole lot easier as a single mother. She knew their sitter was quite capable of taking care of her children's basic needs. However, there was no substitute for family and right now Merete needed to be near the living while she put the dead out of her mind. She gave her friend a grateful glance and nodded. "Good idea. You know where to find me if you need me." She snapped off her gloves, tossed them into a bin then flipped open her communicator. "Merete to *Millennium*, one to beam up." Before the beam took her, she said: "Let Piper know."

As she faded away Manny replied: "No problem."

Chapter Four

In the middle of the town was its main water source: a well that led to an underwater aquifer from the nearby river. It was a clever setup as the water was drawn by a series of pitchers attached to a rope that was wound around two large pullies. All one had to do to draw a constant flow of water was to put their basin under the outlet, turn the handle and the continuously filling and pouring vessels filled it in no time.

The problem was the ash from the fire had accumulated in the bottom of the shaft. It was going to take some doing to clean it and make the water safe. In the meantime, Piper had ordered a filtering system be installed. They still recommended the water be boiled, but at least it was drinkable. That's what Piper kept telling herself.

She looked around her and wondered how these people were going to overcome this catastrophe. Nearly a quarter of the townsfolk were dead. Merete's people were tending to those still suffering from smoke inhalation – the worst cases had been transported to sickbay where her CMO had returned, she had been told. Fortunately, there had been few burns.

She checked her old-fashioned, wind-up gold watch and realised the time. Not only had her people been working tirelessly for hours, but it had also been some time since she had sent Jason and Carman off on their errand. She frowned to herself, suddenly worried for them. Surely it shouldn't have taken this long.

As she reached for her communicator past the hilt of her cleverly disguised Vin'tah – it appeared to be nothing more than a handle and hilt as the shaft was secluded within it – she heard

the distinct sound of footfalls. It was a rhythmic pounding that was familiar to her – horse's hooves. It shouldn't have struck her as odd considering she was well aware of these people's dependence on the domesticated animals for transportation, but it did. They were coming fast, as if the rider had little or no regard for whoever might cross her path. Annoyed at the flagrant act of selfishness, she turned her eyes to the intruder and found the rider was a man who appeared to be in his early thirties.

His hair was tousled brown, his face ruddy. There was an attractiveness to him as well as the confidence he demonstrated with every action. This was a man used to having his own way; a man used to taking up all the air in a room.

Piper was not the sort to judge a book by its cover, so she ventured forward to see this enigma. As he swung his leg over and out of the saddle to stand once more on solid ground, his eyes darted about him as if he was summing up the situation at a glance. Piper could see his muscles rippling under his well-tailored clothes, including what appeared to be a belt with a titanium buckle. He was clearly fit, and his attire seemed to be a cut above. By this stage Piper needed no introduction from the already grovelling locals. This was this planet's "Prophet".

As she drew nearer, she caught a glimpse of his eyes under his hat. They were a vivid violet. Sarda had forwarded that detail. This man was a descendant of the original prophet – that was clear. She put no stock in the tale of him being over a century old.

She hung back for a moment as the ever-vigilant Elder Simon Bishop beat her to the punch.

"Greetings, Prophet of the Most High God, we are honoured by your presence!" Piper mused that, if Simon bent

any lower before the Prophet, he would topple over and land his face on his boots.

"I came as soon as I got word of your tragedy. There are others following who will bring aid and food for you all." Piper noted the man had a well-practiced air of command that she would not have expected from someone so relatively young. She had met seasoned Starfleet officers the same age who didn't have the ease this man had.

At that point violet eyes met jade green. Piper was tired and dirty, but for a woman in her mid-forties she still looked a decade younger. Even though her honey-blond hair had come loose from her pin, she was a stunner. Although, as she looked into his eyes, she assessed him as he was clearly doing to her. This man was not interested in her physically, he was evaluating her mind. So, she fell into her casual air to throw him off. People were more easily handled if they underestimated you.

Once again, she was pre-empted by Elder Bishop who was doing a great impression of a sycophant. "Please let me introduce Captain Piper, sir. She believes she's from the stars, but she must be from one of the other villages. I don't know which one."

The "Prophet" stepped forward and, with the tiniest hesitation, put out his hand. Piper realised it was not every day the man had to consider a female as a person in authority. "I'm pleased to meet you, Captain. Thank you for the assistance you've given my flock."

Whilst Bishop missed it, Piper did not. His use of her rank came easily. Not to mention his hinted admission that her people were *not* of his flock.

“You’re welcome, sir. All in a day’s work.” There was no way Piper was going to refer to him as “Prophet”. “When we got the call, we came as quickly as we could. I’m only sorry we couldn’t get here sooner. The death toll was very high.” She made a point of that fact which she didn’t have to feign. She cherished life.

“Yes, it was.” The Prophet turned and took a good look around him. He wore a look of sorrow which Piper didn’t quite buy. “God told me there would be many in his arms this day.”

While the villagers flocked about him, Piper thought she wouldn’t buy a used shuttle from this guy. There was something about him she just couldn’t trust. His act seemed just a little *too* polished. She wondered if he had been groomed for this role from his youth. Perhaps the previous Prophet had trained him.

As his people thought they were leading him away, which Piper knew to actually be the reverse, she remembered she had been distracted from making a call.

It had been quite some time since Jason could remember drinking a cup of *real tea*. Not the replicated stuff from the ship’s galley. Real, bona fide tea, with milk from a cow and sugar to boot! He was enjoying it so much he was tempted to ask his hosts if he could take some with him when he left.

“Father” had introduced himself as Byron Ayres, a local farmer who raised cattle. His stock had mostly been in the southern pastures and so they had been spared. All the same, it appeared the fire had started in his lucerne field. The crop had been devastated just short of harvesting. It had been tinder dry – ripe for a fire bug.

Byron's middle-aged wife, Florence, gave him an almost embarrassed smile as she placed some biscuits on a plate before her guests. He wondered if they had people drop by very often. Judging from the farmer's demeanour, probably not. He was about as friendly as a Tiger Snake.

Speak of the devil. Byron put down his mug and glared at the two of them. "Now, just what were the two of you doing on my land?"

Carman kept his tone even. "As we said earlier, sir, we're investigating the source and cause of the fire."

Byron gave him a less-than-friendly grin, the sort you get from someone who *really* doesn't like you. "I got that. It's just the rubbish about coming from Earth I don't get. Why lie about that?"

"Who said anything about us lying, or even needing to do so?" Carman drew in a breath to settle his frayed nerves. "Why would I *bother*?"

As the men bantered Jason took another look around the room and noted that, for all Byron's brusqueness, he was a devout man. There were Bible verses decoratively placed around the large kitchen and living area, including passages from other sources he wasn't familiar with. All of them spoke of loving thy neighbour and the blessings that come with them.

"We're not Simon Magus," he said in a moment's silence. "We're here to help, not hinder."

The reference to the New Testament magician surprised his hosts. He guessed they all had him figured for a complete heathen. This was one of those moments he was grateful his parents had insisted he attend Sunday School.

“What do you know of Simon Magus?” Byron asked, curious and challenging.

“That he wasn’t what he appeared to be,” Jason answered. “That’s not us. Look, we appreciate the cuppa and the biscuits” – he had tried one and decided his teeth wouldn’t survive another one – “but we’ve got a job to do. If you’re not willing to help I’d appreciate it if you could point us in the right direction of the lucerne field and see us on our way.”

Byron remained sceptical. At that moment Michael seized the opportunity and spoke up. “I’ll do it Father. Can I take Jimmy and Sly with us as well?” His father simply nodded his permission.

The Starfleet officers were curious about the names, but their concerns were assuaged when they were taken to the stables and introduced to a fine pair of horses. Jason was given Jimmy, a Clydesdale cross mare that had to be at least sixteen hands and pawed the ground impatiently. Sly was a Quarter horse gelding that was much shorter and had a demeanour that betrayed his name. He was as docile as they came.

Jason helped saddle them and, within no time they were trotting down a well-worn track towards the west and the source of the fire. Once out of earshot, Jason asked: “Michael, we know it was you who made the call over subspace. Where did you get the transmitter?”

To Michael's credit, he didn't deny it. He simply kept his eyes on the path ahead and said nothing for a moment. Jason had just drawn in a breath to repeat himself when the lad said: “I can't tell you how I got it. Word might get back to the Prophet and that would hurt a lot of people. Anything that challenges him, and his version of history, is taboo.” He locked fearful eyes

with the young Lieutenant and said: "People have been known to disappear."

Carman was shocked. "Seriously?" he said incredulously.

"I don't kid about things like that." Michael pulled his horse up at the top of the hill where they had an uninterrupted view of the valley below. All three of them could clearly see the arc of black where the fire had started – right at the edge of the lucerne field. The *Millennium* officers instinctively knew that this had been arson. There was nothing else nearby except open fields of wild grasses that were separated from the field by wide, tilled breaks. The young man pointed below them. "This is what happens when the Prophet thinks he's been challenged." Without waiting for a reply, Michael clucked and pushed his horse into a lope down the hill.

Jason shared a quick, knowing look with his friend, then spurred his mount to follow. With Carman bringing up the rear, they caught up with Michael in less than a minute. Without preamble, Jason swung out of the saddle, left his mount to nibble on some of the remaining, unburnt lucerne, then took out his tricorder and scanned what appeared to be the source of the fire.

"Why would the Prophet have a problem with your family?" Carman asked, curious and worried for the young man. He found it peculiar that the genuine character before him could be considered a threat to anyone.

