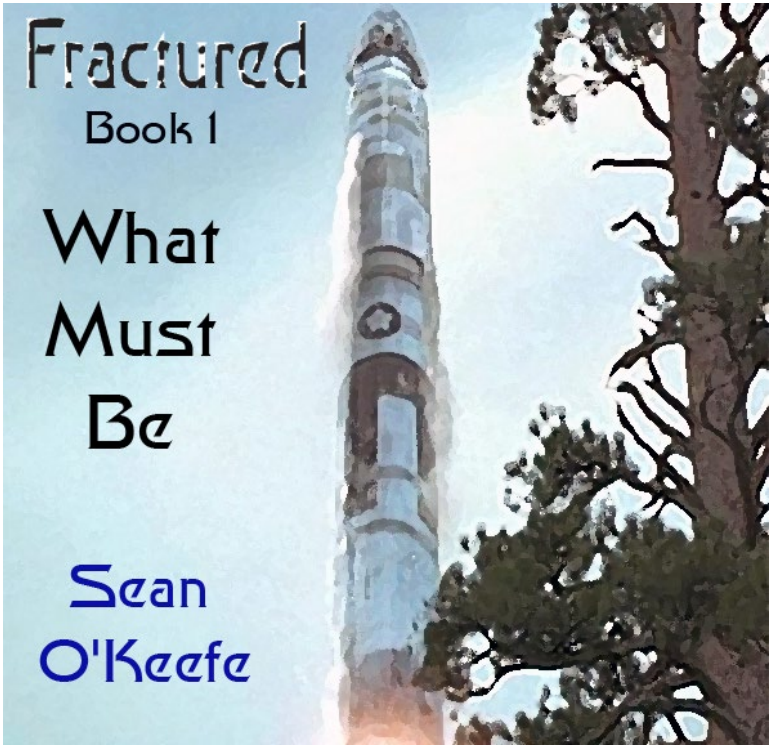

Fractured
Book 1
What
Must
Be
Sean
O'Keefe

FRACTURED

What Must Be

by Sean O'Keefe

Fractured Book 1: What Must Be
©Sean O'Keefe 2013, Revised 2022
is published by TrekkieFanFiction.com
Cover by Edelweiss O'Keefe

Based on Star Trek, created by Gene Roddenberry, and characters created by Diane Carey

This book is in no way meant to infringe the copyrights regarding Star Trek in any of its incarnations or the intellectual property of CBS, Paramount or Simon & Schuster. No profit whatsoever is being derived from this book. It is offered free of charge. Star Trek and its associated marks are trademark CBS Studios Inc. and Paramount Pictures Corp.

FRACTURED.....2
Chapter One.....6
Chapter Two.....30
Chapter Three.....48
Chapter Four.....74
Chapter Five.....100
Chapter Six.....123
Chapter Seven.....142
Chapter Eight.....162

for Edelweiss,
the most patient, loving woman I know

Chapter One

Tall, honey-blonde and green-eyed, Captain Piper walked down the corridor, her thoughts on the task ahead. Her ship, the *U.S.S. Millennium,* was in orbit of a planet known only as the "Time Planet" as it had no official designation – that she knew of. They had been sent here in the hope of discovering the cause behind a series of space/time anomalies that seemed to have their focus here, they had discovered. Having only just arrived after a long journey, Piper was headed to her quarters for a nap before beaming down.

All the same, her mind relentlessly forged on, considering the situation. As a driven person, she was often walking around the *Millennium* on autopilot whilst her brain was ticking over. Enough of her brain was functioning to engage a passer-by with a friendly nod or "good morning", leaving the other person convinced the Captain had met them on some level. In honest moments, she would admit she had no idea who she had passed on her way there. That included her closest friends, who had come to realise there were times when their fearless leader was simply on another planet in her thoughts.

Something shifted. It was enough to get her attention and it gave Piper reason to pause. A change had occurred and, even though she couldn't instantly put her finger on it, she knew that something was odd. She had long come to trust her instincts, and right now they were on high alert.

She looked around her at the walls. They were the wrong colour. The *Millennium's* colour scheme was in subtle brown tones. The panel she was looking at was blue. As she cast her gaze about her, she found all of them were the same hue.

There was also not enough space. She suddenly had the distinct impression she was not on her own ship. It was Starfleet for certain, but not hers. Worried that something sinister was afoot, she touched a computer console and was surprised when it spoke.

"Good morning, Captain. How can I assist you?" The mechanical voice was friendly, but unfamiliar. For one thing, it was masculine. Starfleet had long ago adopted feminine voices for their A.I.s.

"What is the name of this ship?" she asked as she wondered how she was going to get back to her own.

"*U.S.S. Ingram*," it replied.

The answer was more than unsettling, it was impossible. She had personally destroyed the *Ingram* only months before. What there was that was left of it certainly wasn't functional. It was floating wreckage fit only for scavenging.

As she pondered this revelation, Piper found herself involuntarily stepping aside as a crewman passed her by. Out of the corner of her eye she noticed there were some obvious differences between their uniforms. The fabric the male wore was different in texture, and the style reminded her of what she had worn as a lowly Lieutenant during her

stint on the original *Enterprise* when she had served under Jim Kirk. Not the new, red on white jacket with black slacks she had been wearing for the last couple of years. So, it was no surprise (even though she inwardly cursed) that the crewman stopped, slowly turned then gaped at her.

"Captain," he stammered. "What happened to your face?"

Piper could not help but run her hand over her brow, nose, cheeks then mouth and chin. She relaxed when she realised she was all right, but worried a little when she saw the crewman still staring at her as if something was wrong. If the way she looked like here was different in some way, she had to wonder what that difference was. To avoid a scene, she decided to think fast and come up with a good lie. "I had some surgery at our last layover to make some improvements," she said. It sounded good to her.

Not so to the crewman who shook his head in disbelief. "Nobody's that good."

Before Piper could decide whether she should be insulted or not, the young man slapped at the Starfleet pin on his chest, which surprisingly chirped. The Captain soon realised it was a miniaturised communicator.

"Crewman Sandage to the Bridge," he said, eyeing Piper. "Intruder alert."

This was not going to go well, Piper decided to herself. Wherever this *Ingram* was, they would take a dim view of imposters. She began backing away from the crewman with the familiar name. "If you don't mind,

Crewman, I'm not going to hang around and wait for your friends."

"Hold it!"

Piper ignored the order, turned and ran. She took two steps before something even more amazing happened.

She suddenly found herself back in the hallway on the *Millennium*. However, as she made the almost instantaneous transition, she felt as if she had *passed through* someone else.

Safe once more, Piper saw to her surprise that she was looking down the barrels of a number of phasers held by some decidedly anxious crewmen.

"Captain!" said the lead Security officer. "Where did you come from?" He looked past her shoulder as if looking for something. "And where did the imposter go?"

Curious, Piper turned and looked about her, but there was nobody present who should not have been. She stopped and considered what had just happened. One thing was certain, it was beyond her understanding. She took a second to fire off a request for Sarda's presence in her thoughts before asking the officer who it was they had been chasing. There were many times when her telepathic link with her Vulcan First Officer came in handy and now was definitely one of them. She turned her attention to the crewman. Queries regarding her sudden appearance were left for later when, perhaps, *she* understood them. "Who were you chasing?"

The security guards suddenly looked uncomfortable. Their Chief simply stated: “You.”

That bought the Chief a double take from his commander. “Huh?” she said incredulously.

The female guard next to him picked up as the Chief was lost for words. “Well, not exactly you, Captain. She was wearing some weird retro-style uniform and she had some stuff on her face.” Without preamble, she stepped to a computer panel on the wall and commanded it to replay the last five minutes captured from the hall cameras.

As Piper watched, she saw someone who did look a lot like her walk down the corridor, obviously curious regarding her surroundings. She wore a uniform identical to that she had witnessed on the *Ingram*. The other Captain stopped her wandering when she met a crewman in a scene that mirrored the one she had just partaken in.

When the intruder turned, Piper took in a sudden breath when she realised what Crewman Sandage had meant. He was right. Nobody was *that* good. She paused the playback and zoomed in.

At that moment, Sarda arrived and simply looked at the monitor whilst trying not to show the amazement he felt. The face seemingly looking out of the screen resembled Piper, except that half of her counterpart’s face had been replaced by a shining metal prosthetic that ran from her right jaw to her temple, including her right eye and socket. It was as if someone had fixed her face in a hurry and never gotten

around to finishing the job. She looked in amazement at the false eye that glared at the crewman with a bright green lens.

It reminded her of a man she had met a year before at Starbase Forty-Eight. He'd had half of his face replaced so he could take photographs at will. However, Piper could not imagine in her wildest dreams why she would voluntarily have the procedure done on herself.

Piper shivered. It was like looking at a nightmare captured on film.

"She's not you." Sarda's voice rang clearly in her mind.

The simple statement settled Piper's nerves. The whole situation was bizarre. *"I can see that,"* she replied silently. *"It's just weird seeing another version of me."* She narrowed her eyes as a thought came to her. *"How do you know that?"*

Before Sarda answered, he dismissed the security officers and waited while they resumed their duty stations in other parts of the ship. Then he took out his tricorder and scanned the area around them for a full minute before stating: "There are no signs of anomalies, Captain."

Piper frowned. "Something happened that took me …. somewhere else." She shook her head in wonder. "I don't get it."

Sarda considered the problem for a moment. "If you will permit me?"

The Captain nodded. She knew what he was asking. They would need some privacy. "Lead on," she said.

Three minutes later, Piper and Sarda were sitting side-by-side in her ready room. There was no preamble as they prepared for the meld, nor was there any trepidation. They were familiar enough with one another's thoughts and feelings that there was no fear, only complete trust.

After a moment's meditation, Sarda placed his fingers on Piper's jaw, cheek and temple and allowed their minds to mesh together as one.

Piper led him on a tour of her short trip on the *Ingram* and Sarda saw Crewman Sandage through his friend's eyes. It was clear to him what had happened to her, but the how was beyond him. He felt the sensation she had felt when she had stepped back into the *Millennium* – as if passing through another person's soul.

Together, they examined the memory. The other person they felt was familiar, yet strange. They quickly came to the conclusion it was the other Piper as they passed one another through the "rift".

Sarda broke contact and they sat back, deep in thought. Due to their proximity, they were able to continue sharing their thoughts without having them meshed together.

Piper offered: *"The only thing I can think of is that it was an alternate universe."*

"Or another timeline."

The Captain chuckled. "How on earth do you tell them apart?"

Sarda's eyebrows shot up as he stated: "Different universes have varying quantum signatures. Alternate timelines share the same quantum state, but varying fates."

"It's like trying to unscramble spaghetti!" Piper's frustration was beginning to show as she threw up her hands in the air in disgust. "How do we scan an alternate state without being in it?"

A smile played around the edges of Sarda's mouth as a notion came to him. His eyes met hers as he said: "Air. Whilst you were in the other reality, you breathed in their atmosphere. If it *is* an alternate universe, you will be still carrying some molecules from there. If we scan you and look for different quantum states in your cells, we will solve that puzzle quickly. However, we must hurry."

Together, they rose from Piper's couch and headed straight out the door and down to Sickbay.

"You want me to *what*?" Dr. Merete AndrusTaurus of Altair Four blinked her almond-shaped eyes if she had been asked to reach into her medscanners and pull out a carrot.

Not willing to wait a moment longer than they had to, Piper walked straight over to the diminutive Doctor's examination table and lay down on it, her head cradled in the small, rubber cushion at the top. "There's not a moment to waste, Merete," she said, letting her friend know how serious it was by the stern tone of her voice.

The Doctor got the message and, with Sarda's help, quickly programmed her scanners to check her for

anomalies. A moment later, the scanner arm over the bed began moving up and down her body, casting its soft illumination as it went.

"So, you think Piper was sucked into another universe?" Merete queried as they waited. She crossed her arms over her chest, concerned, and realised she would soon have to feed her baby twins. She was getting top heavy once more. Palkeo Est women produced copious amounts of milk whilst lactating. They needed to keep up with their children's voracious appetites.

The Vulcan was not one to commit himself to a theory without solid evidence. "Perhaps," he said, hedging his bets. "What she saw was real, and I felt her absence."

She wasn't certain she was just imagining it, but Merete got the distinct feeling that Piper's absence had somehow affected him on a personal level. She shelved the notion for another time, knowing that Piper and Sarda's link went well beyond a typical Vulcan marriage bond. Anything could happen, even to a pair who were determined to be nothing more than friends.

"What did you see?"

Knowing Piper couldn't move while the scanner did its work, Sarda simply said: "People like us, but not quite. The uniforms were an older style, and the ship had the wrong name."

The scanner finished its job with a chirp and Piper sat up, swinging her legs over the side of the bed. "The weird thing was meeting Crewman Sandage. I can't help

but wonder if he's a relative of Judd's. They certainly looked alike."

Sarda agreed with her with a simple nod. His recollection of the man was clear from Piper's excellent memory. The familial similarity was obvious. He cast his gaze over the readout and grunted. "There are no quantum anomalies in any of your cells. The air you breathed was from our universe."

"That's weird. As you put it, the only other possibility is that I stepped into another time stream." She screwed up her face in amazement. "I thought that was impossible. Never mind that I always thought the notion of multiple universes was a cheat, but the idea that we can have two time streams – two eventualities – for the same universe occurring simultaneously is unbelievable. I'm well aware of the old theories that every single possibility is played out in alternate versions of reality at the same time. It was disproved when mankind finally accepted the notion that infinity is nothing more than an abstract notion. It does not occur in nature."

In the quiet of their thoughts, Sarda revealed: *"It is unsettling."*

Without judgement, Piper chided: *"I don't think it's a bad thing to share that with Merete. You know you can trust her implicitly."*

Their interchange happened at the speed of thought, yet Merete picked up they were having another of their silent conversations. "What is it?" she asked.

Sarda took in a breath to calm himself and shared his feeling with the Doctor. Always the forgiving type, Merete rubbed his biceps and smiled. "I've known you too long to believe you don't have feelings, Sarda," she said. "Why is this bothering you?"

The Captain knew the answer to that question. "Because it's a paradox," she answered. "Two possibilities cannot play themselves out simultaneously without some kind of damage." She shot a look of dread at the Vulcan. "They can lead to accelerated entropy. The end of the universe, if you want to sound alarmist."

Not knowing whether to be worried or not, the Doctor chipped in: "I didn't think that was going to be on the calendar for the odd billion years yet."

Piper's teeth came together in a worried clench. "Time is a lot more fragile than we know," she said quietly. She lowered her voice so only her friends could hear her. "Starfleet has set up a branch called Temporal Investigations to watch over it. Ever since the *Enterprise* proved it was possible to alter the natural flow of time, there have been several attempts to change the course of history. So far, each one has been thwarted."

Merete baulked at the notion. "So, what you saw was some kind of cheat? Changing the course of history without actually doing so?" Fearing for the future for her babies, she closed her eyes and held her head in her hands. "It's almost too much to take in."

Sarda joined Piper at her side and sat down on the bed next to her. The whole subject was at the same time unsettling, yet fascinating. He also took some enjoyment watching how Piper's mind worked.

"The trouble with time travel is that cause is supposed to precede effect, not the other way around." She lightly nibbled the tip of her thumbnail as she considered the puzzle. "This could be the worst kind of grandfather paradox," she said.

Merete pulled over her office chair and sat down in front of them. "What is the "Grandfather Paradox"?" she asked. Her concern over the whole thing was beginning to show as Piper noticed her hands were shaking a little.

Piper donned her teacher's cap. "The Grandfather Paradox speculates that, if someone was able to travel back in time and prevent their own grandfather from having the child who would then create the time traveller himself, you would have effect without a cause because the time traveller would never have existed. Paradox."

Their friend from Altair Four's eyes went wide as she tried to grasp the concept. "So, why is it bad if that happens? Wouldn't the new timeline just continue?"

Sarda interjected at this point. "For a time, it would. However, the paradox would cause an increase in entropy in that timeline. It would "burn itself out" in short order."

Merete threw her hands up in disgust. "How does that affect us if we're in the original timeline?"

Piper scratched her head at that one. "If we're in the original timeline that created the alternate line, then we should have ceased to exist some time ago." She frowned. "That's why paradoxes are so destructive and why time travel should be kept to an absolute minimum. The ripple effect is just too damaging." She turned her attention to Sarda. "How is it that this is possible at all? Both timelines cannot exist simultaneously."

Two brows went up together as the Science Officer admitted: "It is puzzling. It is even more curious that you have made the transition between them. Either entropy is increasing rapidly, causing fractures in space/time, or there is something about you, personally, that is making it possible."

Piper sighed. "All of this speculation is getting us nowhere, really. The best we can do is make a report and forward it to Starfleet. Perhaps it's even linked to the space/time anomalies that brought us here." She hopped off the bed and stepped towards the door. "The odds are this was an isolated event."

Once more, something shifted. Again, she felt the presence *pass through* her, ever so briefly, and she found herself standing in a variation of her ship's Sickbay. Albeit more brightly lit and with a decidedly more futuristic look.

"Not again!" she groaned.

Around her, the crew of the *Ingram* took time to react. Surprised, it took them a moment to realise their Captain's uniform had changed.

Knowing it would be best to try and put on a friendly face, Piper turned and smiled. "Hi! Would you believe I mean you no harm?"

The crew of this vessel were almost completely unfamiliar to her – save one. Doctor Merete AndrusTaurus looked no different to her counterpart in Piper's save the obvious fact this woman was not a nursing mother.

"Security!" The man wearing the Commander's stripes on his sleeves watched Piper warily. He was older than she, human, grey haired and he wore a bristling moustache that made him look quite distinguished to her. He was tall and trim and had the bearing of a man from an old military line. His accent gave him away as English. "Watch her, but do not harm her. She is simply our Captain's counterpart from the other timeline." Putting her to the test, his eyes narrowed a little as he said: "I gather you have already realised this?"

Piper nodded. "No varying quantum signatures. We just finished scanning me."

The Commander took a deep breath. He was clearly concerned but seemed to have no idea how to proceed.

The Captain decided to break the ice. "You know who I am. I know Doctor AndrusTaurus. Who are the rest of you?"

Their reactions to her announcement varied from disappointment to surprise to relief. Most of them were understandable to Piper. All the same, she could not help but wonder why Sarda wasn't here.

The thought of him brought to her realisation that, for however long this went on for, she could no longer feel his presence or sense his thoughts. She was so used to having him in her mind she found it almost disconcerting to be alone.

The Commander brought himself up to parade ground attention and said: "I am Commander Warwick Lee." He indicated the science officer to his left, an Andorian shen who wore a broad grin – uncharacteristically friendly for one of her species. "This is Lieutenant Aaness. She will take a brief scan of you."

Piper nodded her acceptance and Aaness took her cue, stepped past the diagnostic bed and ran a med scanner over her. Piper took note she lingered over her face for a moment, as if they found the fact she wasn't injured odd.

While Aaness worked, Piper asked: "Have you figured out what's going on yet?"

Almost embarrassed, Aaness said: "Sorry, Captain. We haven't gathered enough information to make even an educated guess."

To Piper's ears, Aaness' voice sounded so beautiful it was like rose petals falling to the floor. She couldn't help but mention with a friendly smirk: "You have a lovely voice, Lieutenant. I bet you're a good singer in the shower."

Aaness' skin turned a slightly darker blue. It was clear she wasn't used to receiving compliments. "Thank you, Captain Silayna."

At that, Piper's brows rose as she realised the import of that single word. Her counterpart from this universe had married her old flame from the Academy, Brian Silayna. Circumstances had torn them apart in her native timeline soon after they had become lovers. His silence regarding his involvement with the theft of the *Star Empire* so many years ago, and his lack of trust in her, had driven a wedge between them. Perhaps the Rittenhouse Affair hadn't happened here. If that was the case, she couldn't help but wonder what else was different in this version of reality.

She gave Aaness a gentle smile and said: "My name's Piper. I'm not married."

Her words caused a ripple of surprise in the room. She could tell that Commander Lee was about to ask her another question, but she got in first. She turned her attention to the Doctor and asked: "Merete, where's Sarda and Scanner?"

The Palkeo Est woman seemed a little confused. "I don't know a Sarda. As for Scanner, if you're referring to Judd Sandage, I haven't seen him for years. He left Starfleet after his first tour."

"Aboard the *Enterprise*?" Piper added.

Merete shook her head. "No, the *Hood.* I've never served on the *Enterprise*. She was commissioned after I joined Starfleet."

Piper bit her lip in wonder. Things in this timeline were weirder than she realised. The *Enterprise* was over ten

years old before she had even gone to the Academy. Stranger and stranger.

The Commander's patience had been stretched far enough. "Captain... Piper. Do you know how to get *our* Captain back to us?"

Piper tapped her teeth together and gave him a brief smile. "I haven't got the slightest idea. The only thing I can guess at is that both of us seem to be occupying the same space when we make the transition." The thought drew her to another question. "Where are we?"

"In Sickbay," Aaness said quickly.

"No," Piper said, wishing the room had windows. "Where is the *Ingram*?"

Lee seemed a little reluctant to share information with their guest. Merete came to her rescue. "We're in geostationary orbit over the Guardian."

"Doctor!" Lee shouted. "That is classified!"

Piper nodded. "As we are. It's beginning to make sense. We were tasked with dropping off some supplies to the Security contingent guarding it." It was a half-truth. They had indeed been requested to resupply as well as their primary mission.

Lee demonstrated surprise at her candour. All the same, he remained mute on the subject.

"Commander," Piper said with a winning smile. "We're not going to get very far if we're going to be suspicious of one another. I don't think your Starfleet and

mine are all that different. Our job is to protect the Federation from malevolent forces."

The First Officer crossed his arms, defiant. "It remains to be seen that your reality isn't trying to interfere with mine."

"What for?" Piper countered. "The only person who seems to be able to make the transition is myself and Captain Silayna. I'm certain neither of us wishes to be in the other's timeline and it's not like I'm going to steal the Crown Jewels while I'm here. I have only two questions I want answered are: One: Why are we making these transitions? Two: How is it that two different versions of the *same universe* can exist at the same time? Surely one should have cancelled the other out upon its formation."

The notion that one's entire existence could be simply erased did not sit well with the people around her. Aaness asked: "Is it true that we might not exist in your timeline?" Her agitation was clear in her quaking voice.

Piper suddenly realised that such knowledge was dangerous. She had possibly already revealed too much with her admission she didn't know anyone present aside from Merete.

Considering her friend, she wondered why, as the two women existed in both timelines, they weren't making the transition. The odds of them occupying the same space were much greater than it was for her as this was Merete's domain. They worked in the same space. Strange.

Commander Lee picked up on her previous line of thinking. "I think it would be better if we refrained from discussing such matters, Captain Piper." He glanced at Aaness. "We don't need to know what we cannot change."

Piper nodded her agreement as she pondered another problem. "Commander, where are Captain Silayna's quarters on this vessel?"

Once more, the Commander seemed reluctant to share information. Merete slapped his shoulder, annoyed. "Warwick, she's trying to help." She turned her gaze back to Piper. "Deck Six, section three."

Piper smiled. The differences between their vessels apart, at least their quarters were in the same place.