Michael wiped some of the ash from his sweating face and did little more than leave a black smear across his forehead. He was uncertain whether he could trust the men from Earth, but he decided that he had to be able to confide in *someone*. "I think he knows I'm a part of the Truth Brigade, as we call ourselves." When Carman looked at him to elaborate, he added:

"We still believe in the scriptures and stuff, but we don't believe that the Prophet really hears from God. If he was a man of God, then his actions would line up with what the Bible describes, and he doesn't." He shook his head angrily. "No way."

"How do you mean?"

He thought for a moment. "A prophet is supposed to be able to tell us what God thinks about stuff but a lot of the time he talks as if *he's* a judge. The Bible tells us to judge no-one. It also tells us to be servants for one another, but he treats us all like we're his personal slaves. He pretends to be a man of the people but he's anything but."

Jason looked up from his tricorder to see the young man was visibly shaking, he was so angry. "Give me a "for instance", " he asked.

Michael thought for a moment then said: "Well, there's what happened to Mrs Brigham. She was serving him dinner at their place one night and she accidentally spilled coffee on his shirt. He was so angry for a minute I thought he was going to hit her then and there. Then, he calmed down and said it was all right, but everyone knew it wasn't. Later that night, they found her on the ground outside, dead. They said she fell off the roof, but nobody believes it."

"Why?"

"Because she was afraid of heights. Anyhow, it was weird. When the Prophet was told he didn't seem sorry at all. He just said: "It was God's will"." Michael sighed and looked back towards his home for a moment before turning back to Carman, looking dejected. "I don't know why I'm bothering to tell you this," he said, feeling defeated. "You're going to be gone soon

and we're going to be left with him lording over us for another couple of hundred years.”

Both men started at that. “What?” Carman said, not quite believing his ears.

Jason chimed in: “That's impossible.”

It seemed to delight Michael that he could surprise his guests. “Not at all. The Prophet was the one who led us here in the first place. He's the one who's been rewriting history because he was there and knows just what to say. Fortunately, there are those of us who keep the truth alive.”

“Yeah, and it had to be my own son who would betray our family.”

All three men spun to see Michael's father standing not ten metres away in the long grasses bearing a crude, but still lethal looking, rifle.

Chapter Five

“Piper to Lieutenant Nunn.” After a moment's silence the Captain frowned to herself. She repeated the hail. Nothing. She tried calling Valastro and got the same result.

Feeling in her bones her people were in trouble, she called the ship. “Yes, Captain?” came the response.

It was always good to hear her Vulcan first officer's not quite dispassionate voice. Since her accidental mental bonding with him she had become very much aware of how passionate he really was. He just wouldn't let others see it and would *never* let himself be dictated to by his emotions. He spent many hours each week in private meditation to maintain his control.

“Sarda, I sent Misters Nunn and Valastro off to the south, on foot, to find the source of the fire. Since then, there's been no check-in. Can you scan the area and see if you can find them?”

Piper spent the moment waiting, watching her people methodically pitching more temporary shelters for the locals. If there was one thing they knew how to do on board the *Millennium*, it was camp out. She also noticed some of the aid from the other villages was beginning to arrive on horse-drawn carts. It was getting harder to see them in the dusk light. She shaded her eyes and looked off towards the east into the setting sun where the disc was just about to vanish over the horizon. It was going to be very dark here shortly and there was little hope for a natural reprieve. This world had no moon. Fortunately, her crew had prepared, and portable lamps were already being lit.

“Captain.” Sarda's voice carried a tiny current of concern only those who knew him best would be able to detect. “I have

managed to find them after scanning for their communicators. However, they are not responding to our hails.”

Piper pursed her lips in frustration. This world was complete with its own set of enigmas. After meeting one of them she was in no mood for another. “Don't waste any more time trying to hail them. I don't care what they're doing. Beam them up.”

In the fading light, Michael's father failed to see Carman, who was standing behind his horse, go for his phaser.

Valastro fired over his mount's back and, even though he just missed, he forced Byron to duck back into the grasses.

Using the confusion, Jason ducked for cover himself and pulled his phaser, firing another burst into the brush. It was during the confusion that their communicators chirped away unnoticed.

Michael remained standing, horrified that his father would consider firing on *him*. He glanced about for an idea of what to do and came up with nothing more than: drop. It was a good thing he did as his horse, now thoroughly startled by the bright lights and strange noises, reared and took off for home, followed closely by the others.

Jason and Carman used the confusion to effect by firing repeatedly into the grasses where they had last seen Byron. To their dismay, after several minutes, they appeared to be hitting nothing.

Carman also realised things were likely about to get a whole lot worse in the fading light. Byron undoubtedly knew the

lay of the land a whole lot better than they did. Worried, he decided to call for beam-out.

He needn't have bothered. As the beam took him, he glanced at Michael and realised they were leaving the boy to his father's mercy.

Jumping up from the deck, both men cleared the platform. Carman ordered: "There was a boy standing not three metres from where you found us. Beam him up quickly!"

The transporter operator scanned the surrounding area and found *two* lifeforms. Without asking he beamed them both up.

To their amazement, the Ayres men appeared on the platform and, although they had yet to fully materialise, it was clear the elder was about to fire on the younger. There was no time to stop him before a loud shot was heard and Michael crumpled to the floor.

Doctor Merete AndrusTaurus looked down at her patient and was grateful she was still alive. Her lungs would take some time to recover, but with some more time in their hyperbaric chamber she would be as good as new.

Miriam had told her she was only twenty-two, but she had already brought forward four children. Three girls and one boy.

"My husband was so happy when he was born," she said in little more than a whisper. The Doctor had tried to keep her quiet, but it seemed like Miriam was just delighted to have someone new to talk to. So, with regular checks on her condition, Merete engaged her.

“Why was that?” she replied, curious. “Surely he was just as happy to have your girls.”

Miriam gave a tiny shake of her head, no. “Boys are more useful to him as a blacksmith. Now he has someone he can pass his trade onto and the business as well.”

Merete's brows shot up at that. “Are you telling me women can't inherit?”

The younger woman seemed almost amazed at the notion. “Why would we?” she asked honestly. “It's our job to take care of the home and raise up the next generation for our husbands.” She shared a small, contented smile. “At least I had a boy before Sharon.”

Becoming more confused by the second, Merete asked: “Who's Sharon?”

“Daryl's first wife, or course. I'm his second.”

It was all becoming too much for the woman of the Palkeo Est. They mated only once in their lives – for life.

“Multiple wives?” she muttered to herself in amazement. She didn't realise she had voiced the thought.

The young, brunette woman with the shy face looked up at her in complete honesty. “Why wouldn't we?”

The question caught the Doctor completely off guard as she realised she didn't have a good answer. She stood lost for a moment in thought when Miriam asked: “Are you married?”

It had been less than a year since Merete had met, married, and lost her husband in tragic circumstances. Her emotions were still raw and easily revisited. She was learning that you never got over your loved ones, you simply had to go on without them. “No,” she said roughly, her voice betraying her. “Not anymore.”

Even fully reclined, her head on a pillow, Miriam shared her sorrow. Her voice a whisper, she said: "I am so sorry. Why didn't you die with him?"

The Doctor wasn't sure how to answer that. "I wanted to," she answered from the heart, recalling the despair of being left alone, "but I was pregnant with our twins. I had to live for them."

At that, the young woman brightened up considerably. "You have children, *and* you're a doctor?" She was clearly amazed. "Wow."

Having revisited the pain of the loss of her beloved husband, Merete's thoughts turned to her children. She glanced at the wall chronometer and realised she should already be off shift. No doubt Susanna was already waiting for her to pick up the children from creche.

She was interrupted when the call came in from Transporter Room One. She gave Miriam a quick smile then began moving as her training required. Followed by her best trauma team, she grabbed her kit and put out of her mind her plans to see Rogen and Piper Jr. Duty called.

After a brisk walk, a turbolift ride, and a few more steps to the Transporter Room she was there in under a minute. To her surprise, there was a middle-aged man on the floor with a security officer kneeling on him. A glance told her the man was simply angry, not hurt.

She turned and saw a handsome young man still on the platform where Jason was cradling him. Oddly, just above him, there was a neat hole in the wall she didn't remember seeing before.

Was he shot? Merete wondered. "What happened here?" she barked.

Jason looked up at her with an embarrassed look on his face. "His old man took a shot at him and missed. I think the young fella fainted."

Merete looked down at him, amazed. "You called me down here for *that*?" she stated incredulously, but with good cheer. She smiled to herself and reached into her pouch for some smelling salts. She would rather use less invasive techniques than a hypospray full of stimulants. Sometimes they did more harm than good. She waved them under the boy's nose, and he quickly came to. As he focussed on her and realised, she was not human, she gave him a quick scan and smiled down at him reassuringly. "You're going to be fine, young man. Just don't marry too many women. They'll wear you out."

She turned to Jason and said: "He'll be fine. If you have anything important call Doctor Harper. He's on shift now." Her thoughts had already returned to her children. She stood up and handed her kit to her triage nurse, Stone. "Return these for me, please. I'm off."

Without another word, Merete walked out into the corridor and headed for her children. It had been a long day and she was looking forward to getting back to what she thought of as real life. Her family.

A short time later, with Byron safely ensconced in the Brig, Sarda sat in Piper's Ready Room and listened to what Michael had to say. Even though the Captain wasn't there, he

still wouldn't sit in her chair. Nobody on this ship would. They had too much respect for her.

"So, this Prophet you speak of is supposedly two hundred and one years old?" he asked. It didn't appear possible.

Michael shrugged. "I can't say exactly, but he doesn't age. They say he's immortal."

"How is that possible?" Lieutenant Nunn asked, incredulously. "No human could live that long."

"Perhaps he's a Vulcan made to look human," Carman chimed in. "Commander, your people live a lot longer than we do."

Over his steepled fingers Sarda said: "No. While Vulcans do live that long the Prophet would have aged considerably. By our standards he would be an old man entering his retirement. There must be another possibility." For instance, cloning, he thought. He didn't mention it because it sounded outlandish even to him. "What has this "Prophet" done that has caused so much ire?"

Michael drew in a breath and ran a hand through his thick hair. "Where do I start?" he asked himself. "Nobody gets married here unless the Prophet arranges it. There's no free will at all. I knew a great couple, Malcolm and Sarah, who fell in love when they were about sixteen. They lived on farms next to each other. They'd grown up together..." His voice trailed off a little as his mind wandered back to that time. He shook himself and scowled. "They asked the Prophet if they could get married when he visited. I still remember the looks on their faces when he told them "Absolutely not!"'" He snorted in derision. "He said that God had told him she should be *his* bride. That day he took Sarah back to Lake City with him. We never saw her again." As

he spoke his face grew redder as the anger flowed once more. "Malcolm was never the same again. He was ordered to marry some other girl from across town, but he hasn't done it yet. I worry that he's tempting the Prophet's wrath, but he's told me there's no way he's ever going to marry anyone other than Sarah."

Carman asked: "Is Sarah the Prophet's only wife?"

With a roll of his eyes, Michael said bitterly: "No. The last time anyone knew he's got fifteen. The funny thing is, he has no children."

Jason tilted his head in confusion. "Then what does his need all those women for?"

Their guest scoffed. "What does any man want a harem for? They're his personal slaves for more than just looking after his home."

While the notion chafed all the Starfleet present, they were taught that their place was not to judge another's culture. Change had to come from within, not without.

"What else is he accused of?" Sarda asked.

Michael started ticking off his fingers. "You name it. Disappearances, unexplained deaths, fires. Punishments if you defy him. I know one man who died in an old well he had banished him to for a week. He uses God's name to do whatever he likes. If he was mortal, we could simply hope that he dies and move on, but this man hasn't changed in over a hundred years."

Seated next to Jason on Piper's couch, Carman chimed in: "Do we have any pictures of the Prophet before he arrived here?"

Sarda focussed once more on the young local. "You are familiar with the Prophet's appearance?"

To calm himself, Michael had stepped over to the window and had let himself wonder at being in orbit of his world. He drew himself back and answered: "Yes, many times. That's why he set fire to our field."

The non-sequitur did not sit well with the Vulcan. With a red eyebrow raised he said: "Excuse me?"

The boy took a deep breath and sighed. "I think I gave myself away the last time the Prophet was in town – three days ago. When he arrived, everyone was waving. I forgot to."

Sarda nodded his understanding. "Because you do not adore him like the rest of the townsfolk?" He spoke, as always, completely rationally.

To Michael, the brassy haired man with the pointed ears before him had a funny way of speaking but he had hit the nail on the head. "I hate him and what he's been doing to our people. We're supposed to love God with all our hearts, minds and souls and yet he insists we treat him the same. You can't worship two gods at the same time."

Sarda did not understand the notion of worshipping a higher being, but he could see his point. The Prophet seemed to be a contradiction in terms. A being who should be pointing people to his deity but insisting on hoarding all the honour to himself. Returning to the earlier thought, Sarda used Piper's terminal to bring up an archived picture of the Prophet who wore a full beard then. He swivelled the screen so Michael could see it.

After a good look he announced, with total confidence: "That's him." Just seeing his image his face brought out his hatred for the man. "And may he rot in Hell."

Sarda was mildly surprised by the powerful emotions on display. He wondered to himself just how many moral laws this man had broken. If indeed he was responsible for not only murder but dictating the lives of all the sentients on an entire planet, then he deserved to be punished for his crimes.

“Hopefully he’ll go there soon enough,” Lieutenant Nunn said, his voice full of righteous anger. Sarda saw blood in his eyes.

“We cannot interfere, Lieutenant,” he said, his word final. “This man’s crimes must be dealt with by the people of this world. We have no jurisdiction here.”

Before Jason could vent his spleen, Carman spoke. “Commander, if it is true that this man is responsible for the deaths in the town, surely he must be made to pay for his crime.”

Sarda drew a breath before replying to make certain he maintained his veneer of logic. “Gentlemen, I agree. However, the laws of the Federation do not extend here.” Before they could reply he added: “We can only inform their elders of the evidence and let them decide what is to become of him.”

Michael shrugged, dejected. “The man’s immortal, we can’t kill him. We can only cheese him off.” He took one more look at his world turning below and, resigned to his fate, said: “You’d better send me home, now. My Mom will be wondering what happened to us, and if you don’t plan on letting Dad go anytime soon, she and my other Mom will need me to make sure the farm is properly cared for.”

The officers present, Sarda included, felt for him. He looked like a man headed for the gallows and there was little hope they could give him things could be otherwise.

Sarda stood and offered Michael his hand, which surprised both Nunn and Carman. Michael, unaware of the Vulcan privacies, simply took it and shook it warmly. "Michael, we will report all of this to our Captain. There may yet be something she can do. She is a very resourceful woman."

Not yet out of his teens, Michael looked from one to the other of those present and saw the confidence they had in their leader. It gave him some hope in a very dark future. Speaking of which: "What are you going to do with Dad?"

Sarda considered his options. Sure enough, the man had discharged a weapon on this ship, but only because he had been caught doing so during transport. The argument that he had tried to commit murder aboard a starship would not hold water in a court of law. It was a technicality in the very least. There was, however, another option. "Your father will be held on board for twenty-four hours for damaging Starfleet property. Then we will beam him down to New Utah Village."

The young man's eyes widened in surprise. "That town's the furthest one from Young. It'll take him weeks to make his way back."

The Vulcan, deadpan, raised an eyebrow. "Will it? How unfortunate."

This finally gave the young man a reason to smile. After a light laugh, he said: "Yes, it is." He turned to go.

"Mister Valastro, escort our guest to the transporter room." As he watched them leave, Sarda's mind was already ticking over.

Chapter Six

Taking Manny with her, Piper spent the evening trying to talk with some of the locals. She had little success with the adults. The men and their wives tended to shy away from her. Some of the men looked at her with open hostility, as if the notion of a woman in a position of authority offended them. Others, with fear as she could see them glancing off in the direction of the Prophet, who never seemed to be too far away.

In the end, it was her security chief that had the breakthrough. Most of the children had never seen a feline; none had been imported and there were no native varieties and so having a big ball of fur to play with was proving to be a drawcard. With the Captain's permission, she had her children beamed down as well to give them a little shore leave as there appeared to be no overt threat.

With the area floodlit and most of the adults now fed having to organise their new living arrangements, the children had been left to their own devices. They were taking full advantage of the chance to play in the warm evening and Manny and her kits, Drallah and Lila, were doing her best to keep them entertained.

"What's it like to be a cat?" one child asked, staring up into her huge eyes.

Manny, who had been standing facing him, bent over backwards, put her front paws on the ground and, in one fluid motion, sprang and flipped over, coming to rest on her behind, seated. She whipped her tail behind her and said: "Awesome."

Her dark furred, adopted son, Drallah, sidled up to her and rubbed her under the chin with the top of his head

affectionately. "I wouldn't be anyone else," he said, his tone heartfelt. "Or with anyone else. I love living on a starship."

Manny got up and led their little troupe over to a lit brazier that was burning nicely, its flames leaping up into the night air. As a chill was beginning to fall, she wanted to keep the human children from catching cold. She wasn't concerned for her own. Their fur was more than adequate protection.

Her daughter, Lila, also black furred, looked up at her with wide, loving eyes. They had a lot to be grateful for as both children had experienced the worst their society had to offer as they had been persecuted for their colour. Even now, neither child liked to dwell on the horrors they had endured – including Drallah spending time mining a dilithium laced comet that had been falling into Cait's star. "Hi Mum. Thanks for letting us come down and play."

Lila was the younger of the two. As she was only two and a half years old – she had the maturity of a nine-year-old human child – she had endured for less time but even more painfully. Manny had felt the scars on her flesh though her fur.

"No problem, little one," Manny said fondly. "Have you made some new friends?"

The young female looked around her at the small collection of juveniles who had been drawn to her. "Yes," she said with a strange mixture of delight and intrigue. There had not been many opportunities for her to bond with other children her age.

A little girl who was sitting next to her soaking up the heat from the fire cheekily said: "She's no fun to play hide and seek with. She disappears in the dark in seconds. Nobody's found her yet."

Manny grinned at her daughter's natural camouflage – unlike herself, who stood out like neon with her pure white fur. “She can never hide from me, though,” she said truthfully. She was highly attuned to her children's thought patterns. She could easily find them in a crowd.

“That's right,” Drallah interjected. “She can read minds!”

Instead of drawing back in fear, the children looked at her in awe. “Do you know what I'm thinking?” one boy asked, one question among many along the same line and all asked simultaneously.

Manny held up a paw. “I don't go invading the private thoughts of others,” she said, feeling a little defensive. The problem with her talent was that she was sensitive enough to pick up stray thoughts unintentionally.

A teenaged boy, who looked a little thin for his age, said: “I wish I could read minds. Then I could find out why Dad's always so angry with Mom.”

Sitting nearby in the dark, Piper's attention rose as she listened.

“What do you mean?” Drallah asked, innocently.

The boy seemed torn but gave vent to his frustrations. “Dad's got three wives and he didn't choose to marry any of them. I don't think he really loves any of my mothers. He just puts up with them because the Prophet told him to marry them.”