"Why do you want to know?" Commander Lee asked.

Piper drew a deep breath. "I don't understand what's going on, but I suggest we pool our resources. Your Captain and I can share information if we can agree on a place where we can make a transition safely with an expectation of returning." She glanced at the ship's chronometer on the wall and compared it with her antique wristwatch. They were in sync. "I think the doorway to my personal washroom would be appropriate – on the hour." She fixed the Commander with a stare. "For this to work, you're going to have to keep the ship *right here*. If either of them moves, you could be stuck with the wrong Captain." She gave him a cheeky grin.

She noted that her friendly attitude seemed incongruous to this crew. Was her counterpart that different? She wondered what she would be like if she'd been badly injured and needed such drastic surgery. She couldn't help but ask: "What happened to Captain Silayna's face?"

That was a subject that put these people on edge.

Merete spoke up. "Phaser accident," she offered.

Aaness added: "We don't usually talk about it."

"Why?"

Commander Lee's baritone answered a little more quietly, obviously more than a little embarrassed: "Because the Captain doesn't mention it."

To Piper he seemed keen to protect Silayna's privacy. Fair enough.

Before she had a chance to ask another question, she found herself back in the company of friends in the *Millennium's* Sickbay. "How did that happen?" she asked.

Her Merete smiled. "You'll laugh, Piper, but your other started spinning around the room with her arms out wide hoping to find you."

Piper chuckled. "I never was a graceful dancer," she admitted.

"Neither was she," Merete said, still grinning. "But it was effective."

Piper looked to Sarda. He had to admit, it was nice having him back in her head. "Did you learn anything?"

Sarda almost frowned. "Only that your counterpart, Captain Silayna, has no idea what is transpiring, either. She did, however, confirm her ship is in the same orbit as ours."

"So, we're literally occupying the same space and time," Piper observed. She turned and suddenly left the room, headed for the Bridge at a brisk pace. Sarda and Merete ran to keep up with her.

"Why are you running?" Merete called.

"Would you believe I'm trying to get out of my way?" Piper returned.

As she ran, she realised it might get maddening trying to second-guess Silayna. They were bound to bump into each other from time to time and cross over unintentionally. She was even uncertain as to whether she should occupy the Centre Seat. Not good.

She slowed down and waited for her friends who caught up with her at the turbolift doors.

"Don't spend all your time second-guessing Captain Silayna," Sarda offered out loud.

Merete added: "Yes. If you bump into each other, we're pretty sure we'll get you back anyway."

Piper grinned. "I just hope they'll take me up on my suggestion." She explained the idea she had left with Commander Lee.

"A commendable plan, Captain," he said. He added with a touch of mirth. "If they don't, all you'll have to do is sit in the Conn. It will be simply a matter of time before the two of you meet."

Piper rolled her eyes. "That's going to make it hard to run this ship, isn't it? It's probably only a matter of time before you wind up with her in the chair instead of me." The turbolift doors opened and they stepped inside. "Bridge," Piper ordered.

"That could be a dangerous security risk, Piper," Sarda said. "We don't know if she can be trusted."

Piper's first reaction was to defend her counterpart. She was poised to answer when she realised that Sarda was right. She had yet to meet her face-to-face and she truly had no idea what she was like. All she had was hearsay. Before she could say anything, the door whooshed open and they stepped out.

Lieutenant Valastro glanced up at Piper as she exited and stood, expecting her to take over but she waved him down. He nodded his understanding and kept station as the trio made their way into Piper's Ready Room.

Once inside, they took their usual places: Piper, behind her desk, feet propped on the corner; Sarda, sitting bolt upright on the chair directly opposite and Merete relaxed into the corner of the couch.

"All right, then, what's your take on her?" Piper asked.

Merete started. "She's like you, that's for sure, although I'd have to say she's tougher. She's the sort of person you'd think had endured a hard life, so trying to have a laugh with her was almost pointless. She was polite when I tried a little joke, but she didn't even chuckle."

Piper rolled her eyes. "I have a hardass double. Who'd have thought it?" She threw her hands up in amazement. "Then again, if I'd had half my face shot off, I wouldn't be too happy about it either." Once more, she ran a hand over the right side of her face, feeling almost self-conscious. *It's not me,* she reminded herself, *it's the* other *me.*

"This must be confusing for you," Sarda stated.

The Captain shrugged it off. "I suppose the old saying: "If you travel far enough, you'll eventually meet yourself" isn't that far from the truth." She shook herself. "All the same, we've got a problem. Why is this happening? Does it have anything to do with the Guardian?"

"Uncertain." Once more, Sarda was unwilling to engage in conjecture.

It was a habit that Piper often found maddening. She narrowed her green eyes at him and said not unkindly: "You know, you can have the occasional guess, Sarda! I won't hold it against you."

Although he didn't show it, Piper felt Sarda's embarrassment. It was a character flaw found not only in Sarda, but in practically his entire race. Their rigid code of logic forbade guesses or generalisations.

Regardless of his feelings, Piper was not about to apologise. There was a time for facts and there was a time for conjecture. Vulcans needed an imagination as much as the next species. It was the only way to put yourself not only in the place of another, but in their mind as well.

In the moment of uncomfortable silence, Merete interjected: “Why don’t we just ask it?”

Piper and Sarda shared a look. The idea hadn’t occurred to either of them.

Chapter Two

Cold, dusty, ancient. The undesignated, and highly classified world that was home to the Guardian of Forever reminded everyone who visited it of an ancient graveyard. One could not help but walk amongst its ruins with a sense of respect, awe, and more than a touch of fear. It was if something was lurking here, waiting to pounce on the unwary.

Sitting among the fallen walls and columns was a large, two-metre-tall, distorted doughnut-shaped object that had the appearance of rock but was anything but. A curtain of something akin to mist kept one from seeing through it. It was as old as time itself, a left over from an ancient civilisation – one was meant to believe.

However, doubts about its origins were being raised due to its annoying predisposition towards obfuscation. It would answer questions with statements that would make a politician proud.

Piper mused that, even when it *was* talking, it usually said nothing of value. Lighting up as it spoke, whilst showing images of the past, it was clear that it was proud of its ability to send people to other places in time and space. It no doubt fulfilled its designated role to its creators, but she had to wonder that, for a race with such obvious mastery over time and space, their disappearance was disturbing.

Jim Kirk had shown that one man could change the course of history by saving one critical person. The price of

this lesson had been high as he had fallen in love with one such individual, Edith Keeler. She was a linchpin in history around which the fate of World War Two could have turned out very differently with Germany as the ultimate victor.

To put things right, he'd had to stop Doctor McCoy from saving her as a truck bore down on her in a busy street.

Jim never forgot her. She was the one woman in his life he would never get over. Piper remembered Jim's fitting tribute to her as she leaned across the railing of Jim's yacht as they sailed and read its name: Edith Keeler.

"With great power comes great responsibility." Starship captains knew this. The fate of worlds was often in their hands. Unfortunately, it had sometimes gone to their heads – with tragic results.

Piper gazed at the Guardian and mused to herself that any race capable of creating such a device would live from that point on the razor's edge. All it would take was the wrong choice. An inappropriate action taken at the worst point in time, and they would erase themselves from history. As she circumnavigated a boulder, she wondered if that was indeed their fate.

At least Starfleet had learned something from their mistakes. It was absolutely forbidden to enter the portal and allow the Guardian to send you to goodness knew where. The Temporal Prime Directive was now in force and being guarded, in this place, by a small contingent of some of Starfleet's finest fighters and a ten-gigawatt force field.

As Piper approached it, she got the impression that the Guardian was observing her. It had no eyes or any other sensory apparatus, nothing that moved to give away its intentions. Yet, she still had the feeling it was watching her somehow.

On either side of the portal, the security officers kept a wary eye on their visitor. While they respected Piper's rank, they trusted no-one.

She stopped a respectful two metres from the object, Sarda by her side. She felt his trepidation. Even he was awed by the immense power the Guardian embodied.

Curiously, the Guardian spoke first. Its voice boomed and carried the note of enormous capacity, as if everything it said carried great import. Piper wondered if Genghis Khan had spoken that way. "Time is coming full circle."

The comment brought Piper up short. She considered the words for a moment and silently shared her thoughts with Sarda on the subject. Both of them came up blank.

"Guardian," Piper said, speaking up a little even though there was no other sound save the never-ending wind. "Are you responsible for my recent steps into an alternate timeline?"

For a moment, the Guardian was silent. Piper was beginning to wonder whether she would need to rephrase the question when it spoke again. "Time is fractured. It can only be healed with much sacrifice."

The word chilled Piper's soul. She was well aware just how high a price that could be. She pressed on. "How is time fractured?" she asked.

Again, the Guardian considered its reply. "All is not as it should be. Not in your time, or the other."

This was not going well. If things in both timelines were wrong, what was the real timeline like? Who was she? *What* was she? Was she even in it?

"How is this so?" she asked, feeling a little naïve.

This time the Guardian was ready. "A paradox is occurring."

"What paradox?" she blurted.

Instead of answering, the Guardian said: "Space/time has been torn. It must be repaired or all with be lost."

"What paradox?" Piper repeated.

"There is one who can help you," the Guardian said. The mist in its centre cleared and Piper found herself looking at a mirror of the landscape behind her. Standing in the middle of it was Captain Silayna.

Both were shocked to see the other. They were two eventualities that were never meant to meet. A "what if?" nobody should ever encounter.

Without thinking, they approached one another, drawn to each other like magnets. Piper came within six feet when the security guards decided it was close enough and raised their weapons.

"That's close enough!" Their tone brooked no argument.

Piper nodded, as did her counterpart. It seemed they had faced the same issue.

"Can you hear me?" Piper asked – at the same time her mirror asked.

The peculiarity of the situation was offset by the humour. "Jinx," Piper said with a smile. She noted Silayna simply quirked up the good corner of her mouth.

Piper opened. "It's nice to meet me," she said. In her mind she heard Sarda groan.

Silayna's gaze shifted from Piper, who she had been scrutinising as one would a Michelangelo, to Sarda. "Vulcan," she said, matter-of-factly. "You don't see many of their kind these days." Her words were meant for Piper.

Sarda's right brow jumped up in wonder. "Why is that?" he asked, his need to know clear.

Silayna crossed her arms and looked at him with her mismatched eyes. "Since the destruction of Vulcan, there haven't been many of your kind around."

Piper wished she had a notepad. One of their timeline's divergences was already clear. She needed to compare more of their histories to find what changed them.

"We have a problem," Piper said. "The Guardian has told me that nothing is the way it should be."

Silayna sighed. "Cracked like an old teacup," she said with little mirth. "The Guardian told me it's the result

of a paradox." She nailed Piper with a glare. "We need to compare our histories to find where they diverge."

There had been many times when Piper was glad she was a student of history. Knowing the chief events throughout human history had helped her avoid repeating some of its mistakes.

Silayna took out a large tablet and tapped its screen. "Are you ready?" she asked.

Her tone reminded Piper of a no-nonsense schoolteacher. While she enjoyed teaching, her style was more participatory.

At her side, Sarda took out his padd and signalled his preparedness.

Piper took the lead. "I suggest we start further back and move forward." Silayna nodded her agreement. "All right. How about Zefram Cochrane? April 5, 2063 mean anything to you?"

Silayna tilted her head to the side, her good eye narrowed in annoyance. "Do you think we can do this without the childish attempts at humour?"

The comment came as a slap in the face. The woman on the other side of the looking glass may have looked like her, but Piper was fast coming to the conclusion they were nothing alike in the things that mattered. "I'm not sure Mum would let you talk to people like that," she said caustically.

Now it was Silayna's turn to recoil. She scowled at Piper, clearly angry. "I haven't spoken to Mum in years. Not since..."

Piper missed seeing her counterpart start to reach for her face. At the moment, all she saw was red. The alternate version was showing a side of herself that bothered her. "Are you afraid she'll put you in your place?" she growled, her fists going to her hips. "Mum would never put up with your crappy attitude."

"Piper!" The word rang in her mind, loud and clear, projected there by Sarda, who had had enough of their bickering. *"This is not the time."*

However, the damage was done. Silayna glared at Piper and snapped: "I'm sure Mum would have no problem with your pretty face my dear, but she does with mine!" As she shook in fury a lock of her shoulder-length brunette hair shook loose, falling across her artificial eye. She tossed her head to return it to its place.

"Captains!" Sarda said, raising his voice uncharacteristically. "Do I need to remind you of the importance of what we are doing here?"

Both Pipers sucked it up. They glared at each other, putting their dispute off to another time. *Almost* apologetically, they said: "Sorry."

Silayna continued through gritted teeth. "First contact with the Vulcans was on that date."

Piper nodded. "How about the NX project?" she offered.

Silayna was beginning to cool and said a little more amiably: "The original *Enterprise* was launched in 2151, captained by Jonathan Archer."

So far, so good. Time for smaller steps. "When was the Federation Charter first signed?"

"2161."

That was right, too. "Who signed it?" Piper asked.

They went on for some time until Piper said: "When was the *Enterprise NCC-1701* launched?"

"I'm not sure. 2258, I think." She cupped her chin in her left hand, her index finger on her cheek as she thought. "That's right. She was launched prematurely when Vulcan was attacked."

Both Piper and Sarda reacted to this information. It lined up with neither of their memories.

Sarda spoke first. "Vulcan was attacked?"

Silayna nodded. "I gather it didn't happen in your timeline. A ship from the future, a Romulan ship, destroyed Vulcan by creating a singularity inside it."

Aghast, both *Millennium* officers felt each other's shock. Such a violation was almost beyond understanding.

"Hang on," Piper said, realising it wasn't the only non sequitur. "I'm pretty sure the *Enterprise* was launched years before that in 2245."

Silayna's good brow lifted. "That's news to me," she said, surprised. "The late Admiral Pike was her first commander, with James Kirk taking over her shortly after when he was captured."

Weirder and weirder, Piper thought. "Why was the *Enterprise's* launch delayed?"

"It wasn't." Silayna's annoyance with her double was resurfacing. She was starting to get tetchy again. "I just told you that."

Piper took a deep breath to settle her nerves. "You don't get it," she said after a moment. "There's over a decade of difference between our launchings. Any idea why?"

Silayna sighed and tried to let go of her negative feelings. Being helpful was the only way forward, she told herself. "I'm sorry, no. She is a *Constitution*-class ship, and they'd only built the *Constitution* herself just before the *Enterprise*."

Again, it didn't line up. "How many of them were built altogether?"

"Four." For the first time, Silayna smiled. "Starfleet's made up of a lot of diverse ship designs. We've got ships for all kinds of missions."

The last time Piper looked, there had originally been twelve of the *Enterprise's* sister ships. Silayna's fleet sounded a lot more varied than hers. "Okay. Let's go back a little." She thought to herself for a moment, then asked: "Where was Jim born?"

"Who?" Silayna had no idea which Jim she was referring to.

To Piper, there really was only one. "Jim Kirk. Surely he told you a little about himself over time."

Quizzically, Silayna squinted as she tried to reconcile what she was being asked. "I've never served with

him." As an editorial, she added: "I wouldn't want to, either. Cowboy!"

The disdain she felt was clear and had Piper wondering what kind of a career Silayna had led. If she had never served with Jim, then she probably never captained the *Banana Republic* or the *Star Empire* for that matter. It was also obvious that she had no love for Jim.

"Can you find out?" Piper asked. She wasn't sure why it was so important to ask, but she did so anyway.

Silayna shrugged and tapped in a request on her datapadd. "Whatever." She read for a moment, then said: "He was born on a shuttlecraft. Apparently, his mother went into premature labour when their ship, the *U.S.S. Kelvin,* came under attack – by the same ship that destroyed Vulcan." The co-incidence was not missed.

"Now, isn't that interesting?" Jim had told Piper he had been born on the *Kelvin*. His mother had left the ship shortly after to raise him and Sam on the family farm in Iowa. She thought space was too dangerous to raise children. Piper tucked her head to the side as she considered. "Where did this mystery Romulan ship come from?" she asked.

Silayna sucked in a breath between her teeth, her eyes widened as she cast her mind back. She was being hard on herself for not remembering. "Stuff it," she said after a moment of futility. She tapped in the request and got her answer in seconds. "The logs stated a "lightning storm in

space" appeared and the *Narada* – the Romulan ship – emerged from it."

A thought came to Sarda and Piper silently encouraged him to explore it. "*If you don't practice your imagination, my friend, you'll lose it,"* she thought fondly. "*That brilliant mind of yours came up with amazing new designs. Don't let it go to waste."*

Sarda simply nodded, leading Silayna to wonder what level of synchronicity these two held. The best teams could practically read one another's minds. She had no idea they actually could.

"I was about to speculate," the word hung there for a moment, reminding Piper of her previous barb, "that the storm was in fact the emerging end of a temporary wormhole from the distant future."

Piper's eyes went wide. "When I suggest you use your imagination you really go all out!" she said with a grin. "All the same, you could be right. Captain Silayna did say the Romulans were from the future. If they came from *our* future and changed the past, it would have created her timeline leaving us all with a nasty paradox."

A communicator chirped. Neither Captain was sure it was their own so both took theirs off the back of their belts. It turned out they were both being called. The messages were very similar.

"Captain, we are under attack from an unknown ship. Our shields are up, but they are proving hard to target. We think it might be..." The connection went dead.

Both Pipers tapped their communicators and tried to regain contact with their ships. Sarda tried with his own – to no avail. Piper turned her gaze to the skies and tried to see some tell-tale sign of a battle but saw nothing. If the *Millennium* had been destroyed, it would have lit up like a small sun. She took comfort from that.

She took a moment to glance at her opposite number and saw her doing the same thing – before turning and looking at her. It seemed they shared one thing in common: the fear all captains have of losing their ship.

Simultaneously on both sides of the mirror, a transporter beam appeared. The security guards on each side stared at it in amazement as it should not have been able to penetrate the security shield. Caught off guard, each one fell to an expert phaser shot that knocked them out cold – leaving only the Pipers, Sarda and themselves.

"This madness has to end here!"

For a moment, Piper wasn't certain who had spoken, and on which side. It took her only a moment to decide that it was her interloper. Another question plagued her. Why hadn't they been shot as well?

As there was no cover, both Piper and Sarda kept perfectly still, doing their best to appear unthreatening. Both of them were unarmed – a condition of their visitation. Each of them looked over their unexpected guest and shared their observations. It was a skill they were honing that helped them sum up an enemy much faster than on their own.

The visitor was male, human – or at least humanoid – and appeared to be in his mid-thirties. He was of medium height, wore a peculiar ribbed, black, form-fitting outfit, and carried his phaser with an ease come of much practice. Oddly, for the moment, he didn't seem that interested in Piper or Sarda. He made straight for the Guardian.

As she turned to watch him, Piper noticed that a similar thing was happening in the other timeline. However, instead of a male, this protagonist was female. She was only about five feet tall, but her physique spoke of great athleticism. She carried herself as one born to confidence. She had long, raven hair, graceful features and cold, blue eyes that could cut a man down. She spoke with a voice full of arrogance. "Who said anything about madness?" she taunted. "It's simple. You and yours must die so we can live."

The male spoke, imploring. "We both cannot survive. Since the event, entropy has increased. It's only a matter of time before space/time rips itself apart."

The woman put a hand to her hip. "What does what happens over there have to do with me?" It was clear she held little regard for their timeline's existence.

The young man pulled himself up and spoke from a life of experience. "If our timeline ceases then yours will be doomed to crumble because of paradox. Both timelines will be destroyed. Nothing of our universe will remain!"

On both sides, Piper looked at her mirror in horror. What they were talking about could literally mean the end

of everything. They gave each other a tiny nod. If an opportunity arose, they would act, no matter the cost.

"Do you have any idea who these people are?" Piper asked Sarda.

"I cannot even guess," he replied. "*I am, however, concerned that any being with the power to subdue the* Millennium *must be taken seriously. Tread very carefully."*

"Excuse me," Piper said politely. "Do you mind if I ask a question?"

Both interlopers reacted as if they had completely forgotten she was there. Each turned and stared at her as if she was an impudent child speaking out of place. The female spoke first. "What do *you* want, alternate Piper?" Her voice was laced with disdain. "Don't you think you've done enough?"

Behind her, the other Piper shifted, trying to find a position to strike.

"Who are you?" she asked sweetly. Her tone took on some steel. "And what have you done with *my ship?"*

Now she was a little closer to the Guardian, Piper could see the woman was wearing an outfit like the male on her side. The only difference being that hers was burgundy coloured.

The male spoke with a modicum of respect. "My people watch over the continuum to keep our timeline from being interfered with," he said, as if that explained everything.

The female spoke caustically. "You mean flowing in the direction *you* think it should be. How arrogant!"

Once more discounted, the male turned back to his adversary. Before he could say a word Piper spoke again. This time her voice was deadly. "What did you do to my ship?"

The male sighed. It was a sound that came from the depths of a weary soul. Without turning he said: "Captain Piper, your ship is fine. I've simply placed it in a stasis field temporarily."

The comment brought a raised brow to Sarda. He understood such an act would require an enormous amount of energy that was harnessed by a technology that was far beyond them. He shared the observation with Piper.

"Whatever the two of you are planning, put it out of your minds," the man continued. "I am well aware that you're telepathically connected."

Neither of them could cover their shock, which was reflected in Piper's other, who had managed to edge closer to her quarry. Silayna looked at Piper with a gaze that spoke of surprise and envy.

In a lightning smooth move, the alternate time agent whipped out her phaser and pointed it at Silayna's nose without looking. "And whatever you've got going in your bionic brain, forget it. I know what you're capable of as well."

The comment hurt Silayna, but she managed to keep it from everyone except her alternate. The more time she

was around her, the more Piper was becoming tuned into her thinking. Wisely, she stopped moving.

The female spoke again to her adversary. "Just let it happen, Kelvin. There's nothing you can do. Your time is over."

"Not yet, it isn't," Kelvin said, determined. "I can still keep you from ever existing, Keily."

Keily gave him a grin that spoke of absolute mastery. "Nothing you do in the past can stop me without rubbing yourself out. Grandfather all over again."

It was an obviously empty threat, but it was clear that was the best that Kelvin could offer at the moment. Piper stepped back from the situation and marvelled at the ludicrousness of the situation. It seemed that both her and Silayna's ships had been put in stasis by these unknown beings who just dropped in from out of nowhere, who also claimed to be the "good guys" of time, whatever that meant. Piper knew from experience that absolute power could easily corrupt absolutely. Mastery of time travel could lead to disaster.

Which led her back to the state of the Guardian's world. Perhaps they had done the same thing, and, in their hubris, they had suffered the ultimate fate: Extinction. Was that what awaited the universe now things had been set in motion?

Keily had a final comment for him. "Besides, even if you did manage to rub us out, who would you trust to save the universe? Piper?"

Her sarcasm had its desired effect. Both women winced.

Kelvin was not finished. "I'm sure they would do a better job than *you,"* he snapped.

"Piper." The voice was ancient and yet it seemed only she heard it. "What you see before you is an example of why I exist." Piper suddenly realised she was hearing the Guardian's voice in her mind. Peculiarly, she noted Sarda did *not* hear it.

She glanced at her other and noticed she had a quizzical look on her face, as if she had just encountered something odd.

"I am speaking to your alternate as well. Once a race attains mastery of time travel, they do irrevocable damage to time. As it is, your people may have already unravelled space/time itself. If you want your universe to continue, you must act. In a moment, I will open the portal to the past. Pass through it five seconds later. You will have an opportunity to start putting things right. You must work together to make it happen. You will know what to do when the time comes."

Piper glanced at Silayna to see what she thought of the whole thing. It was clear she was undecided as Piper was. However, it was clear to her that something was definitely wrong. That was why they were here to investigate. Space/time was breaking down, they knew. The question was: could they trust the Guardian?

The time for decision came when the mirror finish disappeared, and images started appearing in the mist. Acting on instinct, she barked an order to Sarda to distract Kelvin.

His trust in Piper absolute, Sarda stepped to the side and did his best to tackle Kelvin, who was still stunned by the sudden change in the Guardian. Kelvin tried to bring his phaser to bear, but the much stronger Vulcan gripped his arm in an iron grip and refused to let go. A shot went high over their heads.

However, Piper wasn't paying attention. She was counting down the seconds and quickly began moving. On the count of five she leapt into the unknown.

Chapter Three

Piper found herself in the dark on a dusty, wooden floor wondering where she was. Never mind that someone else was there. Someone who didn't seem to be happy either. They disentangled themselves and sat up.

"Where in Proxima's thick jungles am I?"

The voice was hers, but she didn't remember saying it. She looked at her companion and took in a startled breath.

"This shouldn't be possible." This time, both spoke together in perfect harmony. Again, they spoke: "What are you doing here?"

Piper was sitting only two feet away from herself. At least, it was a person who used to look a lot like her. Not quite believing what she was seeing, she put out a hand, just as Piper Silayna was doing. Palm to palm, they confirmed they were both very real.

They both retracted their hands, in wonder and feeling very confused. "How is this possible?" they both said.

For the first time, both shared a laugh. The impossibility of the situation gave them a momentary release from the stresses they had already endured that day. It was a good feeling.

Once they settled, they looked into each other's eyes, waiting to see who would speak next. Silayna went first.

"Any idea where the Guardian sent us?" she asked.

Piper looked around their little, dark, non-descript room with its generic door and knob and tiny incandescent bulb. "Well, judging by the décor, I'd say it sent us back to the mid-twentieth century Earth."

Her opposite agreed with a nod. "Well, at least we've got electricity. Imagine if it had sent us back to the Middle Ages! Cold nights and bad food don't to a lot for me."

Piper smiled her agreement. "Never mind we'd have a lot of trouble passing you off. We'd probably be burned at the stake within a matter of hours."

Silayna rolled her eyes. "I have no intention of being a sadistic town's entertainment today!"

Piper made herself comfortable by sitting on the floor cross-legged. She encouraged her counterpart to do the same. She did so, but awkwardly.

"Did your injury hurt you elsewhere?" Piper ran an eye over Silayna's form and couldn't see anything out of place.

"No, I'm just not much for sitting this way. Give me a good chair any day." She rubbed her knees and pushed them down a little to stretch her legs. "I see you've had a lot of practice."

While Piper would have loved to banter on the subject, their personal exploration of each other would have to wait. "I'll tell you about it later," she said. "Right now, we need to figure out what we're going to do next."

Silayna approved. "It's nice to see you *can* get down to business," she said a little tartly. "What do you have in mind?"

Piper let the comment slide, but she knew it would be a subject for another time as well. "While our uniforms aren't necessarily a problem, I suggest you wait here for a minute while I scout around. There's no guarantee your prosthetic won't be a problem once we step out of this room."

Silayna gritted her teeth in annoyance, but she had to concede the point. Before Piper could continue, she said: "There is one thing we need to agree on as well."

"What's that?" Piper asked curiously.

"What we're going to call each other. We can't *both* go by Piper, can we? It's going to get confusing, fast."

"Hmmm. I see your point. I'm not sure we'd want to be known as "Piper One and Two" all the time. Never mind it would sound stupid. So, how are we going to introduce ourselves to others?" she said, deep in thought.

Silayna, all business, said: "We can pass ourselves off as identical twins, at least. How about Thelma and Louise?"

Piper remembered watching that movie in her youth. It occurred to her that her mirror had probably done the same thing. "Didn't they wind up dying by driving off a cliff? No thanks. How about Susanna and Suzette?"

"Where did you get those from?" Silayna asked, genuinely interested.

"Suzette was a friend of mine, another starship captain. Susanna is a Federation Ambassador who is attached to my ship. She's married to my Second Officer."

"You miss them," Silayna observed.

Piper sighed. "I do. Suzette was killed a year ago in a Klingon attack. Susanna is on a sabbatical with Krashtallash, her husband, on Cait."

Silayna shook her head sadly. "Cait was a beautiful world. We lost it some years ago when a rogue asteroid destroyed the star. It went nova. We still don't know how."

Piper felt both sadness and irony. It was her crew's actions which saved the planet. She gathered her opposite number never had that chance.

Silayna spoke up. "I've dot dibs on Suzette."

Piper chuckled. "Okay. From now on, you call me Susanna. Hopefully, nobody looking back from the future will pick up on the names. What's our last name?"

The newly dubbed Suzette said: "Ingram."

Piper/Susanna tilted her head to the side as she considered it. "Nah. A search might turn it up too easily. Best to go with something generic. We can more easily get lost in the crowd. How about Smith?"

"Suzette" grimaced. "Not very imaginative," she said unhappily. "But if you want to get lost in a forest it's best you look like a tree." She had a thought. "I'd suggest Lee. It was one of the most popular names of the day and less likely to draw suspicion from others."

"Susanna" blew out through pursed lips. She had a point. "I remember from the old video files that Smith was often used by people looking for an alias." She slapped her knees cheerfully. "That's it, then. Susanna and Suzette Lee. With a grin, she leaned forward and shook Piper Silayna's hand. "Hi, I'm Susanna Lee. I'm pleased to meet you."

Her "sister" smirked and shook her hand back. She realised it would be good for them to get used to their temporary monikers. "I'm Suzette Lee and the feeling is mutual."

Susanna let go and pushed herself off the floor then stepped over to the door. Suzette found herself wishing she was as agile as her "sister". She couldn't help but wonder whether she was trained in some kind of martial art. Susanna/Piper gave her a quick grin. "Wish me luck," she said with as much cheer as she could muster.

"Just don't make me have to come and rescue you." Piper wasn't certain whether she was trying to be funny or just rude. She put it aside and gently turned the doorknob. It moved smoothly and the door opened without a creak. Piper put her head outside and had a quick look around.

They were in a tiny utility shed on the fringes of a large compound that seemed to be surrounded by forest. The day was warm, and the sun was shining brightly.

Piper ducked back into the room and divested herself of her uniform jacket. "I'm not going to need this today that's for sure."

As Piper stepped back out into the sunlight once more her companion simply wished her: “Good luck”.

Piper simply gave her a quick grin then disappeared outside. Left alone, Piper Silayna found herself wishing for her companion’s quick return.

Piper tried to make herself seem as nonchalant as possible. Everybody she saw seemed intent on whatever it was they were doing at the time. While there was a sense of urgency nobody seemed particularly interested in making new friends, which suited her. Whatever these people were doing security did not seem to be an issue.

She noted that the people were dressed in clothes that had seen a lot of use, as if they didn’t have much of an opportunity to buy new ones. The style was reminiscent of the mid twenty-first century, while the architecture reminded her of a hundred years before. While it was all odd, there was something vaguely familiar about it.

Piper meandered among the buildings, finding most of them quite utilitarian. Except for the large one in the centre that doubled as a general store and a bar.

Stepping out of the sunshine, Piper found herself surrounded by shelves stocked with items that ranged from toilet paper to caviar. As she wandered around the room, she found a few items that she could use. However, she quickly realised she had nothing of value to trade for them.

“What is it honey?”

Piper started and found herself looking down at a sweet old lady who could have been no more than five feet tall. For a moment she was lost for words.

"I've seen that look many times," said the woman. She had grey hair, a face that had seen a lot of sunshine and a light cotton dress with a floral print. She looked at Piper myopically through thick glasses. She summed her visitor up in a second. "It tells me you need something, but you've got no money. Am I right?"

Piper nodded truthfully. "I need a few things for me and my sister. We're new in town and all our money was stolen on our way here."

The comment drew a look of surprise mixed with suspicion. "Nobody comes to Bozeman because they want to, Sweetie. You're either coming here or hopelessly lost."

Piper didn't quite manage to cover her surprise at the unexpected news. "What's the date?" she asked in shock.

"Why, it's April Fool's Day, dear!" the shop keeper said with a mischievous grin. She looked her up and down and smiled, her mind clearly ticking over. "Maybe we can come to an arrangement."

Just when the newly dubbed Suzette was beginning to give up hope the door opened and Susanna slipped inside. "What happened to you?" she asked, a little testily.

Piper just flashed her a grin. "I found that a good pair of boots are in high demand in this town. Speaking of which we're in Bozeman, Montana four days before First Contact."

Suzette's good eye went wide in amazement. "Why on Earth would the Guardian send us *here*?" she asked in wonder.

Susanna shrugged. "No idea, but it did say we'd know why when we saw it."

Suzette's mixed eyes focussed on Susanna's booty. She was carrying an armful of clothes, not to mention her outfit had changed. Instead of her uniform she now wore second-hand clothes from someone a size bigger.

"Here, put these on," Susanna said with a quick grin. "They're your size. I should know."

Suzette slipped off her uniform top and looked at the three shirts Susanna had been carrying. She held up one that had an arrow pointing upward and the words "My Face Is Up Here" printed below it. She frowned. "I don't want people focussing on my face, that's for sure," she said with a touch of sadness. She picked a black one with a star field motif and pulled it over her head. She looked down at her slacks and shoes. "At least I get to keep these," she said with a little cheer.

"Ah, no." Susanna/Piper grimaced. "I promised the shop keeper your outfit was well in exchange for this lot. Sorry."

Suzette took off her boots, grumbling under her breath. She dropped her slacks and pulled on an old pair of jeans. "At least I get to keep my bra," she said, annoyed. She shot Susanna a look. "Or did you give *that* away, too?"

Susanna cheekily cupped her breasts with her hands and gave them a light lift, demonstrating they were being supported. “Don’t worry. Mine don’t defy gravity any more than yours do.”

Suzette sighed, her gaze looking backward. “But not as much as they did when we were twenty.”

Time was taking a similar toll on both of them. “I miss when B1 and B2 were perkier, too.” Piper smirked and watched as her namesake put on the cheap tennis shoes she had bought her. They were the same as the ones she was sporting. She wiggled her toes. Inexpensive, but still comfortable.

Piper Silayna stood upright and tossed her hair backwards. Piper noted that she kept it shoulder length, unlike hers, which was half-way down her back and held in its usual ponytail with a silver ring with a bar through it. It was these simple details that made her wonder how deep their differences truly ran.

“How do I look?” she asked. She seemed genuinely interested in hearing her answer.

Piper laughed. “It’s funny to hear you say that. I think you look great. I never knew how good I looked in a good pair of jeans.” She stepped forward and gently guided her new friend under the bulb. “Now, I want to see how this stuff does on your face.” She opened a jar of foundation and dipped her finger in the flesh-toned substance. She reached upwards and almost touched Silayna’s right cheek when she flinched. “What’s the matter?”

A number of expressions warred for supremacy on her face until she settled on angry. She snatched the jar out of Piper's hand. "I don't like people touching my face."

Piper snatched it back. "Hey!" Piper held the jar behind her and passed it back and forward as Silayna reached past her, moving left and right, trying with both hands to retrieve it. "Stop it!"

When Silayna refused to do so, Piper stepped out of range. "What is the matter with you!?"

Her namesake recoiled. "What do you mean by that?"

Piper angrily stepped forward and well into her personal space. Nose to nose, she stared into her eyes and said in all seriousness: "If there's one person on this planet who cares more about you and what you think than me – a person to all intents and purposes *is* you – I'd gladly like to meet them. Until you do so, I want you to get over yourself!"

Silayna stared right back, but the tear forming in the corner of her eye gave her away. "You are *not* me. I stopped being you when that Orion shot me on Gamma Crucis Three and left me a freak!"

Piper recoiled slightly and cast her mind back. The place was familiar to her. "I remember being there about fifteen years ago. We came under fire from Orion Pirates. I remember their Captain had me dead to rights, but Sarda pulled me out of the way." Her look became wistful. "If he hadn't, the shot would have got me right in the face...."

"What missed you got me," Silayna growled. She became introspective. "It's a pity your friend Sarda wasn't there for me."

A sadness gripped Piper's heart as she realised where he must have been in her universe. "I bet he was on Vulcan when the Romulan ship from the future destroyed it." She sighed, a sound from the depths of her soul. "The death toll in your timeline seems to be climbing by the minute."

Silayna rolled her eyes. "No more than any other timeline, I'm sure."

Piper stepped forward once more, took some foundation and reached for her mirror's face once more. Not interested in debate, she said: "Now, hold still."

Not to be out-cooled, Silayna did as she was told. "Just don't make me look like a ghost," she grumbled.

Piper grimaced. "No chance of that." She began smoothing the foundation over Silayna's face with a small sponge, making sure to keep the colour even. She had compared it with her own skin and had gotten the shade right. Fortunately, the foundation adhered to the metal without smearing. It took her two minutes to make her look a whole lot less robotic.

"Keep that stuff away from my eye."

"I'm planning on it." She touched up the colour. "Just hold still." A minute later, Piper stepped back and admired her handiwork. "Good. We can nearly pass you off for me," she said with a touch of pride. She looked through the rest of their stuff and produced a pair of

reflective sunglasses with a flourish. "And now for the piece de resistance. Put these on."

Silayna slipped them on and looked Piper in the eye. "Well?" she asked testily.

Piper sighed. Her companion's attitude was starting to get on her nerves. "You pass for human, but if you don't lighten up, I'm sure some people will begin to wonder."

Silayna gave her a look that was not quite a grin and almost a grimace. "I'll try."

Piper gave her tight smile in reply. "Good. Until you do so, I suggest I do most of the talking." Even though she couldn't see it behind the glasses, Piper knew she was glaring at her. She grabbed her arm. "Come on." Reluctantly, Silayna relented, grabbed their clothes, then found herself grateful that she was wearing the sunglasses in the strong sunlight. She looked to her right and grinned to herself when she saw Piper was shading her eyes with her hand. "Where's the store you got this stuff from?" she asked.

Piper led them unerringly through the small village through well-worn dirt paths lined with grass and, within minutes, she introduced "Suzette" to the shop keeper, Mrs Hilldale. She reluctantly handed over her boots and uniform with something akin to a smile.

Susanna elbowed her. "We're really grateful for your generosity," she said, doing her best to be amiable. She put her hands in her pockets and she touched her Captain's insignia and suddenly realised she had one more thing she

could use to barter. Ever so slowly, she took it from her pocket and showed it to Mrs Hilldale. "What would you give me for this?"

The older woman took it from her hand and looked it over. She weighed it in her hand, feeling certain it was really gold. She held it up to the light and even tried biting it to be sure. All the same, she had to hedge her bets. "I'll give you a hundred dollars for it."

Suzette took Susanna's arm and gripped it. "Are you sure you want to sell Mum's pendant? It was our Great-grandmother's!"

Piper/Susanna looked at her "sister" in mild surprise, realising the scam and going along with it. She felt no remorse as the insignia really was made of gold. "Where else are we going to get some money?" she gently pleaded.

"Susanna! We can't!"

Mrs Hilldale sympathised. "Don't fight, girls." She made a counteroffer. "I'll give you three hundred dollars – and I'll hold it for you for a week. If you can give me the money back, I'll return it to you. Okay?"

Both Pipers smiled sweetly at her. "Thank you," they said in unison.

The proprietor looked at the two of them in wonder and paid them in cash. She had one more kindness to offer. "If you're looking for work, Zefram is looking for people to help him finish his rocket."

The "girls" looked at one another in awe. The idea of working for the great Zefram Cochrane was a dream come

true. Piper looked at their benefactor with a sweet smile. "Thank you for the suggestion. We'll think about it."

Mrs Hilldale wondered to herself just how badly they wanted their pendant back and shrugged. The younger generations always made her wonder.

Once outside, both Pipers made their way around the building and soon found the launch complex. They moved over to the huge, lightly rusted launch doors and sat on the aging concrete surround. Making sure they were unlikely to be overheard, they debated the notion of working for Cochrane.

"I'm not sure it's a good idea," Silayna said, sounding more than a little dubious.

Piper mulled it over for a moment. All kinds of ideas were swirling in her head, fighting for dominance. One thing was clear, however. The possibility of her working on the *Phoenix* project was a dream come true. Her more positive nature pointed out: "Perhaps the Guardian sent us here to help him with his ship somehow."

Silayna was anything but convinced. "What on Earth would he need our help for? Didn't the *Phoenix* fly just perfectly without us?"

Piper sighed. "It did, obviously. So, what does the Guardian want us to do?" The situation seemed unfathomable to her, and one look at her double told her she felt the same way.

"No idea." The usually stoic woman slowly looked around her at the mixture of antique Air Force installation

and pine forest, while she took in the fresh smells. It had been a long time since she had been outdoors. "This is all still a little surreal to me."

Piper felt the rough concrete under her palms as she gently stroked them. "I know what you mean. It's like one of Dad's surprise picnics when I was a kid. He'd take us off to goodness knew where at no notice."

Her alternate nodded, a faint smile on her lips. "They were always fun, though. We'd call them the…"

"Jack-in-the-box trips," they said together.

Piper Silayna actually smiled at Piper this time. For a moment, they had found something that truly connected them. A shared, cherished memory. They both wondered if they had done the same things.

The sun was beginning to settle behind the trees, and the temperature was starting to drop. Not wearing a jacket, Suzette was the first to notice and she rubbed her forearms to warm herself. "We're going to need somewhere to stay for the night. Did you see a hotel in your wanderings earlier?"

Piper cast her mind back. "I don't recall seeing one, but then I wasn't looking for a hotel at the time." She pursed her lips in frustration. "This place is big enough for us to get lost in. It might be a good idea to simply ask for directions at the bar over there." She jerked her thumb over her shoulder.

Silayna gave her a rueful smile. "Considering the crap you and I have had to put up with today, a visit to the

bar would probably do us both some good." She stood and gave Piper her hand. "Come on, let's let our hair down for a while."

Taking the offered hand, Piper allowed herself to be hauled to her feet. While she didn't drink alcohol in general, she wasn't averse to a bit of wine occasionally with a meal. Also, she had to admit she was right. The trials of the day so far had been wearing. "Sounds like a plan," she said with a smile.

The bar had an open doorway in the centre and glass walls going off in both directions from it. Inside, there were a number of tables in reasonably good condition, with the bar running along the wall opposite the door. It wasn't a very big place, but there was still a large number of people crowded into it.

As they entered, Silayna's attention was drawn by the ancient Wurlitzer Jukebox to the left of the door. It was currently pumping out a song she was unfamiliar with.

Piper noticed her confusion and informed her: "It's ABBA singing Waterloo, if I'm not mistaken."

"ABBA? What kind of name is that?"

A forty-odd male near the door said conspiratorially: "Don't let Lily hear you say that. She's a diehard fan."

"I heard that!" A short, dark-skinned lady Piper estimated as being around forty appeared out of the crowd and gave them a welcoming smile. "Never trash ABBA, Europe or Billy Ray Cyrus when I'm around."

Silayna returned the gesture as best she could. She had no idea who Lily was talking about, but she decided to be gracious. "We'll make a point of that."

Piper reached out and offered Lily her hand, who shook it warmly, then did the same with Silayna.

"I'm Lily Sloane. What brings you to Bozeman?" The woman's eyes were friendly, but both Pipers realised the woman was shrewd and was quietly sizing them both up.

Piper took the lead. "I'm Susanna Lee, and this is my twin sister, Suzette. We're passing through and were wondering if anyone here could point us in the direction of a hotel."

The question brought a chuckle from those standing by. Lily covered her smile with a hand while her eyes betrayed her mirth. "There's a hotel in town, all right," she said with a chuckle.

Suzette bared her teeth, expecting the worst. "And..."

Lily smiled openly and let her guests know what she thought of the home away from home. "It's fine as long as you don't mind sharing your bed with cockroaches."

Having grown up on a lush planet should have hardened the women against bugs. However, for all their toughness, bugs were not their favourite. "We'll pass," they said in unison with tight smiles.

One of the women standing nearby interjected. "Lily, aren't you looking for some boarders?"

Caught out, Lily scowled at her but still admitted: "Thank you for reminding me, Mel. Yes," she said with a

touch of sarcasm. "I am." She turned back to the Lee sisters, finding she had to look up at them somewhat. They were taller than she, and quite good looking. She mused that the women varied their hairstyles to help others distinguish them more easily. However, it was clearly unnecessary as Suzette was sporting some obvious scars. Perhaps even eye damage considering she was hiding her eyes behind reflective glasses.

The women were also different in temperament, Lily reasoned. Susanna was the more friendly of the two, that was clear. Suzette seemed to have less time for others. As well, she got the distinct impression that they both hid considerable intelligences.

One thing she didn't get from either of them was any sense of malice. They appeared genuine in their desire to simply find somewhere to crash.

"Can you pay your way?" she asked abruptly.

Susanna spoke for them. "We have some money and we're willing to find some work to help pay our way."

Lily got the vibe from Suzette she wasn't quite so willing. Whatever her problem was, it was none of her business. However, Mel was right. She could use some help paying the bills. "All right. Follow me."

She led the way back outside and into the fading light. A chill was coming over the shanty town, even though it was late in the Spring. Lily noted the trees had begun swaying in the building breeze. "There's going to be a storm

tonight," she said with confidence. "We'd best get inside before it hits."

Suzette looked up at the sky and saw the storm clouds building in the distance. It reminded her of home, and she felt a pang of loss. It had been many years since she had stood on its soft soil, soaking up the rich atmosphere while listening to the sound of the chirping birds. She glanced at Susanna and noted she seemed to be reminiscing, but content. For a moment in time, she envied her.

Both Pipers picked up the pace as Lily broke into a light jog. Fortunately, they didn't have far to go, and they found themselves outside a modest sized home. It was clearly a left-over from the officer's quarters for the old missile installation that the *Phoenix* was housed in. Lily unlocked the door and ushered them inside.

While the exterior was dated late twentieth century décor, Lily had furnished the home with furniture from her own century. Even though it was clear none of it was even remotely new, Lily had taken care to maintain her home and her lifestyle. There was even an old Flat Screen Television set on one wall, connected to a still operating Blu ray player.

Her tastes were southern, with more than a little New Orleans. The lounge was brightly coloured and there was even a banjo hanging on one wall.

Before the "Lees" got any further with their perusal, Lily became all business. "I'm happy to have you two here, however, I have a few rules I need to make clear. Board is fifty dollars a day – each. That includes your food, water

and use of the kitchen, shower, etcetera. Thanks to the ECON, I've only got cold running water, but it's better than nothin'. Okay?"