Lila was fascinated. She knew persecution against children, but problems between adults was new to her. “Why wouldn't he want to marry them? Doesn't he want children?”

The boy looked at her as if she was a foolish child. "I'm not so sure. I heard him once yelling that he wishes he never had children!"

Manny was cut to the heart. It would have been soul destroying for a child to hear they were unwanted. It came close to home in that her children had been abandoned by their parents due to their unfavourable colouring. As her brother was black and had proven to her colour had nothing to do with a person's value, she had come to see her fellow Cait for who they were, not what they looked like. She adored her adopted children and would willingly die for them. There was no way she would ever reject them. She tried to put the boy's mind to rest. "He was probably just angry and didn't really mean it," she said gently.

Her words failed her. The boy's red-rimmed eyes stared back at her as he said: "Then why does he keep saying it?" Amantasandage, mother, wife and Starfleet Officer, had no answer for him. As she sat there speechless her son chimed in.

"It sounds like arranged marriages suck."

From her place in the shadows Piper had to suppress a snort. From her point of view Drallah was spot on. However, there was little she could do about it. What she heard next shocked her.

"That's OK," another little boy said. "Dad had a wife he didn't like at all. The Prophet said if he didn't like her, he should get rid of her. So, he took her out back one night, dug a hole and buried her in it."

All three Sandages looked at him in horror. From her place Piper noted the other children didn't seem surprised.

"Are you saying he killed her and buried her just because he didn't like her?" Lila said, mortified.

The boy just looked back at her blankly. "No. He buried her alive." He looked back at the fire, haunted. "I remember being woken by the screams."

Drallah had a finely tuned sense of justice, and the story rubbed him entirely up the wrong way. "Surely he was held accountable." The fancy wording went over the child's head, so he rephrased. "Did he go to jail?"

The boy shrugged. "Nope. Why would he? The Prophet said it was all right."

Manny's son balked. "That's not right. That's murder!"

"A man is the ruler of his household," the boy said, echoed by most of the other children present. It was obvious it was a conditioned response.

Drallah felt the need to defend the sanctity of marriage. "My Dad would never do that to Mum! He loves her! He told me real men lead their families, never rule them."

A teen aged girl chimed in: "I know my mother loves me. She tells me every day. She just wishes Dad loved her."

Listening, Piper was appalled that a whole generation of children were growing up here without being able to experience the fullness of a family's love. In her mind, she had no problem with polygamous marriages that were successful because all those involved did so committed to the relationship. To her ears the people here were all living reluctant lives in situations that had been forced on them – by one man. Her blood boiled at the level of manipulation this man employed.

One other thing she had noted was that the children all looked undernourished. It was odd given that the land was

fertile, and the local farms seemed to have no problems with production.

She tuned in once more to hear Lila say: "Our god told us it was never a good thing to kill. It wasn't a general rule. It was an absolute."

Manny felt pride for her children for a number of reasons. Their high moral standing for one. Their willingness to defend it second. Also, she was once more amused to hear Lila's new favourite word: Absolute. For the last two days everything had been absolutely this and that.

Drallah sat next to the boy who had made the startling confession and placed a compassionate paw on his shoulder, surprised to find it was fairly bony. "I'm so sorry you had to go through that," he said. "How long ago did that happen?"

His new friend looked up at him through tear-filled eyes. "What day is it?"

Another child offered: "Thursday."

The boy thought hard for a moment then said: "Monday."

Manny shot her commander a look, knowing instinctively where she was. Without a word she sent her a thought. "We should check that out."

Piper had to suppress the fury in her soul. That this sort of thing was going on in the Federation's sphere of influence was appalling. Without thinking it through she answered: "Yes, we should. Try to find out where the boy lives."

Thinking quickly, Manny reached into her tool belt and slipped out a small patch of Velcro. It was a beryllium patch. The isotope was traceable from several sectors away. She stepped

over to the lad and gave him a hug while slipping the patch under his collar where it stuck fast.

She let the boy go and sat back. She considered telling the children a story when Drallah spoke up. "I want to tell you what kind of man my dad is. Let me tell you what he did when Queen Faith was being chased by killers. My Dad was a hero..."

Piper leaned back against the tree she was sitting on and wondered whether she would sit through another rendition of this tale. She had heard it herself from Drallah and read Scanner's report and each time it gave her not only a reason to laugh but also to take pride in her old friend. She laughed because each time it was retold there seemed to be more and more bad guys. Pride, because the mild and generally unassuming Judd "Scanner" Sandage was one in a million.

"Heard enough, Captain?"

The voice came from behind her, and Piper immediately swivelled to face the threat, her hand reaching for the pommel at her hip. She found herself looking up into the eyes of the "Prophet" who was gazing down at her with a beatific look on his face. He was making no threatening moves and there was nothing in his hands. All the same, Piper was on her guard. There was something about this man that kept her on edge.

She realised, in her mind's eye, that Manny was looking her way, ready to respond in an instant if she was in any danger. She let her know that things were OK, but to keep an eye on them.

"I'll be here if you need me." She felt the Lieutenant's confidence. Experience had shown her that the Cait could be lethal with just their paws and claws if the moment called for it.

Piper focussed her full attention on the man before her. He was an odd sort and wore a look on his face that made her wonder if he was entirely sane. "I've heard enough to consider you a monster. If you faced a Federation court, they would put you away and throw away the key."

The Prophet chuckled lightly. "I would outlive the jail, Captain." As Piper was still seated, he decided to join her. He sat a metre away, his legs crossed, violet eyes staring right at her. "I am immortal. I'm sure my people have pointed that out to you by now."

She wasn't buying it. "Immortal? I doubt it. Long lived, more likely."

The Prophet shook his head, mildly amused. "My cells are constantly regenerating, Piper. Unlike you, my DNA doesn't make mistakes when it replicates. I will stay this age and healthy forever."

A wry smile touched Piper's lips. "You couldn't survive a blade through your heart, or a phaser set on its highest level.

A vaporised body can't repair itself."

"You got me." Piper found it amazing the man continued to try to charm her, even though he had not denied the crimes he had been charged with. "I'm virtually immortal." He indicated the land around him with a sweep of his arm. "On this world full of people who revere me as their pipeline to God, I have nothing to fear. They believe I am the Prophet spoken of in the Bible and I have given them nothing to doubt it."

The Prophet was amazed by the next words out of Piper's mouth. "The spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets. First Corinthians Fourteen. Prophets are meant to be

accountable. You've allowed yourself to be accountable to no-one."

The man's eyes narrowed with more than suspicion. He was beginning to realise just how much he had underestimated her. "Maybe so. However, what the people here don't know can't hurt them."

Piper's eyes widened in understanding. "You've taken this people's books away from them."

The Prophet gave her a chilling, dark laugh. "I didn't need to. I just had to make sure the next generation couldn't read."

He had rendered the people illiterate – virtually. The basics were obviously still there, but without study and teaching understanding would be lost to them. He had deliberately dumbed them down. "You can't get away with that forever. One day the population will grow to the point where you can no longer control them. What will you do then?"

"That will never happen, Piper." His use of her first name was beginning to get on her nerves. It was a familiarity that she had no intention of encouraging. "When my herd starts getting too large, I will cull them. When food rationing or totally unnecessary fasts doesn't slow them down, I have to take more drastic measures. Like I did with this town."

"What?!" The monstrosity of the claim was almost beyond Piper's ability to grasp. She felt her heart skip a beat as the enormity of his crime came home to her.

Without removing the smug look from his face, he said: "I lit this fire. It was intended to wipe out the town and some people I've begun to suspect are intending to challenge me. I cannot allow that to happen." When Piper remained silent for a

moment he continued. "I must admit I'm annoyed at you and your people. I had no idea that you would come riding in on your white horse to "save the day". I had told the elders of this town it was under judgement. They were prepared to suffer the consequences and were ready to meet their maker." His eyes narrowed – the first indication of the creature of the dark he truly was. "Then you came to their rescue. Why, I have no idea. How you knew is beyond me, but I do intend on finding out."

Piper just stared at him, letting him see the depths of her loathing for him. "Lucifer would be proud of you."

The Prophet chuckled darkly. "Lucifer was a light bearer, Piper."

"If therefore the light that is in thee be darkness, how great is that darkness!" she quoted once more. "Your light would put a black hole to shame."

At that the Prophet gave a low growl. "I don't know where you got your teaching from, *Piper*," he fairly spat her name, "but I will not be challenged on *my world*." In a split second he recovered from his flash of anger and the angelic look returned. It crept the captain out. "I appreciate the efforts you and your people have made for my people. It will take me some time to expunge this from their memories, however, but your visit has given me reason to consider a treaty with the Federation. Not only do I want you and your people off my world by sundown tomorrow, but I want to ensure you and your people never return. You cannot touch me here, Captain. Here, I rule and make the rules. I will not have you challenge me ever again." Having made his position perfectly clear, he got up to leave and disappeared in the direction of the tent city.

As soon as he was gone Manny joined her at her side. "I thought Zif was bad," she said, referring to Cait's former religious leader who had advocated for the genocide of the black Cait on her world.

Piper just considered the situation and, for a fraction of a second wondered if there truly was anything they could do. The Prophet seemed to be holding all the cards. Then she got angry. Very angry. "There's no way in Hell this guy is going to get away with this," she said through clenched teeth.

"Damn straight," Manny replied, echoing Piper's previous words. Her feelings were also resonating with the captain's. Sitting this close to her commander Manny could not help but hear Piper's thoughts and feel her rage. Whilst the Captain was psi sensitive, she wasn't as powerful as the Cait, who was practically a feline thought magnet. "What are we going to do? We've only got a day."