The Pipers gave each other a look. Inflation had done its dirty job and left them with a lot less money than they realised. They were going to *have* to find some work. They turned back to Lily in a fashion that she found a little unsettling. Their mannerisms were sometimes uncannily identical.

"We accept," Suzette said.

Susanna fished in her pocket and took out two hundred dollars to pay for their first two nights and handed it over. Lily took it and stowed it in her breast pocket.

Happier now that she had been paid and the Lees weren't simply leading her on, Lily showed them around her small home. Standing off to one side on a small sideboard sat a katana sword, sitting in a purpose-built cradle, proudly on display. Susanna looked at it enviously and bent down to examine it. The ivory handle seemed genuine, but she wasn't certain about the blade as it was hidden within an ornate emerald-coloured sheath.

"May I?" she asked Lily politely.

A flicker of distrust passed over Lily's face, replaced by realisation. She gave her a simple nod. "Go ahead."

Suzette watched as Susanna picked up the sword by the hilt, feeling the weight of it. She slipped it out of its sheath. She gave it a quick spin in the air before bringing it up close to her face. "The weight's a little off and it could

use sharpening," she said amiably. "But it could be a formidable weapon. Would you mind if I could use it to practice in the mornings? In exchange, I'll see what I can do about giving it a proper edge."

The weapon was clearly a favourite of Lily's, but she relented after a moment's consideration. Susanna appeared to know what she was doing, and it would be good to have it taken proper care of for a change. For all its good looks, she wouldn't know what to do with it other than swing and hope she didn't miss. "I'll introduce you to someone who might be able to give you what you need."

Their host continued on with the brief tour. One thing the women quickly realised was there were only two bedrooms. When they brought it up, Lily simply shrugged.

"You're not going to find anything better in Bozeman – not to mention the rest of what remains of the United States." She took a second look at the Lees, once again suspicious. "You should know that."

Both women did their best to allay her fears, even if it was a little over enthusiastically. "We're not complaining!" Suzette said quickly.

"The room's lovely!"

"Delightful!"

"I'm sure the bed's great!"

At that, both women checked the bed. It was Queen-sized. They were going to have to share. They looked at one other and realised they were going to have to get to know each other.

Lily was sharp. She looked at the two of them and asked: "What is it? You look like you've never shared a room together before! I thought identical twins shared everything!"

Suzette wondered to herself if they had even shared the same men.

Susanna said: "We have! We've even had the same crush on boys when we were little."

In her mind, Suzette ticked that box.

Lily's eyes went wide in amazement. "I'm glad I wasn't around you two when you were checkin' out the same man! The fur must have been flyin'!"

At that, both women simply gave her an amiable grin. There was only so far they were going to go with their fabrications.

Seeing the two of them giving her the same smile was almost creepy. She decided to take this as her leave. She said: "I've got to check in with Zee before I call it a day. Feel free to whip something up from the refrigerator while I'm gone." Lily gave them both a quick nod then turned and left.

"Zee?" Piper asked, perplexed.

"Zefram Cochrane, I think," Silayna said helpfully. "History often wondered whether the two of them were an item. Neither of them ever said anything."

It was clear that Silayna knew more about their personal life than she did. "What else can you tell me?"

"Not much. What I've learned from the archives – and I've read a lot of them from this time – was this was a pretty traumatic time for both of them. For some reason, what should have been their greatest achievement was also remembered as a time of great loss." She moved over to the comfy looking red couch and sat down. Piper took the other end. "I've seen video from interviews they both did and each time they were asked about the first flight of the *Phoenix* they got this weird look in their eyes, as if they knew something they weren't talking about, but that made them sad for some reason."

Piper shrugged. "I suppose we're going to find out shortly. We're going to have a ringside seat for history. I know Sarda would have loved to be here."

Silayna thought back to the red-headed Vulcan she had briefly met on the *Millennium*. He seemed to be a good man, as Vulcans went. She had always found them to be an overly reserved bunch – that was on the rare occasion that she actually met one. They were practically an endangered species. "Why is that?" she asked.

As Piper thought of him she found herself missing him even more. She was so used to having him in her mind it was peculiar to not feel his presence. Oddly, having her double around was making it easier, even if she was a total pain at times. "Sarda once told me that he's the great grandson of Sotal, the commander of the *T'Plana-Hoff*. It's not something he broadcasts, even though I know he's quite proud of his heritage."

"If we're still here in a couple of days you can take a photo for him for Sarda." Silayna got up and made her way into the kitchen. It took her a moment to work out how to fill the kettle with water before she put it on the stove to boil. "Would you like some coffee?" she asked.

Piper followed her a moment later and found the cups. She took down a mug for Silayna and a glass for herself. "No thanks," she said. "I stopped drinking that stuff when I was at the Academy. I found it kept me up at night." She opened the fridge door and looked for some fruit juice. She came up empty. She looked at the faucet and wondered if it was a good idea.

Silayna took off her glasses and saw where she was looking. "I wouldn't. You don't know where that's coming from." She shook the coffee jar for effect. Its contents gave a slight rustle. "Perhaps now's a good time to resume old habits."

Not seeing a whole lot of choice, Piper simply nodded her assent.

"How do you know so much about Sarda?"

Piper's eyes went wide for a moment. She didn't know just how much she could trust this other version of herself, but she was finding it hard not to. Never mind the Guardian seemed to think they needed each other for whatever it had sent her here for. "Have you ever heard of the Vulcan Mind Meld?" she asked by way of introduction.

"Telepathic contact through touch, if I remember. I've never seen it done."

Piper chuckled. "In some ways, you seem to have lived a fairly sheltered life," she said with a bemused grin. She went on to explain the accident a year before that had left them permanently linked to each other. While it was unwelcome at first, they had turned it to their advantage on a number of occasions.

"Are you telling me that Sarda can hear what you're thinking?" Silayna involuntarily shivered. "I'm not sure I'd like that. I don't like the thought of someone snooping around in my head."

Piper shook her head. "No, it's not like that. He usually only hears what I tell him. And I'm not worried about him in the least. He has my complete trust and I know it's reciprocated." She looked Silayna in the eye. "There is no room for deception in our relationship. It's completely open and completely honest."

"Wow." Silayna went silent for a moment as she poured and finished making the coffees. She handed Piper hers and together they returned to the lounge. "I'm not sure I've ever been that honest with Brian."

The reference to her husband piqued Piper's interest. While their timelines had obviously diverged greatly, she couldn't help but wonder what became of her old flame in the other universe. "How is he?" she asked.

A great sadness came over Piper Silayna as she stared into her coffee. Softly, she ruminated: "I don't know. I haven't spoken to him in over six months." When she

noticed Piper was about to ask her for more, she simply said without any heat: “I’d rather not talk about it.”

Piper wasn’t about to jeopardise the rapport she was building with her, so she didn’t push. For a while, she just sat back and considered all that was going on in silence. There were so many things that simply didn’t add up.

After a little while, she noticed her cup was empty. She had forgotten to see if she still liked coffee, she was so lost in thought. She collected Silayna’s from her as she went past and she was surprised when she caught her hand and brought her up short.

“You know, I haven’t been this open with someone for years,” she said quietly.

Piper squeezed her fingers and gave her a little smile. “If you can’t trust yourself, where does that leave you?” She gave her a gentle tug. “Come on. Give me a hand to cook something for dinner.”

Reluctantly, Silayna followed her. “What do you mean, *cook*? Coffee’s about the best I can do.”

“Great,” said Piper drolly. “That was something I was hoping we *didn’t* have in common.”

Chapter Four

Time is relative. It's a notion that we've been told since youth. "Time flies when you're having fun" and such.

The passage of time varies not only from our point of view or perception, but how time is viewed – even manipulated. Time can be slowed down if you go fast enough – a notion that has been twisting minds for generations.

During the hours that the two Pipers had spent in April the 1st, 2063, time moved on elsewhere. Back in the twenty-third century, amongst ancient ruins surrounding the enigmatic Guardian of Forever, two men wrestled for control of a phaser. The stronger of them, Sarda, should have had the upper hand and dealt with the human from the future. However, Kelvin got off a lucky shot with his phaser and stunned his attacker. Sarda slumped to the floor, unconscious. Kelvin knew he would remain that way for hours.

He turned back to the Guardian and immediately realised it was far too late to do anything to stop Piper. She was long gone.

Irate and not caring who knew it he barked: "Guardian! Where did she go?"

The usually helpful Guardian was strangely silent.

Peculiar, Kelvin thought. Usually you couldn't shut the device up. He asked again. "Where did Piper go?"

Once again nothing. Kelvin wished he could threaten the Guardian and shoot it, but studies done by his people in the distant future had proven the device was practically impervious. If they destroyed the planet it would still be drifting in the debris, untouched.

Frustrated, Kelvin took out his communicator and dialled up his people in the thirty-first century. Largely protected by the damage to the universe by their advanced technologies, the runaway entropy wreaking havoc on space/time was at last beginning to take its toll on them. It had been some time since they had been able to use their starships in normal space, however time travel was still available to them.

"Daniels calling," he said.

"What do you need?" The masculine voice was friendly, but all business.

"I need you to run a trace on the Continuum. Captain Piper has gone retro and I need her found." He was already aware that history may have been irrevocably altered by her leaving. Oddly enough, there appeared to be no alteration. Perhaps he would be able to get to her before she left any lasting damage. However, he knew better. Whatever Piper *was* going to do since she had left she had already done from his point of view. It was all in the past.

He knew that, no matter when she was, or where for that matter, as soon as he found her he would enter that time and place and deal with her. The annoying thing was that he could not create a paradox by arriving at her location and

dealing with her *before* the photo or other evidence they found was documented. He needed it to find her, and removing her before it was created would destroy his method of finding her as well. It was just another rule of time he had to observe.

This time, his people would disappoint him. "We don't have the energy or enough functioning equipment to find her. The entropic distortions have become too pervasive. We're using all our remaining reserves just holding what remains of the universe together."

"Arrrgh!" Daniels growled. This day was getting better and better. "How the hell am I supposed to find her, then? Who knows what damage she's already done!"

"If it's any consolation, son, there doesn't seem to be any lasting alteration in the continuum. It seems as though she has simply become a natural part of history." The tinny voice did its best to cheer him.

The notion left Daniels with a quandary. There was a possibility that Piper *needed* to go back in time to correct some aberration to history. The fact things hadn't changed for him gave the argument great weight.

He also remembered that, once a person completed their task/journey into the past the Guardian would immediately transport them home. He made a decision. He said: "Daniels out," before snapping shut his communicator. He then waited for a few minutes to see if Piper returned.

She did not. Becoming even more frustrated, Daniels snapped: "Guardian, show me Earth's past." As the

images began flashing by in the misty centre of the stone geolith, Daniels began recording. He wasn't certain she was there, but it was as good a place as any to start.

As he was doing so, he wondered if Keily was doing the same thing he was. Experience told him yes.

Time is relative. It goes by quickly when you're enjoying yourself. It drags when you're not.

Right now, in Lily's kitchen, time was a snail. The Pipers had taken stock of their resources and found some eggs. "What could be easier than scrambled eggs?" they thought.

"I'm glad Lily doesn't have a smoke alarm!" Silayna growled as she scrubbed the frying pan.

Piper stood in the front door, using an old magazine to fan smoke into the evening air. Fortunately, it was beginning to clear. She could almost see Silayna. "We'd have the whole neighbourhood here by now, I'm sure!"

Silayna reached forward and slid the kitchen window open. The breeze helped blow the smoke out. "Why didn't Mum teach us how to cook?" she wondered to herself.

"Everyone was focussing on making sure we didn't fail the Academy entrance exams. We learned all about Denebian slime devils and Andorian wedding rites and Vulcan chess. It was a minor oversight. I guess Mum always thought there'd be a replicator around for us to use."

Silayna glanced over at Piper. "Promise me if either of us ever have children we'll make sure they can at least make an omelette."

For the sake of the joke, Piper smiled and nodded.

The truth be told, time was running out for both of them. Soon, nature would render that possibility moot and menopause would take its due.

Before they could continue, Lily appeared at the door seemingly unimpressed. "What the hell is going on here?" she said, clearly upset.

Piper was apologetic. "We're sorry. We tried to cook some eggs and, well, we didn't quite get the recipe right."

Lily looked at her incredulously. "How on Earth could you screw that up?" she said, partly angry, more amazed.

At Lily's appearance, Silayna had turned and replaced her sunglasses on her nose. She felt fortunate that she could correct for the light with her artificial eye. "It was my fault," she said. "I thought I remembered how Mum used to cook them and I messed it up."

Lily turned her amazement on "Suzette". "I'm amazed the pair of you have lasted this long if you can't cook. What have you done for food?"

Piper's mind raced. "During the war, we were fortunate enough to be in a well-stocked bunker," she said, trying her best to sound convincing. "Our Mother still did

all the cooking. We never did get a chance to learn how to do it."

Lily's brown eyes engaged Piper's emerald green – which Lily knew instinctively were artificial, even though she had no idea how it was done. There was something peculiar about these two, she thought. She had no idea what it was, but she was certain she was going to find out.

All things being equal, she still believed they meant her no harm, even though it was clear they were spoilt.

"Let me guess," Lily said, donning her Sherlock Holmes cap. "You were in New York when the war broke out. Park Avenue brats?"

Neither Piper was certain of their facts regarding her suggestion. It could go either way. Suzette erred on caution. "We lived in New York," she said amiably. "However, we were in Boston when the war broke out." Silayna mentioned this because she remembered the city had survived the nuclear holocaust. "We were taking some more courses in Engineering at Harvard."

Her comment caught Lily's attention. "The two of you are engineers?"

Piper just smiled and nodded. The courses she had taken in the Academy would get her by here she hoped. She wondered if Silayna had taken the same classes.

Now the smoke had completely cleared, Lily strode into the kitchen and waved Suzette away. "Don't worry about it, honey. I'll fix something up." Lily looked at the

two of them and felt it must have been Kismet. "I may have some work for you after all."

Later that evening, with the wood fireplace illuminating the room with its soft, flickering light whilst keeping them from the night chill, Lily treated her guests to some southern hospitality. She cooked minestrone with some locally baked bread and chased it down with some bourbon.

The tastes were new to the time travellers, but very welcome. Lily was an excellent cook. Coupled with the fact neither of them had eaten for hours, the flavour tantalised their taste buds. Both of them complimented the Chef.

"Thank you," Lily said. "It's nice to be able to entertain and be complemented on my cooking. Zee says I'm not a bad cook, but then he's usually half-drunk by the time we've finished the meal."

It was clear to the Lees that Lily was saddened by her friend's drinking. Her tone spoke of a deep fondness that hinted at something deeper.

"Are you in love with Cochrane?" Silayna asked bluntly.

Lily recoiled as if slapped. "What kind of question is that?"

Susanna tried to cover her sister's tactlessness. "She's just curious," she said gently. "It's clear you're very fond of him."

Lily was clearly uncomfortable talking about private matters. "We're close as two people can be when they're working on a project of this size."

"What project is that?" Suzette asked, feigning ignorance.

Lily considered telling them, but she held off. "I'll let Zee tell you tomorrow when I introduce you two to him."

"Okay." The Pipers were willing to wait. The missile held no surprises for them that they knew of.

With the meal concluded, the Lees washed up and put away the dishes. They watched as Lily almost aimlessly walked over to the monitor and turned on the screen. She selected a movie from her shelf and asked the women if they were interested in watching it.

The name meant nothing to them and so they simply nodded. When they finished cleaning, Suzette finished off in the kitchen while Susanna put some more wood on the fire.

"You know," Lily said absently. "It's nice having you here. This house has been empty for too long."

The Lees shared a look, both wondering what she meant by the comment. Suzette said: "We're happy to be here. It's the nicest place we've stayed in for a long time." The lie was transparent, but still well received.

The chores done, the women sat down next to each other on the couch facing the screen. They were still a little uncomfortable being inside their personal space, but they

realised they would have to get over it if they were to share the same bed that night.

As the movie started, Lily asked: “How come neither of you ever got married?”

Suzette stiffened a little, even though Susanna was comfortable with the question. The latter spoke for them. “We were married to our careers, I guess. I know I just never got around to finding the right man and settling down.”

Lily noticed she was speaking only for herself. She turned to Suzette. “How about you?”

Suzette focussed off into the distance, her mind elsewhere. “I loved a wonderful man once, but I let him get away.”

Lily surprised Suzette by giving her fingers a friendly squeeze. “Don’t let that happen, honey,” she said. “If he’s worth it, go after him. Don’t live your life pining for someone who doesn’t even know you’re there for him that way. Life is too short.”

While Suzette was comforted by the advice, Susanna found herself wondering at the window she had just seen into both women’s lives. It was clear to her that Lily was in love with Zefram Cochrane.

As the credits finished and the movie began, the women fell silent and let themselves be carried away by the narrative. Neither Piper could remember a time when they just sat and watch a movie. By the twenty-third century, they were no longer a popular form of entertainment.

Two hours, and a few tears, later, the women decided to call it a night. The Lees used the bathroom to brush their teeth – Susanna had made a point of buying some brushes – before retiring to their room. They wished Lily a good night, then closed the door.

The first thing Suzette did was remove her glasses. "Okay," she said. "Which side do you want?"

Susanna shrugged and pointed to the left side. It made little difference to her. She felt embarrassed to ask something else. "What do you usually wear to bed?" She flushed a little as she said it.

Suzette, who had taken a seat at the bureau and was wiping the foundation off her face, chuckled a little. "My birthday suit. I've been that way since I was little. Never could take the hot nights at home."

Susanna blushed. "Me, too. I usually keep a kaftan by the bed in case I have late night visitors."

Suzette tilted her head to the side. "I've got a standing order with my crew. Don't wake me for anything short of an invasion."

"There are times when I wished I could do that, but life on the *Millennium* is a little like having a large family. Sometimes my friends come to me with their problems at night. I like to keep an open-door policy. It means I sometimes lose a little sleep, but I find it helps my people deal with their issues a little better knowing that I care."

Suzette frowned. "I tend to not fraternize with the crew. I don't want the line between Captain and crew becoming blurred."

Deciding to take the plunge, Susanna divested herself of her shoes, shirt, jeans and bra. She realised that Suzette should be the last person she should be embarrassed to be undressed in front of. Besides, she wanted her to know she could not only trust her but be comfortable in her presence. She stepped over to Suzette and picked up the T-shirt with the arrow from their clothing pile and pulled it over her head. "Come on, sis, it's time for bed."

Suzette looked up at Susanna, her face once more reflecting the light on the right side. She was fast becoming attached to this other version of herself, and grateful of her acceptance. She nodded and changed herself into the remaining T-shirt. She reasoned the clothing wasn't so much their unfamiliarity with one another, it was simply cold, and the bed only had a few blankets on it.

As they slid between the sheets and fluffed up their pillows, Susanna said: "Don't isolate yourself from your people, Suzette. They can be the source of your greatest strength. I know that I wouldn't want to run my ship on my own. I've got a great team and I'm proud of them."

For a moment, Suzette simply lay in the bed and shivered a little. The night was colder than she realised. She considered how lonely she had been feeling of late, pinning it on her husband's absence, but she was beginning to see it went a lot further than that.

"Are you as cold as I am?" Susanna asked.

Suzette mumbled yes, then was pleasantly surprised when Susanna gently spooned her from behind. Together, they quickly warmed one another.

"I hope you don't snore," Susanna said quietly.

Suzette simply replied: "Brian never complained." She closed her eyes and sleep caught up with them quickly.

Piper Silayna woke with a start, the unfamiliar surroundings throwing her for a moment. Then the previous day came flooding back and she settled back into the pillow once more.

A glance at the window showed the sun had just come up. Good, it was still early. A look in the other direction told her she was alone. Surprised, she frowned, wondering what on Earth her counterpart could possibly be doing at this early hour.

Right then and there, she didn't overly care. Piper was a big girl and quite capable of taking care of herself. It was cold outside and still warm under the blankets.

All the same, she started getting itchy feet. Both Pipers were women of action and lying around here wasn't going to achieve much.

She decided on taking a morning run before breakfast. She, almost reluctantly, slid out from under the covers and dressed herself in her jeans and runners, but kept the T-shirt she had slept in. She realised they would need to do some washing soon. Throwing her clothes in the uniform

recycler wasn't an option here. She just hoped the washing facilities would make things easier than when she tried to cook a meal. They didn't have that many clothes to ruin.

Suzette applied her makeup, put on her sunglasses, then let herself out quietly and rejoiced in the crisp, morning air. A mist hung between some of the trees in the hollows, and the golden rays of sunlight played through the trees. The ground was moist with dew making the grass slippery. She realised she would have to tread carefully.

She decided to jog down to the bar and back as she remembered the way. She started out and got about twenty metres when she heard something that caught her attention.

Nearby she heard the sound of the odd grunt and many footfalls, as if someone was working out. She recognised the voice. She jogged past a couple of pines and found Susanna in the middle of a small grassy area moving with the grace and agility of a samurai warrior.

Suzette paused for a moment, not wanting to disturb her, but not wanting to miss the opportunity to watch what was obviously a master at work. She leaned against a tall pine and watched silently.

Susanna worked through her version of a kata, katana flying in her hands, the blade practically zinging through the air as she sliced through unseen opponents. Kick, chop, punch, parry. She blended the motions together into a personal practice that resembled a lethal ballet. As she worked though her morning calisthenics, she remained oblivious to the fact her "sister" was watching.

However, Suzette began to notice that she was not the only person observing the spectacle. A number of others had gathered around the edges of the clearing to watch Susanna's display. She took a certain level of pride in the looks of amazement on the small crowd. Even though she didn't know even the rudiments of her alternate's martial art, she knew she had it within herself to be just as good as she was. It reminded her that, even though she was getting older, she was capable of more than she knew.

At some point, Susanna became aware of Suzette's presence. She quickly brought her kata to an end, slid the katana through her belt then gave her sister a smile. "Good morning!"

Suzette smiled back. She couldn't help but be affected by her "sister's" good cheer. She noted to herself that she *was* beginning to think of Piper as another sister.

Their relationship reminded her of their sister, Priscilla, who was a year younger than she. She had never left Proxima and had become a schoolteacher, mother and loving wife. Even given their differences, when they got together it was just like old times, as if she had never left. She found she was beginning to form that kind of a rapport with Susanna.

She also found it a lot less confusing to think of her as Susanna – rather than "alternate Piper". The difference in their adopted names was helping her to recognise they were unique individuals rather than just different possibilities.

"Good morning!" she called back. "You make that look so easy." She marvelled that, even though Susanna had been working out for some time, she wasn't soaked in sweat. She was fitter than she thought.

An odd mixture of confident and humble, Susanna simply gave her a slight tilt of the head to the side. "It took a lot of practice to get this far. I'm at Grand Master level, but there are still higher levels that what I've attained." She waved her over. "Come, give it a try."

Suzette stepped forward and pointed at the katana. "You're not going to get me waving that thing around, are you?"

Susanna shook her head, no. "I didn't get to touch a weapon for the first year." She walked over to a nearby tree and leaned the sword against the trunk, then returned and stood before Suzette. "First, let's do some warm-ups."