Piper realised they didn't even have that long. Yet the beginnings of a plan was forming in her mind. "That should be all we need. Gather your children. We're returning to the ship."

Chapter Seven

Shortly after, Captain Piper called a meeting of her senior staff. They quickly collected in the Conference Room.

“Are you nuts?” Scanner blushed as he realised he had spoken his thought out loud. When the Captain scowled at him, he said: “Sorry.”

Piper just shook her head and let it go. “I’m taking a page out of Capone’s diary. If you can’t get him head on, you’ve got to try from another direction. The people here like him too much or are too afraid to move against him.”

She turned to her Second Officer, Krashtallash. “Crash, I need you to do what you’re so good at. Keep an eye on the “Prophet” and let me know if he does anything suspicious. We need to keep him away from Lake City. I don’t expect he’ll return there while we’re in town, but we can’t take the chance.”

She then turned to her chief of pilots, Lieutenant Commander Caitlin “Ghost” Ryan. She needed someone who could blend in, and Ryan’s Irish accent was the closest to the local’s vocal intonations. “Ghost, I’m confident you’ll fit right in. You know your part?”

The diminutive, raven-haired, razor-sharp pilot gave Piper a confident smile. “I do, Captain. I’ll pull this off.”

“Good. But first, we need to be sure I’m right.” Piper turned to the Doctor. “Merete, make sure Crash knows exactly what he’s looking for. We need proof, something he can’t get away with lying about.”

The Doctor’s purplish skin darkened with delight. She was overjoyed that they were going to mete out some justice to the “Prophet”. Once Piper had shared what the Prophet had told

her the pieces came together. The poisoned family were all suicides. The father, believing they were all going to perish in the fire – as some kind of divine judgement – had shown his family some mercy and poisoned them instead. Thirty-odd people were dead because of this monster, and she was on the team for some payback. “Don't worry. Piper, Crash will know precisely what to do.”

The transporter beam set Crash down several hundred metres away from the edge of town where their scanners showed no-one was around. Once the beam faded, there was no possibility that the casual observer would ever see him. He was pitch black under a moonless sky.

He kept a tricorder in a jet-black belt he wore around his waist, and he quickly searched for the “Prophet”. He wasn't hard to find. He was the only one in town with a titanium belt buckle.

He put it away and used his natural senses to find his way. His night vision was excellent, and he was able to use it to great effect. The goggles he wore to keep his eyes from reflecting light in the dark did not dull his senses. He was grateful for that.

Moving on all fours, he moved silently through the destroyed forest, black on black. He put the fact that he was quickly being covered in soot out of his mind. He knew he was going to need a bath when he got back.

There were few people moving around this late at night. Most of the floodlights had been turned off to allow people to sleep. As there were no natural predators on this world, they didn't need night watchmen, so everyone slept.

Crash thanked his eidetic memory for bringing him to the right tent. He used his nose to find which side of it the “Prophet” was on. He liked to wear a locally produced aftershave that offended Crash's sensitivities. He couldn't have made himself more obvious if he had lit a flare.

His ears flicked forward a little as he listened and heard only light breathing and the occasional snore. Crash was glad *he* didn't have to sleep with the man.

As he reached for his medical tricorder, he heard a sound close by and shrank back into the shadows. Out of the corner of his eye he saw one of the locals step out into the night. He rounded the tent next to him and passed within millimetres of Crash, who was not even breathing. Fortunately, the man kept going and walked beyond the tree line. A moment later, Crash heard the sound of water running and realised the man was simply taking a midnight leak.

Fearing discovery on his return trip, Crash moved even further into the shadows. The man returned the way he came and had no idea he had been watched the entire time.

Silently, Crash took a deep breath to settle his nerves. For this to work he had to go completely undetected.

He moved forward once more and took out his tricorder, finding the range was acceptable and the thin material of the tent did not interfere. Within thirty seconds, he had taken a complete scan of the “Prophet” and once more disappeared into the night.

Merete looked at the scan results and smiled to herself. Piper was right. However, the scan had picked up something she

did not expect. It was odd, but it reminded her of something from the past.

“No,” she said, disbelieving. “It couldn't possibly be.”

The sun coming up over the horizon on Epsilon Scorpius III was like most worlds, beautiful. The deep reds became oranges; however, these were tinged with purple. It was one of the most amazing sights Ghost had ever seen.

She was glad she was dressed as most women on this world – conservatively in a blue dress. What the Prophet had for blue dresses; she could not fathom.

Ghost was usually at home in her Starfleet uniform or her jeans and t-shirt collection when she was off duty. The loose shirts did a good job of hiding her back brace she constantly wore – a reminder of an accident two years before that had nearly crippled her but had permanently grounded her.

Before that, she had been Starfleet's best fighter pilot.

Her sheep skin boots were keeping her feet warm, and she did her level best to avoid the puddles as she walked on the muddy road into town. Lake City was really a misnomer. It was little more than a frontier town with a central street lined with businesses. Homes dotted the landscape here and there nearby. She looked ahead. At the far end of the street was her destination.

A large, brick temple stood with a tall spire. Judging from its size, Caitlin guessed it could house about five hundred worshippers.

Next to it was an even more ornate building that had few windows, a front door and what appeared to be many rooms.

While it looked impressive from the outside, she thought it a little too much like a prison.

Boldly, she walked up the street past the milkman doing his morning rounds and the bakery which had such a heavenly smell coming from it she was tempted to stop by and sample their wares. She wrinkled up her nose, disappointed. Maybe later. There really was nothing like the taste of fresh bread.

She approached the door of what must have been the "Prophet's" home and knocked.

She was surprised it was quickly opened by a young woman who was probably a few years younger than she. What was striking about her was her natural beauty. From her fair hair, blue eyes, gentle face and slim build, Caitlin was beginning to wonder if the man was running his own harem.

"Hello?" the woman asked. "Can I help you?"

Caitlin drew herself up and put on her most angelic face. "Hi," she said. "I'm Kate. I was sent here to become the Prophet's latest bride." She tried not to barf when she added: "It's such a privilege."

The woman's response was incredulity. She turned and shouted over her shoulder: "We've got another one!"

At that point, Caitlin wondered just how many women lived here.

"Come in." She stepped aside to let Ghost enter. She took her coat from her and hung it on a peg near the door. "I'm Meg. Follow me."

She led her down a long, wooden corridor past room after room. Caitlin was able to glimpse inside some of them as they passed by. Each wife had her own room, it appeared, and each had decorated it in her own style. Small, glass windows

allowed in a modicum of light. She noted that, down the end of the hall was a larger, double-doored room that she paused and gazed at.

Meg noticed the cause of her interest. "That's *his* room," she said. "Most nights he takes each of us on a schedule. Now you're here, I'm going to get an extra good night's sleep every month."

Ghost screwed up her face in disbelief. "*Month?*" she asked, amazed. "Just how many wives does he have?"

Meg gave her a weak smile. "Counting you, twenty-four." She turned and headed down another hall off the main. "Come with me and we'll get you some breakfast."

Seated around two long tables were a number of women in various states of dress. Most wore pyjamas or night gowns with robes. The majority looked up in curiosity at her appearance, however the older women had no interest. They had seen it all before.

A chorus of "hellos" greeted her. Once more the older women mostly remained silent.

"Don't mind them," Meg said sarcastically. "You're just the latest in a long line of conquests for his highness."

This wasn't the greeting Caitlin expected. Piper had told her that most of the people of this world believed the man truly was a messenger from God. It appeared the women closest to him knew he was anything but.

Playing the devotee part, she replied crossly: "You don't seem to have much respect for the Prophet."

Meg turned and scowled at her. "You're going to find, newbie, that few things are what they appear to be on this

world.” She indicated an empty seat and Caitlin took that as her cue to be seated.

As she sat the hard, wooden chair jolted her fragile spine. She could not help but wince.

A young woman on the other side of the table didn't miss it. “Are you alright?”

Caitlin shrugged. “It's an old injury. I've just got to be careful.” She tapped her side, and a knocking sound was heard as she connected with her brace. “My back's not what it used to be.”

The woman facing her smiled knowingly. “If *he* only knew half as much as he professes to know I think there'd be half as many here. A lot of us are carrying farm injuries under our clothes. He's not too pleased when he gets our clothes off.”

A voice down the table offered with bitter humour: “It's not that terrible for some of us. At least it gives us a little more peace.”

The fair-haired woman opposite offered a hand. “By the way, I'm Sarah.”

Ghost's eyes widened in recognition. She was hoping to meet her. “Hello, I'm Kate. I'm from the Young district as well. A mutual friend passed on his greetings. Malcolm misses you very much.”

It took the mere mention of his name to bring tears to Sarah's eyes. She brought a hand up to her face and wiped her eyes, trying to stem the tide before they became a flood. “Thank you,” she said through a very tight throat.

Beside Sarah, a woman of similar youth placed her arm comfortingly around her waist. “Shush, Sarah. You know we're not supposed to talk about our past loves. They're behind us.

Our future as the brides of the Prophet is before us. Just wait until he opens our wombs, and we start having children.”

Caitlin could see that this woman was a recent addition to the group – she had yet to become as jaded as the others. It took a moment for her comment to sink in. An incredible untruth had been foisted on these women and they had believed it! There were no children in this house for a very good reason.

She turned and looked at the oldest of the women here, who, she had to admit, was probably no older than her Captain at about forty-five years. She was tall, fair-haired, and buxom. Caitlin had cottoned on that the Prophet had a type.

One that she did not fit into. She was short, dark haired and almost flat-chested. She realised she stuck out like a sore thumb in this room.