Suzette's eyebrows shot up. "I've already warmed up a bit."

Susanna stepped right up to her and looked her in the eye – as well as she could given all she could see was a reflection of herself in her glasses. "If you want to learn," she said in all seriousness, "you have to trust me and not question when I ask you to do something. Okay?"

Suzette bit her lip and reminded herself that Susanna deserved to be respected for this field of expertise. She humbled herself and gave her a simple nod. "Sorry."

Susanna said: “All right then.” She stepped back. “Now, I’m going do some warm-up exercises and I want you to do your best to copy me. Let’s begin.”

For the next hour Susanna led her sister through a tortuous regime that tested her physical limits. She was a little surprised that Suzette stubbornly kept going, even though it was clear her body was screaming at her to stop. The reason was clear: anything she could do she should be able to do as well.

She led her through a simple kata, and made her do it, over and over. After the fifth time through she noticed Suzette was starting to remember to do it from memory.

When Susanna realised she might be ruining her sister for the rest of the day, she stopped and led them through some stretching exercises to cool down. As Suzette leaned forward, propping herself up with her hands on her knees, breathing heavily, Susanna retrieved the katana. She slipped it once more through her belt, then took Suzette by the hand and slowly led her back towards Lily’s home. Their onlookers had mostly moved on by this point, however some remained – at a respectful distance.

One wide-eyed young lad, clearly the son of poor parents, approached, looked up at her and eagerly asked: “Could you teach me that?”

The women shared a look. It was enough they were crossing their timelines; it was another thing to introduce an Andorian martial art to a world that hadn’t even heard of Andor yet.

"Sorry," Susanna said. "I can't." At the boy's crestfallen expression, she added: "But I don't mind you watching." She patted him on the head as they walked by and headed back to their temporary home. "Was Lily up when you left?" she asked.

Still a little pooped, Suzette wheezed out: "No."

Susanna nodded and gave Suzette her arm to help her. She seemed about to beg off for a moment, then accepted the offer. She noted the faces of some of the people she recognised were watching during her practice. There was a level of respect for her and the blade that hung at her side. It gave her a sense of relief to know that word would get around that the two of them were quite capable of taking care of themselves.

She reminded herself to spend some time sharpening the blade. Right now, it wasn't much better than an oversized butter knife.

When they arrived, they found Lily was up, dressed and making porridge for breakfast. She was warming it over her small, wood-fired stove that they had managed to ruin some perfectly good eggs on the day before.

"I hear you've been entertaining the neighbours this morning," she remarked whimsically.

Susanna placed the katana back on its ornamental stand. "Just exercising," she said.

Lily gave her the lightest of chuckles. "If that's "just exercising", then I don't know what I've been doing all these years." She pointed towards the shower. "It's cold, but you

pair need one. At least the upside is that you won't spend too long in it. The fresh water I use comes from the tank out back and the rain from my roof."

The Lees looked upward and realised the roof wasn't *that* big. Her supply would be fairly limited. "Gotcha," Susanna said. She turned to Suzette. "Do you want to go first?"

Suzette nodded. "Thanks, yes." With a glance at Lily, she disappeared into the bathroom. A minute later there came a squeal through the door as she stepped under the water. "I miss hot showers!" she yelled through the door.

Lily and Susanna glanced at one another. They had to agree she was right. There was no substitute for a nice, hot shower.

An hour later, the three women, reasonably well presented, arrived at the entrance to the underground bunker where the *Phoenix* was housed. Without any preamble, Lily reached down and pulled up the hatch then ushered the Lees inside. They walked down two floors of winding stairs until they reached the metal door to an old nuclear missile silo operations room. A tall, burly male stood guard at the door and opened it for Lily as soon as he saw her. He cast a suspicious look at the Lees, but a nod from Lily was all he needed.

Once inside, Lily raised her voice and said: "Good morning, people."

A chorus of "good mornings" replied and a number of new faces popped up from their stations monitoring the *Phoenix's* systems.

"I'd like to introduce the Lee twins," she said. "This is Susanna and Suzette. They're engineers who will be helping us out on the project."

"Not until I say so, Lily," came a new voice from the far side of the room. A tall, slim, aging man who wore worn denim clothes and, peculiarly, a reversed baseball cap stepped forward.

The man needed no introduction to the Lee sisters. They had seen a number of his pictures in the archives from the time. Zefram Cochrane was considered one of the chief architects of their modern society due to his breakthroughs in warp field physics.

"How do we know they know one end of a screwdriver from the other?" he asked cynically. He stepped over and sized up both women. Tall as the Pipers were, they had to look up six inches to see his eyes.

Suzette was the less star struck of the two and she scowled at the man. "You forgot to shave this morning, Zee," she said, clearly annoyed. "You really need to remember you're setting an example for your workers."

Cochrane looked at her and growled. "Is your future so bright you can't take your sunglasses off inside?" he asked. Before she could react, he scooped them off her face.

Suzette was surprised, but she just kept glaring at Cochrane.

Instead of reacting, he scrutinised her artificial eye and said: “That explains it. Nice work.” He turned to Susanna. “Is it yours?”

It was an opportunity not to be missed. She knew this could be the key to getting inside. “Yes. When my sister was injured, I designed an eye that would give her back her depth perception.”

Cochrane called her on her bluff. “What resolution?”

“Twenty million megapixels.”

“What do you use for a power source?”

“Bio-electricity, so it never runs flat.”

Cochrane was impressed. He continued his interrogation, asking questions ranging from the optical interface to lubrication. Susanna let her imagination supply most of the answers, drawing on her experience studying physics during her time at the Academy and recalling some of Scanner’s more outlandish ideas.

When he finished, he looked her in the eye and asked her straight. “Do you know anything about quantum mechanics?”

It was a subject Piper had nearly failed whilst she was studying, but she had managed to scrape through. All the same, she found she could answer honestly: “Yes.”

Realising Susanna had been doing all the talking, he turned his attention back to Suzette. “What about you? Do you know anything about relativity?”

Suzette gave him a cheesy grin. "If you managed to get to .99c I might wind up older than you."

Susanna blushed and elbowed her sister in the ribs. Suzette pretended to ignore her and stared Cochrane down.

Instead of getting angry, Cochrane laughed. It started as a chuckle and quickly developed into a belly laugh. After a moment, he collected himself and said: "You'll do." He turned and headed towards a blast door. "Follow me! I'll show you our flight of fancy."

The Lees obeyed and they soon found themselves walking through the metal and concrete corridors of an old Air Force installation. Pipes and wires lined the walls, and everything was painted in the same aging, dull grey.

They soon came to another blast door and Cochrane strained to push it open it was so heavy. Even though it swung freely, it was clearly difficult to open. Once through, Cochrane showed them his labour of love with a flourish.

"The *Phoenix*," he said proudly. "She's a converted intercontinental ballistic missile that is going to carry a converted second stage into space where, if all goes well, it will carry me and Lily where no man has gone before. Hopefully to Mars and back within an hour."

He expected them to be in awe of the notion. What he perceived in them was something like it – but not quite. It was as if they expected to see it there but were still amazed to be here. It was weird.

Susanna and Suzette split off and circled the tubular hull, examining its many riveted steel plates and access

ports. They met on the far side, and both turned to look up towards the cockpit. He noticed them gesturing at something in a negative fashion. Curious, he sauntered over to eavesdrop.

When they went silent as he neared he asked straight out: "What is it?"

The women shot each other a look and Cochrane found himself wondering how much these two could communicate without actually saying anything.

Susanna spoke for the two of them. "Where's the navigational deflector?" she asked.

The question stymied Cochrane. "The *what*?" he asked incredulously.

Instead of answering directly, Suzette posed a simple scenario. "You want to fly this thing to the speed of light and beyond, right? At those relative speeds, what would happen if you hit a rock the size of a grain of sand?"

The usually cocky Zefram Cochrane was dumbfounded. The thought hadn't occurred to him. Their logic was sound, however. "It would punch a hole clean through the ship."

"And anything else in the way," Susanna added.

The image rattled the usually unflappable scientist. "I can't believe I didn't think of it."

Susanna and Suzette held hands and smiled at him. "That's what we're here for. We can have one installed within a day."

In the project office, located off the control room, the Lees, Cochrane, Lily and three others from their staff poured over the schematics of the *Phoenix*. The Lees had already designed a simple deflector array for the ship – a feat that amazed Cochrane. It was as if they already knew how to make one.

Now all they had to do was fashion it and install the device.

Walter Simmons, a young man who had only just graduated from university when the bombs started dropping, nodded his handsome, dark-haired head and said through full lips: "I think we can find what we need to build the "deflector" in the base stores. It shouldn't take long to put together once we've got the parts." He then drew long and hard on his extremely expensive cigarette and blew the smoke towards the ceiling. Nobody minded. It had become apparent to the Lees very quickly why that was so. The man was brilliant.

Lily added her two cents. "I'm just not sure how we're going to power this thing. It'll take a whole lot of energy to push aside rocks from the path of the ship while it's flying at them like a rocket."

Nobody pointed out to her that the *Phoenix was* essentially a rocket.

Susanna traced her fingers down an energy conduit that fed the warp core. It amazed her that the small device – tiny by modern standards – used a small chunk of dilithium

Cochrane had scrounged from a meteorite to channel the energies required to power the ship.

"If we draw off some of the energy here," she tapped her finger on the page, "you'll have all the power you need and still have more than enough to power the warp nacelles."

Suzette chipped in: "It's not like you're planning on going to Alpha Centauri in this thing. A short hop should be all you need to prove your theories."

Lily looked at the sisters gratefully. "I've got to say I'm really happy the two of you have gotten on board with this thing. There are some..." she glanced across the table at Simmons through narrowed eyes, "who are only doing this for the money."

Susanna eyed the young man once more. For all his reported genius, it was clear he did not believe the *Phoenix* would fly. Before she could speak her sister asked for her.

"You don't agree with Professor Cochrane's theories?" she challenged. "This is the only feasible way mankind will ever get off this planet and explore the galaxy. Relativity makes exploring the nearest stars problematic at sublight speeds."

Simmons tapped out his cigarette and looked Suzette in the eye. He couldn't quite hold her gaze now he knew one of them was artificial. "Get past the light barrier by changing the nature of space itself? I'll believe it when I see it." His voice fairly dripped cynicism.

The Lees shared another of their famous knowing looks and smile. Standing across the table from them,

Cochrane could not help but feel the two of them knew things that the others did not.

Suzette decided to have a little fun with the mouthy kid. "What will you give me if Zee pulls it off?" she challenged.

The younger man could not help but be pulled in by the dare. "Hmm." Inspiration struck. He put up one finger as he said: "I know! I'll give up smoking."

As Susanna snorted, Suzette countered: "Fine." She spoke like she was on a certain thing. "I'll give you a week's pay."

Lily could not help but notice the absolute confidence the women carried. They *knew* they were going to win the bet.

Susanna said: "At least you'll live longer when you lose," she said derisively. She never had liked the smell of burning tobacco.

Simmons stamped out his cigarette butt and lit another. "No chance," he said arrogantly. "I'm going to be enjoying these when the two of you are dead and buried."

"Side bets aside," Cochrane interjected. "I think the Lee's idea for powering the deflector system is our best bet. Susanna, Suzette," he paused for a moment, a look of annoyance on his face. "In future, I'm going to call you the Suzies collectively." As both women rolled their eyes, he continued. "I want you to work with Simmons and the rest of his crew and have the deflector installed by tomorrow night. I don't want to delay the launch past April 5th. Okay?"

The Lees were well aware of the importance of keeping the launch date. First Contact could not be missed. They both nodded. “We won’t let you down,” they said together.

Chapter Five

Now safely aboard the Starship Taurus, Captain Kelvin Daniels scowled at his computer monitor. The ship was tiny, by twenty-third century standards, being only about twenty meters long, roughly triangular in shape, with a large, forward-facing viewport that allowed its single occupant to see what was really going on outside. For all its diminutive size, it hid savage teeth – the technologies it wielded were formidable. At the moment, it held the *Millennium* in a stasis field while doing the same with Sarda who was lying behind him in a locker reminiscent of a mortuary with its locked door and pull-out tray.

He felt no remorse for his rough treatment of the Vulcan. While he had great respect for him and his accomplishments for the Federation, Kelvin's need to save the universe from the effects of the paradoxes that Sarda had unwittingly become a part of left no doubt which was the more important in his mind.

"Come on!" he muttered over and over. The tension was making bile rise in the back of his throat. Yet all he could do was wait. It was going to take time for even his computer to look for relevant references to Piper in history. He knew she had gone back in time, but to where he had no idea. The best he could do was scan the images the Guardian had given him and reference his own data banks. Hopefully, something in there would give him a clue to her current whereabouts.

The computer would sometimes come up with something it thought was relevant, but so far everything it had offered had proven useless.

All Daniels could do was wait and eat his tuna sandwich.

Exhausted for their day's work, the Pipers lay back in their bed and stared at the ceiling, trying to get to sleep. Neither could do so, they were so worked up.

Piper rolled over, turned on her bed-side lamp with a click then turned to face Silayna. There was no hiding the fact she was still awake. Her eye was glowing dimly in the dark. It turned to focus on her.

"What's up?" Silayna asked, curious. "You having trouble sleeping, too?"

Piper shrugged. "I'm about as tired as I've ever been given the work we've done on the deflector today, but I just can't get over the fact that we're taking an active part in one of the great turning points in history. The first flight of the *Phoenix*, and we're part of the team making it fly!" Even through her fatigue, Piper's enthusiasm shone.

While she shared her sister's feelings, Silayna was not quite as effervescent in her behaviour. "It *is* very cool," she admitted. All the same, her mind drifted to the one she was missing the most. "I just wish Brian was here to share it with."

"Ah." Piper took a breath while she tried to put herself in her sister's shoes. She tried to remember what it

was like for her when she lost her Brian after the Rittenhouse scandal, but she had to admit the pain of that loss had been dulled not only by time, but by the fact that so much had happened to her shortly after it that their breaking up got swamped in a tide of memories.

After a moment, she had to admit to herself she really didn't understand how she felt. All she could offer was: "I'm sorry."

During the last couple of days, Silayna had been enjoying having Piper around because they truly resonated in so many areas. They often knew exactly what the other was thinking. In this area, she knew she was alone. Piper had never known what it was like to be part of a *marriage* – the bonding of two people who chose to spend the rest of their lives together. They were no longer individuals; they became part of each other.

It was a feeling of completeness she missed deeply. Brian had become the other half of her, and she often felt less of a person in his absence.

"It's okay," she said. "I know you don't really understand, but you're trying, and I respect that."

Piper gave her a brief smile of encouragement. "If it helps at all, the bond I share with Sarda may not have been something I asked for, but I've gotten used to. He's my right hand on the ship, and, with our psychic link, we can move together as a team without even talking about it." Her tone softened. "And, right now, I'm missing the fact that, every now and then, he silently gives me a word of encouragement

or a piece of advice. I've come to rely on it more than I realised," she admitted. "It's great to be able to have a totally honest relationship with someone – even though he's not my partner."

Silayna looked at her in mild wonder. She couldn't imagine what it was like to share her thoughts with another. To have that going on all the time made her uncomfortable, but she saw in her alternate the capacity to derive strength from the association. She found herself a little wistful. "I wish I could have that with Brian. At least I could share what I really feel with him. There are times when words just don't cut it."

Piper sighed. "I know what you mean." A thought came to her, but she dismissed it.

Silayna was more preceptive than she realised. "What were you thinking?"

Once more, Piper sighed. "I was thinking it might be possible to give you an idea of what it's like. Sarda's taught me a few techniques. I might be able to let you hear what I'm thinking – if you're interested."

Fear warred with curiosity. However, neither Piper was the kind to let fear rob them of a new experience. Silayna nodded. "Give it a try."

Piper sat and crossed her legs, indicating to her sister to do the same. She took a moment to relax and clear her thoughts then reached out with both hands and placed her fingers on Silayna's chin, cheeks and temples. "Just relax,"

she said. "Don't tense up. Just let yourself be calm and open."

Relaxed was not a natural state for Silayna. All the same, she tried. "How will I know if it's working?" she asked.

Piper laughed internally. "It already is," she said – without voicing it. "Do you remember actually speaking?"

Silayna's eyes went wide in surprise. She didn't. "That's amazing." This time she had used her lips. To Piper, it was like hearing an echo as she heard the sound *and* the thought.

The exercise done; Piper decided to break contact. However, Silayna grabbed her hands and held them to her face. "Please, don't," she said, plaintively.

Piper didn't need to see her face to know she genuinely wanted to maintain contact. The feelings she was experiencing weren't necessarily hers. However, she did enjoy the elation of making contact with a mind so similar to her own. "It's intoxicating, isn't it?"

Instead of answering in words, Silayna showed her how she felt. She took Piper through a gamut of images that defined the loneliness she had been feeling. The rejection from her family. The distance she felt from her peers and her crew. The growing disassociation from her husband. Piper saw the look in Brian's eyes as the light of love in them slowly went out.

The loneliness and isolation took its toll as Piper Silayna withdrew more and more. She realised that she was

as much to blame as Brian for their separation. That she had been projecting her feelings on him and pushed him away. Her feelings became those of despair as she began to wonder if their relationship could be restored at all. Would her marriage simply become another statistic?

Silayna took her back to happier times when the face in the mirror was just like Piper's. Piper recalled romantic meals in San Francisco at a lovely Italian restaurant that overlooked the Golden Gate Bridge at sunset. She recalled the moment that Brian proposed. She felt the elation of being so loved and desired and feeling it returned to her lover.

She felt the angst and long-buried guilt over discovering she was pregnant a week before graduation. It was unintended. They had been using precautions.

However, Piper didn't want it to interfere with her career. She terminated the pregnancy and never told Brian.

They realised that it was then that the rot set in. It was the secret that slowly destroyed the foundation of their relationship. She saw it in his eyes. Brian knew she was keeping something from him but, as she would never discuss it, he began to lose trust in her. He also took it as a slap in the face – that there was something in the universe his *wife* (she heard the words, in Brian's broken-hearted voice) couldn't share with him.

Over the years, they had tried to keep their marriage together with trips to the sun and sandy beaches of Risa. Even a camping trip to Yosemite. They had their moments

of love and passion. Piper felt the heat of their lovemaking, felt the heat of his body against hers. It was so like the times she had shared with her own Brian at the Academy.

For a moment, she shared her own memories of Brian and she held nothing back. The highs and the lows – especially his betrayal of her that had ended their relationship. They both felt the pain of it.

She shared her experiences serving under Captain Kirk on the original *Enterprise*. Her excitement and fear as she piloted the *Star Empire* to victory. Her promotion to First Officer of the *Hood*, and finally her ascension to Captain of the *Exeter* before moving on to the *Millennium.* She showed Silayna her crew – her extended family – and how fond she was of them all. She even shared her feelings of sadness that they were separated with Krashtallash, his sister, wife and Scanner serving on Cait. She even gave Silayna a glimpse of that lush world.

At the mention of Cait, Silayna showed her an image of that destroyed world that she had seen from the archives. That linked her to the memory of Vulcan, which was now nothing more than a small black hole circling its star that it was already drawing matter away from. It had already drawn the frozen wasteland of Delta Vega into itself.

Piper showed her what Vulcan looked like the last time they had visited. She let her sister feel the dry heat of the valleys, showed her the ochre cliffs and mesas, let her hear the cries of the Vulcan eagles as they sought their prey. She showed her an image of Spock's mother, the Lady

Amanda, let her see her sparkling eyes, even given her advanced age. She was a woman of great character and compassion who had helped Spock recover after his death and resurrection.

After seeing all that once was and was no more, Silayna felt a great sense of loss. In her timeline, they were nothing more than a footnote in history. Not only was the wisdom and knowledge of the Vulcans lost, so was the beauty of Cait with its wonderfully spiritual feline people.

Finally, she shared with Piper her worry that, once this was all over, she would simply cease to exist. That all she knew, all she had loved, all she had done, would be lost. It was a despair that threatened to consume her. Piper shared something with her she hadn't considered.

Ever since the cracks had appeared in the universe – as they should not have done – her timeline had been altered as well. As Piper's timeline was closer to the true one, it would still resemble it, but Piper feared as well that the person she was right now, with the experiences she had shared with Silayna and how they had affected *each other*, would also be lost. They would *both* be gone, with a Piper living on that knew nothing of their adventures together.

To both of them, it seemed grossly unfair.

For a time, they simply held each other, sobbing on one another's shoulders as the feelings they shared were amplified within one another. Yet, they took solace from the fact that, here and now, they were not alone. Eventually,

they went to sleep, holding each other, giving one another solace as they slumbered.

The next morning, the Pipers sat silently at the breakfast table enjoying their oatmeal. In the future, neither of them would have ever considered eating the steaming, milk and sugar flavoured substance. However, they had to admit it was growing on them.

Lily watched the two of them quietly. It was clear that something had happened between them the night before, but she had no idea what it might be. Her frustration was exacerbated by the fact butting into other's personal lives was not something she would normally do. In her paranoid culture, which she was well and truly a part of, people kept mostly to themselves. Trust was hard earned and seldom given away freely.

A part of her envied the relationship the women had. She had been long aware of the closeness twins often demonstrated – especially identical twins. There were some who believed they knew each other's thoughts, even felt each other's pain at a distance. That kind of rapport was something that was missing in her life, she knew. She yearned for it. Her thoughts drew her to Zefram Cochrane who, for all his bravado and big talk, was the one man she couldn't get out of her head. Yet, she was pretty sure he never thought of her that way.

She quietly sighed. And probably never would, she thought dismally. She looked up to note that Susanna and

Suzette both finished their bowls at the same time, got up together, and stepped over to the sink in the same fashion. Without a word, one washed while the other dried and put them away.

"Ladies," she said in order to get their attention. Both women looked at her with faces that were alike in some ways and totally different in others. She turned her attention to Suzette, who was staring back at her with her natural and mechanical eye. "A piece of advice," she said honestly. "Zee, myself and the rest of the *Phoenix* team might be OK with your electronic eye, but I'm sure you've met some people who are a little too curious about it. They might even try to take it off you, if you're not careful. These are hard times, and something like that could bring a fair price on the black market. At least for now, I suggest you keep your sunglasses on while you're outside."

Once again, the sisters shared a look, as if everything was sorted out between them. Together, they nodded their silent agreement. "That's good advice," Suzette said stoically. She grimaced. "I was getting used to not having to wear them."

"Give it time," Lily said in a mild attempt to comfort her. She took a sip of her coffee. "The people around here will eventually get used to it."

Susanna gripped her sister on the shoulder and gave it a gentle squeeze. "Don't worry, you're still beautiful to me," she said with a mixture of cheer and sincerity.

Suzette just looked at her with a pained expression. It was clear to all she wished she wasn't scarred. "You're biased," she said from a melancholic heart. "You have to love me the way I am. It could have just as easily have happened to you."

"True," Susanna said, giving Lily reason to wonder how that could be so, "but if I can't love you the way you are, how can I have any respect for myself?" Without asking, Susanna gave her sister a hug. For a moment, Suzette seemed ready to resist, but instead she relented and accept the gift. After a minute, the women broke contact and Susanna took her sister by the chin, raising her eyes to meet her own. "Now, are you up for another lesson?" she asked airily.