The “elder” ignored her and looked scornfully at Sarah's counsellor. The bitterness in her voice was old and well fed. “You are naïve indeed, Susan, if you think he will ever open our wombs and give us children. The last thing an immortal needs is a child that might challenge him.”

Meg had sat next to Caitlin and placed some bacon, eggs and toast before her. As she listened, she began to eat and revelled in the flavour of real, home-grown food. She realised now was the perfect time to drop her bombshell.

“It's a good thing he chose to marry me, then. I never wanted to have children anyway.”

Her words were so foreign to the brides that they, as one, turned to face her. “Are you serious?” the elder asked. “It is our duty as women to bring the next generation into the world.”

Caitlin simply shrugged. She was speaking from the heart. She never planned on becoming a mother. "I know that. It's just that I don't think I'd be very good at it. I'm not that great with children." Which was true. She felt decidedly uncomfortable around Merete's children.

To her surprise she noted a few sympathetic looks. It seemed like she was not alone.

The elder kept up her examination. "You will have no choice. When he chooses to make you a mother you will be one."

Once more Ghost was amazed. They had never put it together. "I doubt that," she said almost cheekily.

Next to her, Meg elbowed her and whispered: "Don't make Cynthia angry. She can make your life miserable. The only reason she's still here is that she pleases John in bed."

John. He finally had a name.

Cynthia rose, carried her plate to the sink then turned on Caitlin, who rose to meet her. She had made short order of the delicious food. She didn't think she'd have time to savour it.

"What makes you doubt, newcomer?"

"Kate."

"Whatever."

Caitlin reached into her dress pocket and took out a printout she had been given by Merete before she beamed down. "I just came from Young where our beloved is caring for the injured after a fire killed many of the townsfolk. People from Earth put out the fire and saved the rest. Their doctor saved a lot of lives and, when she heard I was to be sent here to become John's bride she thought I should see this." She held it up. It showed, in colour, two tiny clips on the Prophet's Vas Deferens.

He had had a vasectomy. "These," she pointed to the clips, "stop the flow of seed in John. He cannot have children." She hammered the thought home. "He *chose* not to have children."

The rest of the women gathered around and stared at the document. The image was clear. It also showed a minor, peculiar anomaly on John's equipment that only a wife would recognise. It clearly identified the patient to them.

Sarah was the first to find her voice. "I don't believe it." She clearly did not want to believe it.

Cynthia plucked the document out of Caitlin's hand and stared at it in amazement. "How? What?" She stumbled backwards. Fortunately, there was a table behind her, and she sat on the edge. She assembled her thoughts and focussed on Caitlin. "You said they were people from Earth. I thought Earth was only a myth."

Ghost shook her head. "No, it's not." She considered her position and decided these women had been lied to enough. She wanted them to trust her and lying to them wasn't going to wash forever. It was best to start on an honest footing. "I can prove it."

She stepped forward and reached behind her, unbuttoning her collar. Her dress easily slipped over her shoulders and fell to the floor. Underneath, she was wearing a polyester sports bra, black G-string and her ultra-modern back brace. Taped to the inside of her leg was a communicator, a type one phaser and a medical tricorder.

Meg stepped forward and touched the fabric of her brace and bra. "Where did you get these from?" she asked, amazed at the design.

Once Meg had broken the ice the other women did the same. Ghost was almost smothered with the attention.

"I got them from my ship, the *U.S.S. Millennium*." She thickened up her accent. "Sorry, I'm not really from Young, although I was there yesterday. I'm really from Ireland on Earth. We came here to rescue you and found you've all been lied to. That's why I'm here, to show you the truth."

Enraged, Cynthia came forward and lifted Ghost off her feet by her bra straps. "How do I know that *anything* you're telling us is true?" She didn't know what to believe.

"Put! Me! Down!" It wasn't a request. So used was she to the air of command that Ghost had no problem being taken seriously.

Cynthia, too, was also used to obeying orders. She complied.

Caitlin adjusted her clothing and arched her back to try to settle some of the excruciating pain that was now shooting through it. She spoke through tight lips, her eyes still wincing. "I could have kept telling you fibs, ladies," she said, looking about her, doing her best to catch as many eyes as she could. "I believed you deserved the truth. John has filled your heads with so many lies you don't know what to believe anymore." She took back the report and held it up. "You can believe *this*. He never intended to make you mothers. He was only using you for sex!"

As one the women recoiled, mortified at the bold truth placed before them. They were nothing more than toys in John's playground. Used up and thrown away. It was an open secret that he disposed of the older among them once he lost interest in them. They looked at one another in amazement, realising for the first time how little he actually thought of them.

They began muttering amongst themselves.

"He never really loved me."

"He doesn't want children."

"It's not me after all."

"He's just using me."

The same theme over and over as they all came to the same conclusion. Their husband was a selfish liar who only pretended to speak for God and was, at worst, a murderer. Sarah stumbled over to the sink and retched.

Caitlin shivered, realising it was still cold in the dining room even given a fire was burning in the slow combustion stove. She pulled off the tape holding her tools and placed them on the table next to her whilst she picked up her blue dress and buttoned it. Then she pocketed her equipment.

Meanwhile, a debate was raging. Twenty of the women, led by Cynthia, were out for blood.

"I say we lynch him," she said. "Wait until it's dark when he gets back and hang him from the tree out the back."

Susan, the woman who had earlier comforted Sarah, was the main defender. "You can't mean that! He's our husband! God will judge us!"

Cynthia was not to be swayed. "My dear, God will be cheering us on. John, the "Prophet", is a liar and the Bible is full of examples of what happened to lying prophets. Just ask Elijah."

The women present knew well enough the story and its gruesome outcome.

"Death is too good for him," another woman said.

"Yes!"

"Do you hear yourselves?" Susan's words were falling on deaf ears. "Killing him will make us no better than him!" Tears were flowing down her cheeks.

She was the only one crying.

Sarah stepped over and faced Cynthia. She looked at the older woman, clearly torn. For all the misery she had been put through, she still sought another way. "If we kill him the townsfolk will kill *us* as well. I don't want to die a sinner and go to Outer Darkness. I want to go to the Celestial Kingdom. Surely there's something we can do to make him leave and renounce his claim to us."

As one, the wives turned and looked to Caitlin. Right then and there she had no answer. "Let me call my Captain," she said and flipped open her communicator.

The sound it made startled most of the women and they were stunned when a male voice sounded. "Is everything OK?" he asked.

"Put me through to the Captain," she said, a little nervously. It was a peculiar sensation for her. In a cockpit, she had no peer and dominated all situations. Here, she was scrambling for ideas.

"Go, Ghost," Piper said a moment later.

Caitlin quickly outlined their dilemma. To her surprise, Piper laughed. "I expected as much. Crash reports that the "Prophet" is overseeing our extraction from Young. He doesn't trust us." At that she chuckled. "Word is, he'll be returning there tomorrow. That gives you plenty of time to get everything ready."

By now, the wives had gathered around Ghost, amazed that this voice that came from the box was female and she seemed to be in charge.

Spokesman for the group, Cynthia spoke. "What do you have in mind... Captain?"

Piper's smile could practically be seen through the grille. "I'm glad you asked."

Chapter Eight

It took until midday the following day for John the “Prophet” to ride back to Lake City. As was his usual, flamboyant style, he rode at full gallop right into the centre of the town, expecting the usual response. A boy from the stables normally ran out to collect the horse.

This time, there was nothing. John sat, uneasy, looking around him at the empty shop windows. There was not a soul to be seen anywhere. Not even from his home a mere hundred metres away at the top of the street.

Then one man, the town's first elder under John, rounded the last building and slowly walked towards him, face to face. Joseph Miles was a good man, devoted to his faith and his people. He had managed the people and helped the others keep the faith even when they had their doubts – due mostly to the behaviour of their “Prophet”.

Tall and solidly built, he tended to intimidate others with his mere bulk even though he was a gentle soul.

Today, he was not happy. Evidence of a shocking nature had been presented to him. It suggested a level of deceit unprecedented in their culture. It had to be addressed.

He tilted up his grey-haired head and looked John in the eye. It was amazing that the man had not aged, even though he, personally, had. He clearly remembered hearing sermons given by the Prophet when Joseph was but a boy. His faith in John had, until now, been unshakable. Like God, he had hoped that John would be the same yesterday, today and tomorrow. Now, he hoped otherwise.

"How the mighty have fallen," Joseph said, shaking his head in sorrow. "Is it true that you truly are not God's messenger?"

The smooth, polished mask came down easily. "What could possibly make you doubt my sincerity, my brother?" He made no move to unseat himself and remained firmly in the saddle. He almost imperceptibly tightened his grip on the reins.

Once more Joseph shook his head. "We are not brothers, John. You have been tried in your absence with apostasy, murder and deceit on a scale to make the enemy desirous. The evidence was so overwhelming it was agreed that your testimony was unnecessary and even undesirable. You are guilty, John Spencer, and you will be hung in the morning."

John could not help but notice that the townsfolk were now beginning to show themselves. They were fanning out, blocking the exits from the town. For the first time in as long as he could remember, he felt fear. However, he was not going to lose his grip on this town without a fight. "You overstep your authority, Joseph. I speak for God. He is the one who made me immortal. You cannot kill me, nor do I answer to you."

Out of the corner of his eye he saw something that caught his attention. A flash of red in a sea of blue. A lone figure standing outside the town, watching. Even from this distance, the figure and bearing of the individual were unmistakable. "What is that woman doing here? You mustn't heed a word from her. She is Satan's messenger."