Suzette gave her a broad smile, her teeth sparkling. It was something Lily had not seen her do before. "Any time, sis," she said, momentary joy breaking the ice. She stepped into the bathroom for a few moments to apply her make-up, then donned her sunglasses. Already dressed in their exercise gear, the two of them disappeared out the front door with a friendly wave to Lily.

As she watched them go, Lily got the feeling the women were truly enjoying themselves. As if it was something they weren't quite used to.

Outside, the Lee sisters broke into a light jog as they made their way to their new favourite place to work out. Each took in the morning air, rejoicing in the clarity of it. Starship air was technically clean and breathable, but few

could forget that it went through carbon scrubbers, and everyone else's lungs, many times before each breath. The air in Montana was like a glass of pure, fresh water: a little chilled but totally refreshing.

The sun was now well and truly over the horizon and had begun its daily routine of drying the moisture from the green grasses – a job it never quite completed. The tall pines and cedars saw to that by throwing long shadows that covered most of the soil and the homes that collected beneath them.

The steady, squishing beat of their sneakers on the damp soil soon brought them to the clearing where Piper led Silayna through their warm-up exercises again. She noted with a certain amount of pride that her sister had remembered most of what she learned the day before.

Today, she worked her a bit harder, taking her for a five-mile run around the town, followed by a time of cooling down. Then she ran her through the kata again.

To their amusement, a few more of the locals had braved the morning chill to watch them. Fortunately, it hadn't rained the night before, so the ground was relatively dry. Even Piper found it harder to exercise on wet, slippery grass.

As Silayna followed Piper through their moves, she said quietly: "You know, I had a weird dream last night. We were both riding in the *Phoenix* with Cochrane, but we'd had to fight a pile of Klingons to get on board. I distinctly remember you fighting them with the katana, but, somehow,

I was doing the same. Then, when all was going well, and we were about to enter warp, we disappeared and found ourselves back at the Guardian on opposite sides again."

Piper finished the kata then looked her sister in the eye. "We must have been still connected somehow when we went to sleep. I think we had the same dream." She didn't mention how alone she felt when she found herself back in the future, separated from Silayna. She had grown quite fond of her alternate over the last couple of days, and a part of her wished this time wouldn't end. While she missed her future family, she found the resonance she had with Silayna refreshing and alluring in its own way.

For all her attempt at hiding her feelings, Silayna saw through her. She gave her an almost embarrassed smile and admitted: "I don't necessarily want to go home, either" she said affectionately. She pulled herself upright and grimaced. "However, we're going back whether we like it or not. We should be prepared for it."

Piper nodded her sad, silent agreement. She slid the katana out of its sheath and began one of her more arduous katas. As the short, bone handled sword sliced through the air, she thought about how bizarre this mission was. Never mind that she wasn't even here on Starfleet orders but on the whim of a device that nobody seemed to be able to tame, let alone understand. While she guessed they were here to ensure the success of the flight of the *Phoenix*, she could not be certain that was the Guardian's primary reason for their presence.

As the sword cleaved an unseen Klingon, Piper wondered how the task before them was helping save the universe. When she and Silayna left the twenty-third century, space/time was cracking up in all directions. She couldn't speak for Silayna, but she knew Starfleet had tasked her with finding the cause. She could not help but be frustrated that her time was being wasted in the past when she should be finding a solution to the problems in *her* present.

Silayna watched the woman she had come to think of as her twin as she went through her exercise regimen. She had come to recognise certain behaviour patterns in Susanna, and one was clear right now. She was angry at something, and she was taking it out on her phantom foes. In her mind's eye, she could not help but see bodies pile up around her. She was worried for her, but also amazed. Her breath was taken away by the grace and agility that was on demonstration this morning. What she had seen the day before had been restrained.

Susanna swung, jabbed, whirled and kicked. Her hands flew in punches and chops. She blocked incoming blows, then despatched her attacker with her blade. The longer she went, the faster she got as she got even angrier at their predicament.

From the side of the clearing, Suzette had gotten her breath back and was relaxed. Even though, she found herself feeling angry, although she had no idea why. Usually, it took a lot for her to become really *angry*. While

she didn't suffer fools gladly, she would put them in their place with a few cutting remarks then move on. What she was feeling was seriously *angry*.

It came to her in a flash. What she was experiencing was not of her. It was Susanna's feelings. The realisation was stunning. The two of them were somehow resonating off one another. "Susanna!" she called.

Momentarily startled, Susanna/Piper quickly brought her kata to an end with her katana held high in an attack stance before she brought it together with both hands, the sword pointing to the sky in front of her. Finished, she slid the ceremonial sword into the scabbard and watched as her sister came over. "What is it?" she asked, doing her best not to project her feelings at her, but not quite managing to keep them out of her voice.

"What are you so angry about?" Suzette asked. She stepped up close and whispered as if revealing one of the secrets of the Universe: "I could *feel* your anger from over there." She pointed back to where she had been standing.

The revelation brought Susanna up short. Their experience the night before might have lingering effects. "What am I feeling now?" she asked.

"Curiosity." Suzette said it with complete certainty. "Mind you, I don't have to be empathic or a genius to know that. I'm curious too."

Susanna gave her a grin. "I'll credit you that," she said with a bit more cheer. "I wonder how long this will last?"

Suzette shrugged. "Who knows?" she said airily. "I just find it really interesting."

Susanna turned and looked at her sideways. "I think you like it, too," she said gently.

Her first impulse was to come back with an acerbic comment, but Suzette paused for a moment and examined the question honestly. "You might be right," she said with an embarrassed smile. She quickly changed the subject. "Let's go home and have a shower. We've got a lot of work to do today."

The daily chores are something that can never be done away with. Not in the twenty-first century, not in the twenty-third. No sooner had the women returned to their temporary abode did they realise they not only needed a shower, their clothes needed a wash as well. Both women were silently wishing Lily had a washing machine. Alas, it was not meant to be. Lily pointed them towards the laundry sink and the soap.

What should have taken about ten minutes took half an hour as they hand scrubbed every article of clothing they were not wearing. After two days, they had nothing left. It wasn't that they didn't know how to wash their clothes, it was the mere fact they were very much perfectionists when it came to their personal hygiene.

Susanna cast a worried glance at the clock, but she noticed that Lily was not only still present, but that she did not seem the least bit concerned. "Are we going to be late

for work?" she asked, worried that the two of them might be docked some of their pay.

Lily shook her head in mild amusement as she nursed her morning cup of coffee. "Two things," she said. "One, I'm the boss. Two, having the two of you on the project is a Godsend. The last thing I want to do is alienate you. If you need a bit more time in the morning to get some stuff done, that's fine by me. I know the two of you will put in a hundred percent when we get there," she said dismissively. "Your heart is in the job. That's enough for me."

Susanna gave her a grateful nod and helped her sister carry their clothes out to the makeshift clothesline out the back where they took a few minutes to hang them out. As they finished up, Lily joined them and said: "Don't worry about your stuff. Marjorie," she pointed to the home behind hers, "will look after them for us."

The Lee sisters looked where she was pointing, silently wondering what kind of a society would consider stealing clothes a day-to-day matter. They shared a look, knowing each was grateful that, in only a matter of years, things on Earth would begin to change after the arrival of the Vulcans. An event that would take place in only two days.

With that thought fresh in their minds, the Lee sisters quickly finished and joined Lily as she walked down to the *Phoenix*.

In the old base's well tooled, yet still underground, workshop Susanna spent some time going over the designs

of the deflector the two of them had put together the day before. They had gone to great pains to assemble something that was simple, yet functional. Their knowledge of many sciences went way beyond the day, so they made a point of keeping it basic. All the same, the design was reasonably intricate compared to the knowledge of the mid-twenty-first century and they had to adapt their knowledge to what was available in this time. It was taking more time than they realised.

While Susanna kept pouring over their schematics, looking for errors, Suzette was putting her electronic eye to good use. With her steady hands and a ready supply of useful materials, she had already begun assembling the unit with the grudging help of Walter Simmons, who had to admit the strangers were good.

"How did you come to this design?" he asked as he tapped another of his seemingly endless supply of cigarettes.

Suzette scowled at the offensive object. The smoke was messing with her mechanical eye. "Do you mind doing that someplace else?" she asked, making it clear it wasn't a request. "I've only got one good eye, and I'd like to keep it."

Walter noted that her sister didn't even look up at the comment. She knew she could take care of herself, obviously. He looked back at the cyborg woman and decided he wasn't going to back down. He picked up the cigarette and drew on it once more before blowing the smoke in Suzette's face.

"I wouldn't do that again, if I were you," Susanna said without looking up. "My sister could kill you with a single blow that you never saw coming. And if she doesn't, *I will*." While Susanna had no intention of carrying out her threat, she made sure Walter believed it.

Suzette could see he did. Word had gotten around about her sister's prowess with a blade and the fact the two of them worked out together. It had obviously reached his ears as well as he, reluctantly, stubbed out his cigarette.

"Sorry," he said, not quite sounding sincere, nor was he.

It was enough for the sisters. They went back to their work. Suzette finished soldering an IC to the board she was planning on using for the deflector's control. She held it up to the light and used her electronic eye to look for imperfections. There weren't any. She looked over at the wall clock and began to worry. It was late in the afternoon on April 3rd, and they only had one more day to complete the deflector and have it installed.

While Cochrane, Lily and the rest of the crew went over the rest of the *Phoenix's* systems, the small team raced to complete one of its most vital systems.

Simmons took the board from her and placed it in the casing borrowed from an old computer. As he worked on wiring it all together, Suzette turned her attention to adapting a small satellite dish to function as their emitter. "Suzy," she said to her sister. "I need your help with this."

Without question, she quit looking for faults in their design and came to her aid. As she held the dish, that was only a foot across, their fingertips brushed as they held it. In that moment's contact, they once more felt each other's emotions and had a flash of seeing what each other thought. Startled, Susanna nearly dropped the dish.

"The effects must have been more lasting than I thought," she said, cryptically.

Suzette gave her a tight grin. "No kidding. We'll have to watch that," she said. She gave her sister a look that said: No offense.

Susanna gave her a quick smile that said: None taken.

Walter didn't have the slightest clue what they were talking about and didn't care. He only hoped they wouldn't make good on their threat.

It was well into the evening before the three of them began installing the equipment in the *Phoenix*. The women lay down a floor panel that folded out of the side of the shaft to give them access to the cockpit's nose cone. Beneath them was a one-hundred-foot drop to the cement flooring below which was punctuated by the odd removable floor panel and stabiliser arm. The air was cold, but dry and there was a distinct echo. Even a whisper carried all the way down.

With a compressed-air operated ratchet in hand they unbolted the nose cone and removed it. Fortunately for

them, Lily's design for the cockpit had nothing behind it but a sealed firewall.

Walter took measurements of the framework behind it and left to make a bracket to suit the deflector dish while the women went to work drilling out a hole to pass their cabling through.

A short time later, Cochrane stepped into the silo below them with a flat, cardboard box in his hand. "Who wants pizza?" he called to them doing his best impression of Santa Claus.

For a moment, the sisters looked at him in bewilderment. Then the smell of fresh pepperoni pizza drifted up the shaft and into their nostrils. Suzette's stomach growled – loudly.

"I'll take that as a "yes"," Cochrane said smoothly. He waited as the two women, who lay prone on the deck they were working on, gripped the edge tightly, then flipped over the edge and dropped onto their feet in front of him. "What do you two do for an encore?" he asked flippantly, quietly impressed.

Susanna looked at him slyly. She wasn't certain his motives were entirely pure as she could smell the alcohol on him. "Wouldn't you like to know?" she answered, her tone making it clear he was never going to find out.

Zefram gave them a cheeky, and slightly lecherous, grin then flipped open the box and offered them a slice. Both of them were unfamiliar with the food before them but were

hungry enough to eat a vegemite sandwich. Each took a slice and delightfully took a bite.

The taste assaulted their hungry tongues and delighted their senses. "Why don't we have these where we come from?" Susanna asked her sister.

As Suzette shrugged, Zefram helpfully offered: "Not many pizza stores survived the war," he said regretfully.

The Lee sisters looked at him and couldn't help but chuckle. "Yes, I'm sure it's that," Suzette said as she ate.

Cochrane looked up at the *Phoenix,* feeling like he was missing something, but not really caring what it was. "It looks like you're nearly finished. Why don't you call it a night and come back to the bar with me? You can finish the installation tomorrow and test it after."

Susanna was about to take a bite, stopped and looked back at the ship. The idea of not finishing the job at hand was foreign to her. A glance at her sister told her she was thinking the same thing. She shook her head. "No, we're going to finish what we started." Suzette nodded her agreement.

It was clear to them both that Cochrane was upset about their answer. He snapped the box shut, miffed. "If you're going to be like that, fine! I just thought I could show the two of you a good time."

While Susanna was unsure what he meant, Suzette understood completely. She pulled herself up to her full height and snapped: "We don't go that way, Cochrane. Now, if you want some female company, try someone who *wants*

to be with you! For some bizarre reason Lily likes you. Why don't you go and bother her?"

Knowing he had just stepped way over the line, their benefactor pursed his lips and turned to leave. "If you change your mind, I'll be in the bar." He was trying to sound pleasant, but he came over as a lecherous snake. He quickly disappeared through a side door.

Both women shook their head in wonder.

"How the history books got him wrong," Suzette muttered.

The saying "how the mighty have fallen" passed through Susanna's mind, but she corrected herself. "The history books tell of a Zefram Cochrane that doesn't exist yet," she said, almost pitying him. She gave her sister a meaningful look. "I think the Vulcan's arrival will change more than just the world," she said then got back to work.

The pizza had done its job and now they had to do theirs.

Chapter Six

April 4th, 2063 started off like the ones before it for the Lee sisters. Their time in Bozeman, Montana had gotten them used to the daily routine of life for the post-apocalyptic town. They shivered through their morning showers after their exercise routines. They were quickly becoming addicted to coffee and grateful for the supply of it, considering most of the world's coffee producers were still only now getting back into production.

International commerce was still in its reborn infancy, and it did not help that most of the former United States' ports had been destroyed in the first volley of fire. While industry was slowly rebuilding in the local states, with trucks coming and going once again, the goods they moved were expensive and fuel was hard to come by. As it was, the world was still in dire straits both financially and politically. With the Eastern Coalition still rattling its sabres from time to time, it wasn't about to get better any time soon.

For all the negativity in the world at the time, there was a sense of hope in Bozeman. The locals were all aware of Cochrane's folly – that somehow he was going to turn an unused nuclear missile into a spaceship. If it was successful or not was not really important. What did matter was that something was actually happening in a world that seemed to have ground to a halt. For those who remembered, there was no more progress, no entertainment, no sense of purpose.

Except in Bozeman. The locals were all benefiting from the ship's construction in some way as the people working on the "ship" had come from all around to contribute to the task. Somehow, they knew they were a part of something special. Whether it made it into space or blew up on its way out of the doors, at least something new was happening in their lives.

As the time ticked down to the launch, a sense of expectation was coming over the town. People in the streets stopped and talked among themselves in wonder at the sight they were going to enjoy the next day. The last time any of them had seen a missile fly, it had rained down destruction.

This time the launch would be reminiscent of Man's first steps on the moon. Nobody had been in space since the International Space Station had been destroyed by the E-Con by a pre-emptive strike.

As the Lees walked down to the launcher, they noted the buzz of conversation growing. The two of them had become famous among the townsfolk not only for their fighting prowess, but for the simple fact that they were known to be helping out on the *Phoenix* project.

So, they often caught fleeting glances from people and the odd pointed finger. While there was some enjoyment taken from the experience, both women were keenly aware they not only wanted to minimise their impact on the timeline, but also avoid photographs. Fortunately for them, film hadn't been made for many years and digital photography required either batteries – which were also

unavailable – or reliable equipment, which was equally as rare.

The downside for the two of them was the fact they stood out like a sore thumb. Even though Piper's hair had been honey blonde for years, it was through the usual dyes and treatments. Her brunette roots were now starting to show, making the two appear even more like the identical twins they were pretending to be.

Sadly, Susanna was also aware there was much speculation from the town's folk as to the extent of her sister's injuries, and she hated the fact that she was the subject of local gossip. It could be more destructive than a photon torpedo. She did her best to keep Suzette distracted by remarking about the beautiful blue sky and the clarity of the air.

A point that Suzette appreciated and was acutely aware of. If she was never the kind to spend a whole lot of time sightseeing, neither would the other version of herself walking next to her. Both women were expert at reading the behaviour and body language of others, and there was no-one she could read better than herself. Reading Susanna was a simple matter, even when she was trying to cover her true feelings. *Especially*, when she was trying to be deceptive.

She appreciated the gesture. It had been a long time since she had worked with someone who genuinely cared about her. Her crew on the *Ingram* were good, but she had to admit she had done too good a job of maintaining a professional distance. So, even Doctor AndrusTaurus, who

had served with her most of her career and who she considered a friend, had become distant. It was a thought that pained her deeply.

Her time in the twenty-first century was becoming like a holiday for her. She knew she was here for a reason, that there was a mission to perform however, the time away from her life in this time, with this other Piper, was becoming an eye-opener for her. She was beginning to see life through her "sister's" eyes and realising how barren her own life had become in comparison.

They had talked little about their lives at home in the future. They had been so busy just dealing with their chores and task in Bozeman they had simply never gotten around to it. Even though she felt there wasn't a whole lot she could tell Susanna about her life aboard the *Ingram*, aside from the day-to-day running of her ship, she was still curious about her sister's life. It seemed a whole lot more fun and fulfilling.

She gave her sister a cheerful smile and determined that they would talk about it. She really wanted to know what it would have been like to be her alternate and she couldn't wait to pick her brains. Their "mind meld" had taught her much about Susanna's griefs, but little about what her life in the alternate timeline was really like. What was her Merete like? Had any of them married? All questions for another time.

It wasn't long before they arrived at the hatch that was the entrance to the control centre. It was already open,

in anticipation of theirs and other's arrivals, however their ever-present guardian – whose name turned out to be Ryan – was still guarding the door. Before they proceeded the pair of them stopped for a moment, eyeing it uncertainly.

"How do you think we should handle this?" Susanna asked, referring to the previous evening's run-in with Cochrane.

Behind her sunglasses, Suzette's eye narrowed in annoyance. She was still angry with Zee for his unwelcome advances. "If he comes on to me again, I'll break his nose," she muttered.

Susanna laughed. "That'd be a good one. Every time someone comments on pictures of the man and his crooked nose, I'll be able to say: I did that! And I'll take pride in it." She wore a big, cheesy grin as she said it.

Suzette took one look at her sister's face and cracked up. She laughed hard and long, enjoying the feeling and the pain that came when her sides started hurting.

Her sister just stood there and enjoyed the shared joke. She was taking great pleasure in the thought of breaking the arrogant man's nose – until he stepped out of the shadows on the stairs below them.

"What's so damned funny?" he asked angrily. He seemed a mixture of tired and hung over.

Instead of worrying about being caught out, both women looked at him and laughed all the more. Suzette even pointed at him but was laughing too hard to get a word out.

Not understanding, and not liking being laughed at either, he waved them off disgustedly and disappeared in the direction of the control room.

When they finally settled down, the Lees locked arms and headed down into the darkness, headed for the *Phoenix.* It was time to test their equipment.

In the shaft, both sisters climbed into the cockpit through the open hatchway, taking care to walk only on the panels marked "Step Here". They took a moment to sit in the launch couches and stared up through the cockpit windows at the closed hatch above.

"I wish it was me going up there tomorrow," Suzette said wistfully. Her glasses hung from her t-shirt's neckline. Today she had decided to have a little fun and wear the shirt with the arrow.

Susanna answered without turning. "You and me both," she said. "It would be amazing." Keeping her eyes forward, she said: "I remember sitting in my bedroom staring up at the stars, watching a re-enactment of the *Phoenix's* flight and imagining that it was me flying her."

Next to her, Suzette glanced to her left at the hatch to see if anyone was watching, then climbed into the pilot's chair up front. She took hold of the yoke and sat back and pressed herself into the chair as if she was being pressed back by g-forces. "Let's make history!" she cried as she pretended to fly the ship.

"Watch out for the asteroid!" Susanna said from behind her, getting into the act. The two of them threw

themselves in opposite directions as they dodged the imaginary rock that was on different sides of the ship.

"Engage!" Suzette said as if she was Cochrane. She remembered hearing that in the video she had seen as a child.

"That sounds cool," said a familiar voice from the hatch. "I might say that tomorrow."

Both women turned their mortified faces to see Zefram Cochrane looking up at them with an amused look on his face. His visage changed as he offered: "I just came by to apologise." He broke eye contact and looked down at his feet. "I have this vague memory that I said something totally inappropriate to you both last night."

From their chairs both Pipers looked at Cochrane in wonder. This was a lot more like the man they had seen in the history books.

"The truth be told," Cochrane continued humbly, "Lily sent me over here to apologise. She heard about what I did and read me the riot act. After what the two of you have done for us, what I did to you was unforgivable."

The thought occurred to both women simultaneously: Who told her?

Suzette grimaced, feeling more than a little humiliated herself. "I suppose we're even, then." She glanced at the yoke, her face reddening. "I'm sorry I played astronaut with your toy."

Cochrane shrugged. "If it wasn't for you two ladies, I probably would have had my *Phoenix* become ashes seconds after I activated the Warp Drive. I think we're

even." He turned his attention to the cockpit's latest addition: the deflector control. Which, he noted, was nothing more than a small, plastic box with a red button on it. Marked next to it was a label in bold, white letters: Navigational Deflector. Hit this button to live.

He bowed his head to the Lee sisters. "How will I know this is working?" he asked.

Suzette's mechanical eye noisily focussed closer in on Cochrane's face. It was her way of looking incredulous.

Susanna picked up on her sister's annoyance. "We're going to run some diagnostics on the system, but we're confident it will work as promised." She held up an old tablet computer and cable. "All we have to do is plug in and run some software we wrote."

To his credit, Cochrane took them at their word. "Then I'll leave you to it." He turned away then stopped and gave them a genuine smile from the heart. "If you're interested, I would like to buy you both a drink later to show you my gratitude." He put up his hands and rolled back his sleeves to demonstrate he had no hidden motives. "My intentions are honest, ladies."

Once more, he watched as the sisters shared a look and thoughts without talking. As one, they turned back to him and said: "You're on."

The day passed quickly for the Lee twins. Whilst they were confident of their design and construction of the deflector system, they still didn't quite trust the aging

Phoenix herself. The two of them spent hours going over every system that was remotely connected to the deflector. By the time they were finished, dusk had fallen, and a number of the workers had already left for the day.

As they passed through the Control Room, they found Walter Simmons working on a computer console, doing some analysis work of his own. With him were three others who would be running the launch from the ground the next day.

"Walter," Susanna said, batting away some of the cloud of smoke that always seemed to hang over his head. "Why don't you come and have a drink with us at the bar. I'm sure the *Phoenix* will make us proud tomorrow. You'll see."

Simmons tapped his cigarette and shook his head. "No, I've got some work to do on the warp field generators." He gave her a look that was a mixture of irritated and envious. "I'm not a wunderkind like the two of you. Some things are actually harder for others than they are for you." He chuckled darkly. It was a sound full of sadness and regret. Susanna wondered what awful things the man had seen to make him so miserable.

"At least you gave Zee an earful for being such a jackass. It was fun to watch. Thanks for that." Dismissively, he turned and began clicking away with his mouse.

Susanna watched him for a moment, certain she would never truly understand the man, then turned and found Suzette was already waiting by the door where she

was trying to keep her mechanical eye clear of the nicotine floating in the air. "Let's go," she said, sounding tired. "I could use a drink."

It was late in the evening on a clear night. An early chill had fallen, prompting everyone to don their warmest attire. Zefram Cochrane had drunk up a storm and had insisted on winding up the ancient Wurlitzer to pump out his favourite songs of the sixties. Sometimes the records got stuck as the 45 singles had seen better days. Occasionally, he would walk over to the machine and give it a thump for good measure. They'd miss a chorus but at least the song would finish.

From her end of the bar Lily got more and more worried as she watched her ship's pilot drink himself into virtual incoherence. Sitting next to her, Susanna and Suzette watched him in amazement. It was well known that Cochrane had made the flight with a hangover. Watching him now, they knew it was going to be a doozy.

"Why does he do that to himself?" Susanna asked, truly amazed.

Suzette shook her head. "I'm surprised he's lived *this* long," she said righteously. "His liver should have the consistency of neutronium by now." She picked up her gin and tonic, gave it a swirl, then downed the remainder.

"Careful with that stuff, sis," Susanna said with a gentle warning. "You know you're a two-pot screamer." She took a sip of her own gin glass as if giving her a lesson on how to drink.

Lily hadn't paid any real attention to what they were doing. She just watched Cochrane with more than familial concern on her face while she played with her beer glass. "He hates flying," she said, as if that explained everything. "When we were kids, I remember him going up in a Ferris Wheel with me. He threw up after screaming for three minutes for the attendant to let him off." She gave them a meaningful look. "He *hates* flying."

"Then I guess I'm glad you're the one going up there with him tomorrow and not us," Suzette said with a slight slur.

Lily sat back in her chair and put her feet forward. She couldn't quite reach the bench, but she did knock something with her foot. "Oh, I almost forgot," she said. She leaned over and picked up the offending object and returned with the katana in her hands. "I had one of the boys sharpen this for me today." She handed it to Susanna proudly. "My gift to you both." She gave them each a peck on the cheek as they were sitting on either side of her. "You came along at just the right time. It was Kismet."

Susanna held the sheath with delight and pulled the blade out just enough to see the blade was now razor sharp. "I don't know what to say," she said gratefully. "This is beautiful." She beamed with delight at her. She was so moved she gave Lily a hug. Over her shoulder, she said: "I'll share it with you, sis," she said with a wink.

Over her glasses, she saw her sister's eyebrow shoot up. "Hey, I was just happy for us to get paid," she said offhandedly, but her small grin gave her away.

Susanna let Lily go and laughed when she saw Cochrane's latest gag. "Look," she said pointing past them.

They all watched as Cochrane got up and started dancing to Roy Orbison.

Suzette giggled and said: "He looks like a rusty robot trying to swim!"

The sight was the last straw for Lily. "It's time I sent him home," she said, determined. She dismissed the Lees with a: "I'll see you two tomorrow morning."

Susanna downed the last of her drink and gave her a nod. "We'll see you later," she said then took her sister's hand and led her out into the night. "I'm going to sleep sooooo well tonight," she said, her fatigue showing in her tired pace.

Behind them, they heard the others say goodnight to the bartender as he was closing up shop.

Suzette fell behind Susanna and gave her shoulders a gentle rub which she responded to with a deep sigh. "I'll tell you what," Suzette said. "When we get home, I'll give you a massage if you give me one."

Her sister gave her a grin and said: "You're on!"

In the dark forest, noises carried well. Both women stopped when they heard Lily say: "What's that?" They turned and looked back past the bar where she and Cochrane

were now looking up at the night sky. The Lees followed their gaze and saw something large moving in the night.

"That's too big to be a satellite," Suzette said, adrenaline sobering her up.

Her sister nodded. "It's got to be a starship," she said, alarmed. "This is all wrong."

Suddenly, green bolts of energy began raining down on the site all around them. The first hit near the bunker and the bar, damaging them both. The Lees dived for cover behind the largest fallen tree they could find, Susanna keeping a tight grip on the katana.

They quickly realised the bolts were coming in groups of four and very regularly. Susanna looked up at the stars once more. It was clear the bolts were coming from the starship.

"What the hell is going on?" she hissed. They dived for cover once more as a bolt came down close by, demolishing a house and leaving it a smoking crater.

"This certainly wasn't in the history books," Suzette said through gritted teeth as dirt rained down from them from a nearby explosion.

Suzette turned her attention to the sky and saw something her sister had missed. She used her electronic eye to full effect and zoomed in. She saw the vague outline of a Federation starship closing in on the intruder.

"What the hell?" she said in wonder.

"What is it?" Susanna asked.

Rather than describe it, she took her sister's hand once more and showed her what she could see. Both women watched in amazement as the starship fired on what was clearly some kind of mechanized flying ball. The four globes of destruction slammed into the ball, breaking it apart from the inside out.

Just before it detonated, they heard a familiar sound. It reminded them both of a transporter but was different enough to leave them wondering for a moment.

They looked to the source and saw something that was beyond their experience. There were two bipedal beings who had once clearly been humanoid but were now covered with mechanised components that were mostly black. Each had a kind of electronic eye and had one arm replaced with something that looked decidedly unfriendly.

Now the fire from the sky had ceased, both women, still holding hands and working as a unit, stood and approached the interlopers. "Who are you?" they demanded, their voices coming out in perfect harmony.

The newcomers ignored them and advanced in the direction of the bunker. There was purpose in their footsteps and death in their eyes.

Still linked, the Piper's mentality was more than doubled. They quickly put together that these beings were from the now destroyed vessel and that their intention had been the destruction of the *Phoenix* and the death of Cochrane. That was something they could not allow.

"Halt!" they demanded.

The cyborgs kept advancing. Knowing they would now have to defend themselves, the women let go of one another, but still maintained a mild link.

As Susanna reached for her katana, the cyborgs stuck and rudely pushed them out of the way. As they did so, Suzette fell and lost her glasses.

Both women rolled and came back up in fighting stances, but their attackers stopped when they saw Suzette's face. The sight of her false eye glaring back at them with its green glow seemed to confuse them.

Without a word they changed direction and came at Suzette. Still linked to her sister she knew exactly what to do. She reached out to either side of her and picked up two solid sticks and began striking at the nearest of the two as it was reaching out to her, aiming for her neck. She increased the force of each hit and frequency as it closed in. Her efforts were buying her time, but it wasn't much.

However, it *was* enough time for Susanna to recover and quickly circle them. Her katana came up in a blur and the cyborg's arm dropped to the ground, neatly severed. Curiously, there was little blood.

Amazingly, the attack didn't slow either of them. They just kept coming.

Knowing there was now very little time as Suzette was backing up against a house, Susanna did the only thing that would ensure success. Spinning in a fashion that would make a ballet dancer proud, Susanna swung her sword once, twice, felling both as their heads hit the ground with a wet

thud. Neither emitted a sound as their bodies stumbled for a moment then dropped to their knees as if there was some final impulse pushing them on. Finally, they toppled over and stopped moving.

Suzette stepped forward; her sticks held high, ready to defend herself if they tried again. Nothing happened.

"I hope there was just the two of them," she said, shaking, still breathing heavily.

Susanna kicked the severed hand lying on the ground, noting the tubules that were still extended from the middle fingers. "They don't look friendly."

Seeing through her sister's eyes, Suzette concurred.

Nearby, there was the sound of gunfire. Without discussion, they ran through the forest in the direction of the sound. Suzette went first, using the zero-lux setting on her eye to see in the dark. They quickly came to a clearing that was lit by firelight from a nearby burning house. Next to it lay the prone form of another of the cybernetic beings, its chest ripped open by a shotgun blast.

A second being was closing in on their assailant, a huge man who was desperately trying to reload his weapon.

Working together, the sisters raced up behind the alien. Suzette threw her sticks – aimed directly for the back of its head. They connected neatly, causing the alien to stop and consider the new attack.

It began to slowly turn and look for the threat but did not move quickly enough. Once more, the katana sliced through the air – and the alien's neck – severing its head.

Amazingly, the alien did not fall. Grotesquely, it stopped, picked up its head and began to restore it to its shoulders.

Not to be outdone, Susanna stepped forward and plunged the blade through the monster's chest and out the other side.

The thrust severed the alien's energy packs, killing it instantly, but also sending a shock back along the blade, through the metal guard and into Susanna. The energy tightened every muscle in her body in excruciating pain, throwing her backwards into the grass and blissfully out cold.

Suzette raced over to her sister, whose pain she had momentarily experienced, and checked her pulse. She already knew she was still alive – she was certain she would have felt her die if she had. All the same, she placed her fingertips to her wrist. Her heart's tempo was strong, but slow. She shook her head and tearfully pushed the hair out of Susanna's face. "Thank God," she whispered heavily before clumsily hoisting her sister over her shoulder and carrying her home.

As she passed the fallen alien, she stopped for a moment and retrieved their katana. She slid the sword from the corpse – carefully. She made certain her hand remained on the bone handle and went nowhere near the metal. To her surprise, the body disappeared as it came, in a weird, greenish transporter-like beam. She wasn't certain it had been retrieved or self-destructed. She scowled at the space

it had vacated. As long as they didn't come back, she was happy. She had enough to worry about.

She adjusted Susanna's weight and began to walk along the street, which was still dimly lit by the moonlight. Her path took her behind the bar whose side wall had been blown out by a blast. The lights were mostly out, but there was enough light from the fires that were burning for her to make her way and for her to see the destruction.

There was clear damage to the missile installation as well. There was no sign of Cochrane or Lily, and she began to worry if history had been irrevocably altered by this event. She hoped they were still alive, but right then she had her own worries. Susanna's weight was wearing her down and she was beginning to tire.

She turned to go and heard something else to increase her night's tension. The quiet whine of a transporter beam.

In the darkness, she turned towards the sound, her electronic eye adjusting for the light. She held up the katana, ready to defend them from more of the invaders. Instead of cyborgs, she saw people like herself, dressed as she was in clothes of their time. Their leader was a balding man who carried himself as one born to lead. Suzette knew she was looking at a Starship Captain like herself.

Next to him was one who looked like a human, but his gold skin stood him apart. Aside from him, there was a woman with flaming red hair who had the bearing of a healer – no doubt the ship's doctor.

Their appearance added to the day's mystery, but she took solace in the fact that some of her own people had come to their rescue.

Taking stock of the situation, Suzette decided her first responsibility was Susanna. She shifted her once more on her shoulder and headed home.

Chapter Seven

When Susanna woke in the morning, she found the world was too bright, the sounds were too loud and every muscle in her body ached. She tried to raise her head, but her neck ached. She felt like she had been dropped from a great height then fired out a torpedo tube – without a space suit.

"Good morning, Sunshine," Suzette said from the other side of the bed where she was reading a magazine. "I'm glad to see you're finally awake."

Susanna gripped her head with her hands and noticed even her arms were aching. She opened and closed her right hand as she felt something odd. She focussed on it and saw a small burn on the webbing between her thumb and forefinger. "How'd I get that?" she asked, confused. "Why am I in bed when we should be working on the *Phoenix?"* She made as if to get up, but Suzette pushed her back down.

"You have no idea what happened last night, do you?" she asked, concerned.

Searching her memories, Susanna quickly came up blank. "I vaguely remember being in the bar and sharing a drink." She looked at her sister in a mild daze. "That's it."

Suzette sighed. She considered it ironic that she was getting used to sharing her thoughts with Susanna. Never mind that the situation was practically surreal. Two versions of the same person should not be able to share the same reality. The peculiar thing was that, even given their

differences, she was beginning to like sharing her consciousness with her. It was a wonderful way of knowing and being known. She knew her "sister" accepted her completely – no reservations.

She reached out and took Susanna's hand and opened her mind. Her sister knew the routine well enough to do likewise and she was soon seeing the night through her Suzette's eyes – even her own when their experiences had been shared. She saw not only herself fight and get zapped, but she also saw herself fall heavily and hit the ground with enough force to knock her out.

She was grateful to feel her sister's concern for her and to witness her actions to bring her home. She also saw the surprise arrival of the Federation away team.

"Who are they?" Susanna asked.

"No idea." Suzette replied. "*I was hoping you might recognise them."*

"The guy with the gold skin is a complete mystery to me. I've never seen his species before."

"Me neither."

"We're not going to learn much about what's going on while we're here."

"Agreed. We should get back to the Phoenix and see what's happening. I want to know how Lily is. She didn't come home last night." Susanna felt her fear and concern for Lily clearly.

She also knew that, in this mode of communication, there could be no lying to her to make her feel better. "*I hope she's OK, too.*"

They let go of each other, yet each allowed an empathic link to remain as they went about their morning ablutions. Suzette helped Susanna get up and into the shower as her body still felt like it had been put through the wringer. As Susanna bathed, Suzette went looking for some painkillers. She didn't find any in the kitchen, but, ironically, found some in the bathroom mirror cabinet.

When Susanna finished, she stepped out of the bath, still shivering from the cold and pain she was still feeling. Suzette quickly wrapped her in a towel and handed her a glass with two paracetamol tablets. "Take these, they'll make you feel better."

As Susanna complied, her sister began her shower and soon they were finishing drying their hair and dressing for the day. Neither felt any embarrassment with the other being undressed. They had shared their bed, their fears, their food and even their minds. Seeing each other naked was like looking in a mirror, nothing more.

Feeling better, but still stiff, Susanna allowed herself to be helped into the kitchen where they had a simple breakfast. They scoffed down their food and coffee. Given a choice, they would have skipped the nourishment and taken the caffeine. At this stage they were already hooked.

The sisters headed out the door with Susanna making a point of taking the katana. She was disappointed the

sheath was missing, but she was fortunate to spot it off the path near the bar as they walked. She gently replaced the blade and slung the sheath's strap over her shoulder. Even though her body still ached she felt ready for anything.

Although only a matter of hours had passed, the locals had done an amazing job of cleaning up after the attack. Scorch marks still abounded, with structures damaged and small craters in the ground, yet the damage to the buildings was already being taken care of. There was even a crew of people working to repair the damage to the launcher. At the doorway there was no sign of Ryan.

They stepped down into the Control Room to find it a shambles. Several of the panels had been blown out, wiring was burned everywhere, and blood stained the walls and floor in several places. Susanna stepped over to the damaged chair she had last seen Walter in the night before. The desk was spattered with blood and the drying pool underneath it was a sad testament of the engineer's fate.

"You owe me a week's pay," she said under her breath, lamenting the annoying man's loss. She felt her sentiment resonating from her twin.

A tall man who was unfamiliar to them stepped forward with a friendly, yet suspicious eye. He was solidly built with a dark beard to match his well-manicured hair. He had a twinkle in his eye as if he expected something humorous to happen any moment, yet the air of command was clear. This man was also from the Starship, Susanna guessed.

"Can I help you?"

As usual, Susanna took the lead and did her best to sound assertive. "I might ask the same of you. We work with Zefram Cochrane on the *Phoenix,* and we know everybody on the team." She stepped forward and tapped him on the chest issuing a clear challenge. "I don't know who *you* are. Explain yourself."

While it was clear the man was not used to being pushed around, he found himself unwilling to deny her an answer. He quickly realised there was something about this female he found familiar. "Fair enough," he said congenially. "My name is Will and my friends and I are helping bring the *Phoenix's* flight back on track for this afternoon."

Susanna narrowed her eyes at him suspiciously. While she was fairly certain he'd had no part in the actual attack the previous night, she did not know that their actions hadn't pre-empted it. "What's in it for you?" she asked, trying to push his buttons.

He clapped his hands together and gave her a friendly grin. "Just trying to make sure things work out the way they should."

They were words that rang a resounding gong for both Pipers. That was exactly what they were here to achieve. Susanna felt her sister's apprehension.

Will looked at both women and tried to size them up. The similarities between the two was remarkable aside from

the obvious repair work to his inquisitor's sister's face. Yet, there was something about them that was decidedly familiar.

Suzette broke his concentration with a simple introduction. "We're the Lee sisters. I'm Suzette and this is Susanna. We're working on the navigational deflector."

The names rang a bell for Will Riker. He remembered them from his study of this time. The temporal Prime Directive was still in force, so he was reluctant to tell them any more than he had to. "I've heard of you," he said simply.

The words had a profound effect on both women. While they had tried hard to minimise their effect on the past, it was clear they had left a notable impression on history. Both women were fully aware that "Will" was from the future, as they were, but what was not clear was *why*. While they believed that their job had been completed with the building of the deflector, neither knew nor understood why they were still here. The women shared a look that was a mixture of pride in their achievements and fear that they may have done more harm than good. What might have changed when they returned to the future?

Something about the women still bothered Will. He didn't remember ever seeing a photograph of them, they were said to be a bit reclusive. However, they reminded him of someone *else*. Just who it was remained a mystery to him.

Susanna took control of the situation and stated: "If that's all, Will, my sister and I have to check on our work. I

think we'd hate for Zee to have a hole punched through him when he enters warp."

Will stepped back gallantly and ushered them down the hall that he had been guarding behind him. "After you, ladies," he said with a cheeky grin.

While Susanna accepted the offering, Suzette simply eyed him with suspicion. She was not ready to trust this man yet.

Once they'd taken a few steps down the hall, both women reached out and took the other's hand so they could talk in private.

"I take it you don't recognise him either," said Susanna.

"Nope. A complete mystery. I'm not sure about his motives, though." Suzette fired an image of a wolf undressing at her double.

Susanna nodded. "*A wolf remains a wolf even though it has not eaten your sheep,"* she quoted. "*I'm not sure what we should do at this point - other than make sure the* Phoenix *is ready to fly."* She could not help a feeling of apprehension. "*I still haven't seen Lily anywhere, either."* Her fear that she had been killed in the attack roared through their link.

Instead of trying to placate her sister, Suzette simply shared the feeling. It would be a cruel fate for their friend if she had been killed in the attack.

When they reached the end of the hall and pushed back the blast door, they were dismayed to see a number of

scorch marks on the wall, but otherwise there seemed to be little actual damage to the ship. There were obvious marks where someone had recently done some repair work, but otherwise there seemed to be little left to do. All the same, they set about making certain their deflector system would work.

They looked down at some people who were also unfamiliar to them working on the booster section below. It was clear they were working feverishly to complete the work, as if they, too, knew the importance of this missile's flight.

Taking their lead, they women got to work.

On the surface, Will Riker of the Starship *Enterprise-E* was taking a quick break. He needed something to drink, and his first thought was to try the bar, but it was still too early in the day – it was not yet open.

So, he turned his attention to walking to the shop. He had been prepared enough to bring some local currency with him, so buying a soft drink should pose no problem.

As he walked, he drank in the clear air and lush forest that reminded him of his native Alaska. While he loved serving on a starship it was always welcome to stretch his feet on real soil and there was no place better than on his home world where even the gravity was just right.

"I see you're getting all nostalgic," came a friendly, feminine voice to his left.

He gave her a huge grin. While the two of them were not officially a couple, Deanna Troi would always be the

most special woman in his life. The one who would always truly hold his heart's title deed. "I'm just on my way to get some refreshment. Care to join me?" he asked charmingly with a twinkle in his eye.

The exotic Betazoid took his arm and said: "I'd love to." While her affection for Will was clear, there was something that was clearly bothering her.

Riker guessed it in one. "Still got a hangover?" he asked gently. "I'm sure we'll find some aspirin in the store."

In her peculiar accent that lay somewhere between Greek and British, Deanna said: "That's one of the best ideas I've heard all day." She rubbed her temple. Partially for effect, and partially to dull the throbbing in her brain.

It took them a few moments to walk to the store. Along the way Will filled her in on his encounter with the Lee sisters. "They're just like the books said they were," he said. "They know what they want and how to get it out of people. It's a pity no pictures were ever taken of them." He snapped his fingers. "Of course, how can I let a chance like this pass? Remind me – some time I have to take a photo of them – for history's sake."

Deanna was always on the lookout to defend people. "Perhaps nobody ever took a photo of them was because they didn't like being photographed?" she offered. "You should ask them."

"Nah," he said defiantly. "All the more reason not to miss this chance." He snapped his fingers as a connection was made in his mind. "*Now* I remember who they remind

me of. Captain Piper from the *U.S.S. Millennium*!" he said excitedly. He frowned to himself and stopped to consider the thought. "Actually, Susanna looks just like her," he said, perplexed. "Right down to the dyed honey hair and emerald-green eyes."

Deanna brought him back to reality. "It *can't* be her," she said. "Didn't you say she had an identical twin sister who was injured? Never mind she would be two hundred years out of time."

Will Riker took a moment to consider Suzette. "I see your point," he said. "But that's what makes this whole thing even spookier. Aside from the facial injury, Suzette looks just like Piper did when she graduated from the Academy."

Troi gave him a light chuckle and dragged on his arm. "Enough of these fantasies about old Starfleet women!" she said, feigning jealousy. "I need painkillers!"

He let her win and lead them into the shop, but the more he thought about it, the more fascinated he became regarding the Lee sisters. Was it possible?

As he headed over to the fridge to find some beverages, Deanna saved herself some time and asked the proprietor for help with some aspirin.

"I don't have a whole lot left of them," she said in her grandmotherly tone. "Cochrane has pretty much cleaned me out!"

After her encounter the previous night with him, and his insistence that she drink shot after shot of tequila,

Deanna understood. She looked into the lady's eyes with her warm brown ones and gave her a knowing smile. "I know what you mean."

Something shiny behind the shopkeeper caught Deanna's attention. "Where did you get that from?" she asked, pointing at an odd piece of jewellery hanging behind the counter.

"You can't buy that just yet," the old lady said. "I'm holding that as surety for the Lee sisters. Lovely girls, aren't they?"

"May I see it?" Troi asked politely.

The shop keeper gave her a second look, then decided that Deanna was good people and allowed her to hold the piece. In her hand, Troi knew exactly what it was.

"Will!" she said in a tone she knew he would respond immediately to: a little urgent, a little worried.

He appeared at her elbow a moment later with the drinks in his hands. "What is it?" he asked, concerned.

Deanna held up Piper's captain's bars for Riker to see. "I think you might be right," she said in all seriousness.

Once the Lee sisters were certain that the deflector was working properly, they climbed further down the echoing shaft to see if they could be any help to the people working below. They found them working on the secondary throttle assembly where it had been damaged by the mystery attack.

"How's it going?" Susanna asked, crouching down beside them. She peered into the open panel to see the components of the throttle had been slightly damaged by their attackers. The burn marks were still clearly visible.

A man in his mid-forties with thinning, brown hair gave her a wide, ingratiating smile. "Hi!" he said a little too cheerfully. "I'm Reg Barclay." He put out his hand and vigorously shook theirs whilst looking at them like a deer caught in headlights. It was as if he was in the presence of rock stars and just couldn't wait for them to say something to him.