Joseph would not be distracted. "Captain Piper's presence is not the issue, John. Your sentence is irrevocable. You will die at dawn. If the noose will not kill you the stake certainly will."

Realising Joseph was right, he pulled back on the reigns and wheeled the horse about on its hind legs then charged the line of people who had no intention of letting him go. He was far from a full gallop when he hit the crowd who had come together to stop him. In amongst them he was surprised to see the faces of some of his brides who had blood in their eyes.

The horse, spooked, reared and spilled John to the ground. The townsfolk were upon him in an instant, punching and kicking the man who, mere hours before, they had revered. Now, they embodied a people who had become tired of being controlled, manipulated and used. Their souls cried out for freedom.

Yet he was not going down easily. Using the training he had kept fresh in his mind and body he started flinging bodies of men and women away from him.

Bruised and bloodied, he managed to regain his feet. Angry though they were, the people gave him a little space as he clearly knew a lot about fighting for a supposed man of God.

There appeared to be one way out. He raised his voice and cried: "Captain Piper, I seek asylum in the United Federation of Planets!"

The crowd froze. Even Cynthia, his eldest wife who seemed to want to kill him with her bare hands, ceased. Like Moses parting the Red Sea, Piper strode through the milling throng unchallenged. She stopped at the edge of a circle facing him, her Vin'tah in her hand, its blade unsheathed. She was taking no chances.

She raised the weapon and pointed it at his chest. "Why would I do that, *John*? What do we have to gain from a filthy creature like you?"

The former Prophet threw her the only bargaining chip he had. "I can give you the secret to my bodily regeneration. Think of it! You would never grow old! Never get sick. I could pass this on to all the people of your Federation."

To his surprise, Piper seemed to be considering his offer. She looked up at him and there was nothing friendly in her emerald-green eyes. "You would be subject to the laws of the Federation. Are you willing to submit to them?"

John nodded. "Yes." He had found salvation.

Piper nodded severely and looked to Joseph. "Is this satisfactory, Elder Joseph?"

Like Piper, the crowd had made way for him. He now stared at the Captain with a look that began to worry him. Had they arranged this?

Joseph drew himself up and said with absolute confidence: "It is, Captain. Please remove this sinner from the face of this world and make sure he never returns."

There are no certainties in life, Piper remembered a friend say. All the same, she was reasonably certain this time. "I will do that, Elder. Please remember that your friends in the Federation would be delighted to give you any aid you need."

Considering their appalling beginning, it was a kind gesture. Joseph gave her a small smile. "I will consider your offer."

Piper nodded and stepped over next to John, but not too close. She kept a handy grip on her Vin'tah.

She flipped open her communicator. "Piper to *Millennium*, two to beam up."

As the transporter took them and they began to dissolve, Sarah stepped forward and pleaded with Elder Joseph. "We can't let him get away without being punished! It's not fair!"

Almost invisible in the crowd, Caitlin Ryan appeared at her elbow. "Trust Captain Piper, Sarah. She knows what she's doing."

The other brides encircled Sarah and led her back to the only home they had. No matter the misery their husband had put them through they had formed a sisterhood. They took care of their own.

Joseph looked down at Ghost. He had to; they were over a foot different in height. He wondered if she was single. "You and I have some matters to discuss," he said.

Ryan wasn't concerned. She knew what he meant. She was about to introduce him to the Ambassador assigned to their ship: Susanna Llash, Crash's wife.

The crowd turned to go and wandered back to their lives wondering where they were all going next in life now they were free to choose for themselves.

Piper materialised alongside John and immediately put away her weapon, retracting the blade back into the hilt. She had no use for it. Transporter Room One had ten security officers, led by Lieutenant Manny Sandage, waiting for their arrival.

"Take him," Piper said with barely concealed delight.

John retreated but found himself with his back to the wall. "What is the meaning of this, Captain? You guaranteed me asylum!"

Piper looked at him with disdain. I know who and what you are, Joseph Spencer," she said. "I told you; you would be subject to the laws of the Federation, and you acceded. Earth is a member and there you are a fugitive. Does the name Arik Soong mean anything to you?"

Spencer darted a look Piper's way, a cornered animal that knew he had been discovered. His muscles tensed, ready to spring when Manny shot him with a tranquilliser gun.

The neuro paralytic took almost instant effect. The former Prophet slumped ingloriously to the floor.

The Captain turned to Manny. "Good shot. Put him in the brig and double the guard. You can't take any chances with these people."

Merete entered and looked about. "Is it safe?"

"Yes, Doctor. You can take your blood sample."

She sauntered over to the fallen and quickly found a vein. She took ten C.C.s, just to be sure, then backed off before disappearing in the direction of Sickbay. She had some tests to run.

Piper left the clean-up to Manny and left. She passed Susanna Llash in the hall, Crash's wife and mother to their four children. "Good luck down there. You have your work cut out for you."

The tortoise-shelled feline from Persia, who looked like a sentient long-haired domestic cat, just a lot larger, gave her a cheeky grin. "Just what the doctor ordered. I could use another tree to sink my claws into."

Piper just shrugged. She wasn't sure what she meant by the comment and frankly right now she didn't care. She had been up all night busy with the preparations for today and she

was exhausted. She had a date with her bunk. She simply gave her friend a polite smile and went her way.

Eight hours later a small tribunal was formed in the Conference Room. It consisted of: Piper, who was chairing, Sarda, Krashtallash, his sister, Manny and Doctor AndrusTaurus. The Captain opened the proceedings using an age-old tradition. She double tapped a brass bell on the desk three times. With the solemnity of the gallows, Piper stated: "The prisoner will be brought before us."

At the other end of the table was a monitor which came on displaying the image of John Spencer. They were not about to let him out the brig. It was far too risky.

Ever the control freak, Spencer started talking. "Captain Piper, I demand...."

She cut him off with a glare. "The prisoner will be silent!" she snapped.

Surprised, he shut up.

Piper continued. "This tribunal is convened to discuss the status of Marcus Wesselton, aka, John Spencer. After his identity was confirmed by DNA analysis the fugitive Wesselton has been remanded to custody pending extradition to Earth where he will face justice." She addressed Spencer directly. "You have already been tried in absentia for your crimes involving the Augment program and your work with Arik Soong to try to return the "super humans" like the, now deceased, Khan Noonien Singh. After Soong left Cold Station 12, you used some of the Augment embryos in your own experiments. Your results were

not apparent until now. Obviously, you used the regenerative properties of those unborn to give yourself an extended lifespan.

“Because of your involvement in assisting Soong when he left the station with the embryos you contributed to the mayhem they created. Your Augments went on a rampage that resulted in the deaths of many innocents. Never mind the notes of some of the remaining Doctors had described some of your experiments as being “worthy of Josef Mengele”.”

She paused for a fraction of a second the continued. “In 2147 the court found you guilty on all counts. The judgement still stands. You were convicted and sentenced to life in a Federation Penal Colony – for the term of your natural life – however long that might be.”

Spencer/Wesselton was shocked. The judgement was an endless purgatory to a man like him. They had anticipated his long lifetime and had taken appropriate measures. Desperate to avoid that future he pleaded: “Wait, Captain! You said you would bargain for the technology I developed. It could be yours!”

“You have nothing to offer us, Wesselton. Your program was flawed from inception. Breed a “superior” human and you get superior ambition. You, yourself, are a perfect example of that. Mankind is better off remaining with the conditions that define us as we are. To change those fundamentals only brings disaster.”

Merete spoke up. “I was part of the *Enterprise* crew when Khan tried to take her. He and his men were monsters. As you are.”

Wesselton realised he was getting nowhere and gave up trying to reason with them. Instead, he allowed his feelings to

erupt into flaming hot anger. Piper had been right to keep him incarcerated. Those hands could bend steel.

Now beyond reason, the condemned glared at the Captain. "You will pay for this, Piper!" He shrieked. "One way or the other, you will...."

The rest was lost as Sarda cut the channel – on request from Piper through their link.

"Windbag," Scanner remarked. "I'll just be glad when we get him off this ship."

Sarda sat back, his fingers steepled as he considered the situation. "I am concerned that a man with Wesselton's abilities will manage to escape his incarceration."

It was a thought shared by all. The man would be incredibly difficult to control.

Thinking out loud, Piper said: "Perhaps we need to take a page out of Kirk's book and drop him off on a deserted planet."

Scanner snorted. "The bastard would probably build his own ship and fly off into the sunset. When you live as long as he will anything's possible."

Manny's tail twitched, betraying her nerves. "Maybe we should have let the locals burn him at the stake." It sounded macabre, but to those present it also sounded like a practical alternative.

The Captain shook her head, no. "The people below have enough problems at the moment without having to worry about a civil war over Spencer. Just because we were able to convince Joseph and his people didn't mean we were going to have the same success in all the other towns." She gazed off at the world below in her thoughts. "They're better off without him."

Manny added: "I don't think they want his blood on their hands, either," she said. "For a deeply religious people, killing is a line I think they no longer wish to cross. It's time to get back to being a community, not a "tin pot dictatorship", as my husband would put it."

The comment got her a fond scratch behind her ears from her spouse.

The Captain leaned forward and once more tapped the bell, bringing the meeting to a close. "Let's get back to work."

Chapter Nine

Two weeks later, the *Millennium* was splitting the ether at warp six when the Captain received a call. She took it in her Ready Room.

She immediately recognised the image. “Admiral Cartwright! It's good to see you.”

The middle-aged human gave her a friendly smile. The last time they met was shortly before the Cetacean Probe visited Earth. “Hello, Piper,” he said in his deep, charming voice. “I hear you have a report for me.”

“Yes, Admiral. You'll be glad to know that the settlers on Epsilon Scorpius III are doing well. They're going through some adjustments sorting out a new governing body since we removed their former “Prophet”. Their problems even extend to deciding what to do regarding punishing people who only acted on his orders.”

She was reminded of the poor woman who had been buried alive. Her husband had been taken into custody by the Elders, but they were unsure who was truly to blame for her death.

She continued. “Ambassador Llash has done a wonderful job of encouraging them to become a Federation Protectorate. They'll sign the agreement when we visit next.”

Cartwright gave her an almost embarrassed smile. “About that. You're needed elsewhere. I've dispatched the starship *Nightingale* to see to their needs. They'll be bringing a full diplomatic detachment with them.”

Piper hated leaving a job half done but had to admit the hospital ship would take better care of the people they left behind. "Fair enough."

Cartwright swallowed. His eyes wandered before refocussing on her. *Here it comes*, Piper thought. "I need you to rendezvous with another Federation starship that will be returning the prisoner. It's a stealth vessel, so don't be surprised that it doesn't carry a registry."

Piper scowled. "You're not asking me to turn him over to *them*, are you sir?"

The Admiral knew who she was referring to, but would not be moved. "I have my orders and now, so do you. You *will* transfer the prisoner as ordered, Captain."

Piper seethed but was well able to keep her fury in check. "Understood, Admiral," she said, her face an emotionless blank. "Is that all?"

"Yes." Cartwright wondered if he had just lost a friend. "Starfleet out." The screen went blank, and Piper started thinking.

Half an hour later she ordered the ship drop out of warp to rendezvous with a Federation starship she verified had no registry. It had no name, either.

"Hail them," Piper said as she tried to get comfortable in the centre seat. Considering what they were about to do, she feared she would never be comfortable again.

"Who are they?" Jason Nunn asked aloud as he stared at the barely visible, black starship on the screen.

She ignored him. She knew perfectly well who they were. Only a select few of command rank knew about Section 31, a group she described as Starfleet's "dirty tricks and bad relations bureau". "This is Captain Piper of the *Millennium* responding as ordered." This whole affair left a very bad taste in her mouth.

The male voice that answered sounded friendly enough. It was the sort of friendly you might hear from a politician. "Greetings, Captain Piper. I'm told you have a package for me?"

These people never ceased to amaze Piper. They seemed to have an innate talent for obfuscation. "I do. I'll beam it over in a moment."

The voice didn't change; however, Piper was certain he wasn't pleased. "I'd be happy to beam it over myself."

There's no way on God's Earth I'm letting him beam anything to, or from, my ship, Piper shared with her First Officer telepathically.

Agreed, Piper. Section 31 has a long history of duplicity. I am ready to transport the prisoner at your command. Sarda was already alone in Transporter Room Two, waiting.

Hold tight. "No thanks," she said. "You know I have the utmost respect for your section." Actually, it was the opposite. It was a matter of Starfleet record that she detested the very notion of their group's existence. "Ready when you are."

They had no choice, and she knew it. There was no way they could beam Wesselton out of the brig with the shielding containing him still in place.

"No problem, Captain." Once more Piper knew it was anything but. "We're ready to receive."

Without using their link Piper touched a control and ordered: "Energise."

Sarda touched a control on his board and the programmed sequence began. First, the shielding dropped in the brig and 1/1000th of a second later the transporter beam began the matter/energy conversion of the contents of the cell.

Something shorted in the console before Sarda, showering him in sparks and smoke filled the air. "Captain, I have a malfunction in the transporter." He began moving the controls, but it was clear they were unresponsive; however, the display was still functioning. The process was still under way. "Transport does appear to be continuing."

On the Bridge Piper spoke up as the Section 31 ship was still listening. "Do you have the package?"

The reply was decidedly unfriendly. "No. What happened?"

"The officer at the controls has reported a malfunction. One moment." She turned back to her chair mic. "What's happening?"

Sarda's voice came back. "I have checked the circuits, Captain. The "package's" pattern is no longer in the buffer. He has been lost."

Piper nodded solemnly. "You did all you can, I'm sure." She spoke again to the visiting ship. "I'm certain you heard all that, Captain," she said, not in the least surprised the man had not introduced himself.

There was a notable pause then: "You say his pattern has been lost due to a transporter malfunction?"

Piper frowned a little. "You heard it, Captain. Would you like to come over and see for yourself?" She was fairly certain

that a man who wouldn't transmit his image to a neighbouring ship would not beam over, either. With Section 31 secrecy was paramount.

"No, thank you, Captain Piper," he said, clearly disappointed but still angry. "Good day."

On the screen the ship did an about turn and quickly warped out of the area. Piper got up and casually stretched then turned and headed for the turbolift. "Commander Krashtallash, you have the Bridge."

Piper met Sarda in the Transporter room and checked the damage. "That'll take a couple of hours to fix," she said, running her fingertips over the scorched surface.

Her Vulcan friend looked at her solemnly, yet she felt his indecision. They switched their conversation to non-verbal.

Are you sure we did the right thing?

Piper looked at him wearily. This whole adventure had been a nightmare from start to finish. *I am. Wesselton is a monster, and we can't allow his kind of evil loose on the Federation.*

To keep him from Section 31 is a violation of our orders. Sarda was loyal to his oath to Starfleet. He remembered every instance in his life when he had done something that was questionable. This one went to the top of the list.

Nobody will notice the mass of bio-matter we had in the Brig wasn't Wesselton, and after the crap he put his and our people through back there, I know he won't get any sympathy from our crew. No, if I've learned one thing about being in command is that you sometimes have to make decisions to save the Federation – and Starfleet – from themselves. Orders are often given by faceless men in windowless rooms without

thought to the consequences. Those of us out on the frontier see first-hand the results and, all too often, we have to throw away the rules and make it up as we go. She knew that her friend not only heard her thoughts but felt her frustration. You know there are times when I consider retiring to some desk job somewhere I don't have to worry about being shot at. Just live the quiet life.

Sarda looked at her with a mixture of concern and incredulity. *Why don't you?*

A great number of images flashed through her mind that he could barely keep up with. She finished with an image of a quasar. *Ours is the best job in the universe, Sarda. I wouldn't have it any other way.*

Sarda's thoughts turned back to the present issue. *Are you sure they won't have a problem with it?* he asked.

Piper actually laughed at that. *Yes, I'm sure.*

Three days later, the *U.S.S. Cork*, a prototype runabout class vessel tasked to the *Millennium*, made orbit of a dusty looking world a parsec from where they had met the Section 31 vessel. At the controls were Scanner and Manny, off on a belated holiday. They were due the time and Piper had insisted now was as good a time as any. All they had to do was run a small errand on the way.

Scanner looked out the viewport at the world turning below. He was familiar with it, however the last time he had been here it had looked very different. Back then it had been lush and green. A planetary catastrophe had ruined it.

Manny looked over his shoulder, making Judd marvel once again just how flexible his wife was. There wasn't much

room, and her head was literally *past* his shoulder and almost in front of his own. "What's so special about this place?"

Scanner smiled and scratched her under the chin, making her purr. "Ask me again later. There's a long story behind this place." He turned in his chair and started scanning the terrain below. It took him only a few moments to find what he was looking for. "There you are!"

"What is?" Manny asked, but Judd ignored her.

"Later, sweetheart," he said once more. He took note of the co-ordinates then fed them into the transporter. Again, he turned and, just before he could touch the controls Manny caught his hand.

"Are you sure we should be doing this?" she asked. "Do we have the right?"

Rather than say it, he gently took her paws and let them touch his face then he opened his mind. A second later, Manny withdrew them and nodded. "I understand," she said a little sheepishly.

"Someone has to protect the children of the universe from this slime-ball, Honey," he said with absolute conviction. "And I'm actually *glad* I'm the one who gets to do it!" Without hesitation, he activated the transporter, and, within a moment, the cycle was complete. With a final look a Ceti Alpha V, Judd took the pilot's chair once more and fed in the coordinates for Risa. He warped out the system without giving it another thought.

Marcus Wesselton woke on the dusty floor of a large, metal box. It looked like some kind of cargo container. He

recognised the lingering effects of being placed in medical stasis as he worked to shake off his grogginess.

Stretching his muscles, he began to examine his surroundings. There were a number of musty, old bunks, books, even a rudimentary stove in the corner.

He listened for a moment and heard nothing but a howling gale outside. What sounded like sand kept dusting the sides of the metal room. He tested the gravity and found it a little higher than what he was used to. The air was thinner, and dryer, too.

He stood and moved around the room and found, to his surprise, some odd clothing, including an old belt with a buckle. There were some words punched into the metal. S.S. Botany Bay.

The truth of his situation came in a flash. He knew his history well enough, especially given his field of study, that the Botany Bay was the vessel Khan Noonien Singh had left Earth in. Had Piper left him with Khan?

He recalled Piper's odd statement at his "tribunal". Khan was dead. So, why had she left him here?

The Doctor's comments included the fact Khan had once tried to take another ship called *Enterprise*. Had they left this place to do so?

Either notion came to the same conclusion. There was likely nobody here.

A sense of dread came over Marcus as he stepped over to the door. He opened it a crack to see nothing but endless sand dunes out to the horizon and a relentless wind constantly reshaping the landscape. At some base level, Marcus realised

that, on this whole planet, he was alone. Piper had marooned him here forever.

Anger displaced fear as his hatred found itself crystallising in the form of the image of Piper. Somehow, he didn't care how, he would leave this place and find her and make her pay! He didn't know how, but he was determined.

Suddenly tired, he turned and made himself at home on one of the bunks, unaware he wasn't the only life left on the planet...