Suzette kept it simple. "We're the Lee sisters," she said. "I'm Suzette..."

"And I'm Susanna," she finished personally.

Barclay seemed delighted to meet them. "It's a joy to meet you ladies," he said like an excited puppy. "Your contributions to space travel have been extraordinary!"

There was something about what he said that told the women he was speaking in hindsight, not foresight. To compound the statement, the young male next to him said: "Careful, Reg!"

Suzette seized the opportunity to pump him for information. "What ship do you serve on?"

Before his friend could stop him, Reg blurted out: "The Enter..."

"...prise," came a voice behind them, finishing the statement. The Lees spun to see Will and a beautiful

Betazoid woman standing with him. "But you already know that, don't you *Captain Piper."*

"I think you have us confused...." Susanna stopped when Will presented her with her Captain's bars. After a moment's contemplation, she simply said: "Oh."

Next to them, Reg looked thoroughly confused. "I thought they're the Lee sisters who invented the Nav Deflector."

The Betazed woman tilted her head to the side as she read them – inside and out. Her empathic ability helped her to feel what others felt, but the Piper's latent Psi talent gave her access to their surface thoughts. "I think they're *both*, Will," she said, baffled.

Riker did a double take as he turned to her. "What?" Susanna/Piper stood and addressed him while Suzette turned her attention back to the throttle assembly. There was something about it that was bothering her.

"You have me at a loss, Will," she said.

Riker drew himself up to attention and made a formal introduction. "I'm Commander Will Riker, this is Counsellor Deanna Troi, and these people are part of the crew of the *U.S.S. Enterprise."*

Piper tipped her head to the side with as she considered the man. "Obviously not Jim's *Enterprise*, so you're from our future as well." She tapped her teeth with a fingernail. "The paradoxes just keep piling up."

"Paradoxes?" Deanna asked, curious.

Piper gave her a smile tinged by pain. "It would take a lot of explaining. The simplest explanation I can give you is that we're here because the Guardian of Forever," Riker flinched at the name, "sent us here." She lay her hand on her "sister's" head. "This is Piper Silayna of the *U.S.S. Ingram.* Essentially, she's me from a different timeline. We're the same person from two eventualities and we're both here to stop a certain paradox from destroying the space/time continuum."

Riker was cluey, that Piper could see. It didn't take him long to find a flaw in her reasoning. "How can that be when we're from *your* future and it hasn't happened there."

Suzette stood up and addressed him for the first time. "That's because, Commander, you're not from *my* future, or my sister's. My guess is that you're from the original timeline that was disrupted when a ship from your future entered our past and changed everything for all of us."

Deanna looked like her head was spinning. "How can that be?"

Susanna gave her a polite smile. "Therein lies the paradoxes. Even if I tell you the name of the ship and when it will fall back into the past, there's no guarantee you will succeed in returning to the future due to the paradoxes that are at work here."

Behind them, Reg Barclay made an interesting observation. "If you're not the Lee sisters, where are the *real* Susanna and Suzette Lee?"

At that, both Pipers laughed in a beautiful harmony. Together, they said: "We *are* the real Lee sisters." Susanna continued. "The names came out of our imaginations."

At that, even Riker baulked. "That can't be true," he said incredulously. "That would mean..."

Suzette beat him to it. "...that we're part of a predestination paradox, yes. We were always meant to be here to create the Navigational Deflector for the *Phoenix*."

Deanna looked at them both incredulously. "How can that be?"

Susanna shrugged her shoulders nonchalantly. "Hey, I nearly flunked Temporal Mechanics at the Academy. Don't ask me."

Riker could see Piper's legendary nonchalance hadn't abandoned her, even though he noted Suzette – Piper Silayna – wasn't quite as cheerful as her other self. Perhaps a result of her injury, he wondered. All the same, their presence presented him with a quandary. "What am I supposed to do with the two of you?" he said, unsure of where to go next.

Susanna/Piper looked him in the eye. The tough veneer of Command came down and Riker got to see another side of the legendary captain. She was cheerful when she wanted to be, and hard as nails at other times. This was one of them. "I don't see that you have any authority to, *Commander*," she said. She recalled her sister's memory of the night before. The bald man was the *Enterprise's* captain, that she was certain of. Obviously, something had called

him away and he had left his first officer in charge down here. "Never mind the fact that I, we, outrank you, I need you to know that our presence here is essential to help restore the time/space continuum. If you interfere, there may not be a future for you to return to."

Uncertain, Riker glanced at Troi, who could only offer: "She believes every word she's telling you, Will. I believe her."

Suzette turned and stood, catching the two of them with her unbalanced glare. "As the Guardian sent us back, we will only be remaining until we've finished our task. Once that is achieved, we'll automatically return to the future." Riker was about to interject, but she held up a hand to silence him. "One thing we must stipulate, Commander. Under no circumstances are you to take any images of either of us – period."

"Why?"

Susanne gave him a glib answer. "Because I said so will have to do, Commander."

Riker drew himself up to his full height, not liking that answer one bit. He found himself staring into the unflinching eyes of not one, but *two* Captains Piper. He had temporarily forgotten her reputation for being a force of nature.

"There are agencies working against us, Commander," Suzette said without blinking.

"Who cannot be allowed to know we're here," Susanna continued.

"If they come looking for us, we could wind up with even more paradoxes and the result could be even more catastrophic," Suzette completed.

Riker looked from one to the other, uncertain where he stood. While Piper outranked him, he wasn't certain that a person from another timeline had any authority over him. The whole notion was beginning to make his head hurt. Singling out Susanna, he said: "Given that the two of you have a place in all our established timelines, I have to admit you make a strong case. There are no photographs of either of you in the future, and I'll make a point of not taking any either."

Both women stepped back and gave him a grateful nod. "We appreciate that Commander," they said in unison.

Out of the corner of her eye, Troi noticed Reg Barclay seemed even more starstruck than usual. He seemed ready to burst. "Reg," she said quietly, but firmly. "We will *all* have to keep this out of our reports and to ourselves." At his crestfallen visage she added: "We cannot tell anyone – *ever*."

For a moment, Reg seemed lost. Troi was concerned what he had been asked to do was too much for him. Her concern was allayed when Susanna Lee dropped down on her heels and turned her attention back to the throttle assembly.

"Well, Mister Barclay," she said amiably. She put her hand on his shoulder and steered him back to the task. "Let's spend some time together while we get this throttle

assembly working properly. We'll be happy to field any questions you have regarding our ships in the future."

The notion that he had the attention of one of Starfleet's finest for the duration tickled the engineer and gave him something to look forward to.

Still standing, Suzette shook both Will and Deanna's hands. "If you'll excuse me, Commander, Counsellor, I'm going below to check over the rest of the *Phoenix*."

"Not necessary, Captain," Riker said, trying to be helpful. "My people have already been over the rest of the ship. She's nearly ready to fly."

Suzette tapped her temple next to her artificial eye. "Don't underestimate the technology, Commander," she said. "I can see a whole lot more than you can with this. You'd be surprised how handy it's been at times."

The *Enterprise-E's* crew members could relate as they had lost track of how many times their Chief Engineer's artificial eyesight had come in handy. Riker simply nodded, not giving anything away. "I understand, Captain." He ushered her towards the ladder. "Be my guest."

Without further ado, Suzette headed downwards, but not until after she had touched her sister on the shoulder briefly. As she disappeared from sight, Riker stepped back through the blast door, headed for the stairs upward. He had to prepare for the *Phoenix's* flight.

Behind him, Troi considered the two Pipers. There was something about them that rang a bell in her mind. When Suzette had touched Susanna, she had felt something

she didn't expect. When she realised what it was, she picked up her pace to catch Riker.

"Will?"

Several steps ahead of her on the stairs, he paused. "Yes, Deanna?"

"How well do you know Captain Piper?" She caught up with him. He noticed she was wearing her curious face.

Riker thought back. He loved reading about the exploits of the Starfleet captains of yesteryear. Captain Piper's career had been a notable one as her ship was one of the few fighter carriers ever employed – and this one with a cloaking device. She had used the ship's technology to great effect and had often been sent into the most dangerous situations. "What do you want to know?" he asked.

"Was she telepathic?"

Of all the things she was going to ask, that was one of the last he expected. "I seem to recall she was telepathically linked to her First Officer, a Vulcan named Sarda."

Troi nodded her understanding. "That would explain it," she said. "For her to link with a Vulcan, she must be psi sensitive." She looked back towards the rocket. "No surprise that she's capable to share her thoughts with another version of herself freely."

"Sorry?" Will was bewildered. "What gave you that idea?"

Deanna smiled. It was typical of those who were not telepathic to pick up on the signs. "What did you think that

touch on the shoulder was all about a minute ago?" she asked, gently mocking him. "She was sharing something with Susanna before she went below. I almost heard it."

Will shrugged. "Nothing we need to worry about," he said as he resumed climbing. "They are on our side."

Troi glanced back towards the *Phoenix*. She hoped he was right.

Chapter Eight

After several days of fruitless searching, Captain Daniels was getting more than a little frustrated. The universe was coming apart around him and he still hadn't a clue as to Piper's whereabouts in time.

He had to remind himself that time *was* on his side. With Piper in the past, all he had to do was find a clue and he could be there a moment after the clue was created.

The waiting was what was killing him. He had the full resources of his ship working on the problem and yet he had still to find *anything* from the past.

Meddling with time was a dangerous thing and he worried about the possible changes Piper could be wreaking on history, yet he was beginning to realise there were no distinct ripples from her departure.

In his panic to try and find the *Millennium's* captain, he had failed to check on the time continuum using the technology at his disposal. A change should be quickly noticeable.

Daniels stepped into a small room that operated much like a holodeck, however it was linked to a miracle of modern ingenuity that could look for distortions in time and display them. Any moment in history was available to him prior to the ship's launch.

The trouble with Piper reminded him of his previous adventures with Jonathan Archer and the crew of the NX-01 *Enterprise*. The changes brought by the Suliban and their

cohorts had made his life miserable for a time – including his being shot by Silik in the twenty-first century. Silik's actions had seemed irreparable for a time – until the whole misery had been unravelled by Archer's activities in his future and the Earth's altered past. Once the pivotal point in history had been repaired, all went back to the way it should have been.

Now he was looking for that point. He only wished he could go back a couple of days and stop Piper from going through the Guardian at all, but he could not change events that would change his *own* past. He had enough paradoxes to worry about it.

As history swirled around him in a three-dimensional display of time eddies and currents, he could glimpse moments in the histories of many worlds and had to consider that Piper could literally be anywhere in the universe – at any time. However, he had a plan.

"Computer," he said calmly. He had to settle his nerves to keep his mind clear and focussed. "Report on any changes in the continuum since Captain Piper of the *U.S.S. Millennium* went back in time."

It took only a moment to report: "There are none."

Daniels' eyes went wide in amazement. That wasn't possible. "Recheck."

The A.I. computer's tone changed to one of derision. "I'm not going to waste my time on such a fruitless exercise." As Daniels rolled his eyes, the computer said:

"And don't go rolling your eyes at me. Since Piper departed there have been no changes."

"How can that be?" he said in frustration.

The feminine and sultry voice said: "The reason should be obvious."

Daniels scowled. He remembered his classes in Basic Temporal Mechanics and knew the computer was right. If someone went back in time and nothing changed it was because it was due to a predestination paradox. That person's actions were a necessary part of history. "So, what should I do? Ignore it?"

"No, I'm not suggesting that at all. Just because Piper's activities are an established part of history it doesn't mean that your activities to dissuade her from whatever she's doing won't be as well."

There were times when Daniels wondered if the person who programmed his ship's computer had a vendetta against him. Even though the voice was sexy, he often felt like he was back in school worrying if he was going to have to do one of those mental exercises a hundred times over again if he got the answer wrong.

"Alright, Computer."

"Sally," it corrected, sounding a little miffed.

This time the human took a deep breath. He was no longer worried about Piper. He was now consumed in his annoyance with the A.I. that insisted that it be treated as a person – complete with name. As it ran his ship – and pretty

much everything else on board – he had to play ball. There was nothing worse than a petulant computer.

"Okay, Sally," he said, doing his level best to be patient. "As we have not been able to find any photographic or textual trace of Piper prior to her natural lifespan, how do you suggest we precede?" There, suck on that one, he thought.

"You have not considered all the possibilities," Sally said, using her instructive tone again.

Surprised, Daniels asked: "What have I missed?"

"There is a remote possibility that someone from beyond this stardate had encountered her in the past and recorded it."

The notion was so far out that it was something that had not come to him. Incredulously he said: "Are you suggesting that *another* time agent may have come across her? That there would be a report of it in our database?"

"Not necessarily. Time agents are not the only people who have travelled back in time."

There it was. Once again, out there, but not beyond the realm of possibility. "All right, Sally," he said, for once pleased with the computer. "Start running a check."

With the work finished on the throttle assembly, Susanna led the rest of the Engineering team topside to watch as the hatch slid aside. On her way up, she had noticed the time was drawing near for the ship's launching and she hurried to reach the surface to watch the event.

It wasn't every day that she got to witness a pivotal moment in history. If everything went right, not only would Cochrane break the light barrier, but it would only be a matter of hours before humanity had its first encounter with Vulcans. From this day forward, things would start improving for the people of Earth. Poverty would soon pass, and a new golden age would begin for the world.

In another hundred years people from Earth would even colonise a little planet called Proxima Beta – her homeworld. It was now only a matter of time.

Standing on the edge of the launch tube, she looked down and saw the sunlight glint off the titanium shell of the *Phoenix's* nose cone that held her navigational deflector. She mused to herself the odd chain of events that brought her here and wondered again if this all meant to be. Without her and Suzette's contributions, there was a good chance the warp ship would never have come back.

She glanced behind her. It was funny how things were working out. If she *and* Riker's *Enterprise* hadn't come into this time, there wouldn't have been much of Bozeman left for the Vulcans to visit. Cochrane had failed to take into account the backwash from the missile's launch. The buildings surrounding the silo and the watching locals would have been vaporised if the *Enterprise* crew hadn't erected some portable shield generators to protect them as the nearby structures were too close to the shaft for safety.

She wondered to herself if there was some cosmic force at work, bringing about order from chaos. Never mind

the impossible notions that civilisations were forming everywhere, bringing about peaceful, or at least regulated, societies that moved forward. All of this was formed from a universe whose one guiding principle was that everything eventually fell apart. It was as if the nature of intelligent beings rebelled against the entropy that would one day claim them.

However, stubbornness wasn't enough. She knew that. There seemed to be a greater consciousness bringing about positive changes that were beyond the abilities of mere men.

She considered this thought for a moment and decided to share it with her sister. Thinking of her, she looked down the side of the shaft, past the rocket, and saw something that startled her. Someone was firing a phaser!

"I could use some help down here!" Suzette's voice was clear in her mind carrying with it a clear note of worry.

Susanna turned and bolted for the entrance. She took the steps two at a time, passed a startled Ryan and dashed down the corridor, pausing in the control room only long enough to snatch up her katana.

Deanna watched her go as she began her countdown. "Be careful!" she yelled. "We've only got one minute to go!"

One of Deanna's people closed the door behind Piper and dogged it closed. Troi worried for the captain, but she was also aware just how vitally important it was for the *Phoenix* to launch on time. She discounted her fears for her

as she remembered just how capable she was. Piper was no fool.

Curiously, another, youngish, man entered the control room behind her and made for the door as if to follow Piper. Deanna looked at him, realising this man was out of place. She was far too busy with her preparations to scan him. "Can I help you?"

Daniels looked at Troi with barely concealed amazement. Of all places for Piper to turn up. "No, Commander," he said, addressing her by her rank. "How much longer to lift off?"

Deanna was too preoccupied to spend time interrogating the stranger. She simply replied, "Forty-five seconds."

The young man stamped his foot in annoyance and made his way back topside. Deanna let him go. She had more important things to worry about.

Suzette had been minding her own business, trying to avoid choking on the vapours from the rocket fuel. While the base of the shaft was ventilated, she found herself feeling a little light-headed from the lack of oxygen.

Her visual inspection had gone well, and she was just about to move back to the ladder when she heard a familiar sound behind her. Knowing the *Enterprise* was in orbit was one thing, however the timing of the sound was peculiar. What on earth would someone be doing beaming down here moments from launch?

Instinctively, she ducked into an alcove and looked back towards the source of the sound. What she saw took her breath away. The time agent, Keily Daniels, was standing on the opposite side of the platform, looking around her, phaser drawn, clearly on the hunt. A vent hatch opened near her, and she shot it in reflex.

"Come out, Captain Silayna!" she growled. "Your time here is done!"

Suzette fired off a quick thought at her sister and prayed she would get here in time. In the darkened alcove, she looked around her quickly for a weapon, something, that she could use but came up empty. Everything was fixed to the walls. There was nothing loose.

When she came back up to look for Daniels, she found herself staring down the muzzle of a miniature phaser.

"You're a hard woman to find, Silayna," Keily said menacingly. "It took me some time to find the right woman sporting an artificial eye."

Suzette grimaced. She had wondered what had given her away. All the same, the notion occurred to her that Daniels seemed to be hunting only *her*.

"Come out of there," Keily said in a decidedly unfriendly fashion. She wisely stepped back as the much taller captain stepped out of the shadows. She kept her phaser aimed squarely at her heart. She reached behind her with her free hand and took out a set of mechanical binders that seemed more in keeping with this century than the thirty-first. "Put these on," she ordered.

Suzette wondered to herself what she had in mind. The woman could simply have beamed the two of them out immediately. The look in the woman's eyes was wild, almost mad. Antique binders suggested a more sinister purpose.

"Forty seconds," the voice reverberated down the shaft.

In Suzette's mind she heard her sister say: *"Stall as long as you can. I'm coming."*

She fired back an image of Keily holding the binders and phaser. *"Gotcha,"* she heard back.

Suzette slowly took the handcuffs and looked at Keily askance.

"Clamp it to one of your wrists," she ordered.

Suzette obeyed, fumbling a little with the cuffs, doing her best to buy time.

"Thirty seconds."

The cuff clicked closed. Keily snatched the other one and snapped it shut around a safety railing. In shock, Suzette realised the time agent was going to let her be incinerated by the rocket exhaust. She looked up at the base of the vehicle, for once terrified that she was going to be roasted alive. As she did so, she noticed something she had missed before. Concern overcame fear as she realised what it was. The main ignition cable that provided the spark to start the rocket motors was damaged. There was no way for the engine to ignite the rocket fuel that would be soon

pouring out of the nozzles. The *Phoenix's* mission was doomed if they failed to act in time.

She pointed upwards, hoping to get the agent's attention to the dire situation they were all in. If the motors failed to ignite not only would the *Phoenix* not fly, but there was a good chance the accumulating fuel would be ignited by something else and explode, taking out not only the ship, but a good portion of the town as well. "Agent Daniels," she said, imploring. "The *Phoenix* is damaged. Help me fix it before it's too late."

"Twenty seconds."

Keily Daniels simply scowled at her. "I don't believe you, and even if I did, there's no time left to fix it."

Suzette was amazed at her lack of concern. The success of this mission was tantamount to *all* the possible futures. For her to display such a lack demonstrated the woman had tipped over the edge into madness.

Behind Daniels Susanna landed, cat-like, on the grating the three of them were standing on. Try as she might, there was still a slight noise as she touched down. Knowing she was discovered; her hand went straight over her shoulder and pulled the katana from its sheath.

Daniels whirled at the sound and tried to bring her phaser to bear, but she made the mistake of getting in the path of the whirling katana. Her right hand dropped to the floor, still bearing the phaser.

Appalled, Daniels fell to her knees, cupping the newly amputated limb with her left hand whilst she tried to

staunch the flow of blood. She looked in horror at her hand, laying on the floor, as the fingers twitched.

"Ten seconds."

There was no time to escape. However, to women like Piper, their lives were far from the greatest concern if parting with it would bring the mission success. The *Phoenix* had to fly – nothing else mattered.

Suzette fired an idea at her sister, and she responded in kind. At the speed of thought, they formulated a plan.

Susanna dropped to her knees and retrieved the phaser.

She also took the time agent's communicator from her belt to keep her from calling her ship.

"You can't use it, either" Keily said, feeling a final victory as she glowered at the Pipers. "It's coded only for me."

Susanna took her sister's hand. In that moment, in their minds, they were in complete agreement. The mission was more important than their lives. It always had been. History had to be preserved. They also took some solace that, if they had to die, at least it would be together and quick.

Susanna raised the phaser as she heard the release of fuel overhead. Out of the corner of her eye she could see the ignition lead arcing as it failed to bring the required spark to the rocket. Knowing the only way to light the engine was to sacrifice themselves, she raised the phaser and fired it into the cascading fuel, igniting it.

Daniels could do nothing but scream as the hot gasses engulfed her, searing her flesh with a massive blast that pushed her flat to the floor and momentarily reduced her to ashes.

As Deanna watched the *Phoenix* fly into the blue on the monitor it occurred to her to check on her ground staff. She called for her people to check in as she wandered topside. There was little her people could do for Cochrane now. It was all in their hands.

One by one her staff checked in and she smiled as she realised they were all accounted for. That was when the penny dropped.

She turned to Reg Barclay, who was standing nearby and asked: "Have you seen either of the Lee sisters?"

The man gave her one of those looks that had him trying to decide whether to be cool or excited. It annoyed some but Deanna found it to be one of Reg's more endearing characteristics. "You mean Captain...." he shook himself. "No, I haven't seen either Susanna or Suzette Lee since before the launch."

She hoped Piper had gotten out in time. She asked a few more of her fellow officers and got nothing. She then ordered a thorough search – including the shaft, which she decided to do herself.

With the ventilators running, it took only a short time for the air to clear. Deanna was careful not to touch any

metallic surfaces as many of them were still warm. At least the fold-down decking had cooled quickly.

She put down her mental shielding and called out to Piper and her duplicate but got nothing in response. Aside from herself and the other *Enterprise* crewmen she could see, there was no sign of anyone.

As she reached the bottom of the shaft, she came upon something peculiar. There was a misshapen form on the decking and, at first, she wondered if it was Piper. However, it quickly became clear to her the size was wrong. Whoever this poor being had been the height was wrong. The corpse was almost a foot shorter than the captain. The face was too charred to identify, the skin grizzled and disgusting. There was even a smell of charred meat in the air that almost made the Counsellor retch.

A glint of light on metal drew her attention to the nearby railing and she found, to her astonishment, a pair of antique handcuffs dangling from the railing. They were still shut, as if they had once held someone, but were now empty. It was a discovery that left her with nothing more than another unanswered question. Where were the Captains Piper? She feared for their safety, but a little voice inside her suggested that perhaps their time in the 21st Century was done. It gave her some solace, but all the same, she left a standing order that, if they should be seen, that she be notified immediately.

Later that evening, the Vulcan explorer ship *T'Plana-Hoff* landed in the open space near the launcher. As

it should be, Lily rejoined Cochrane and, together, they welcomed the visitors from another world. They would always keep to themselves the discovery that the Vulcans were not, in fact, the first aliens they ever met.

And Cochrane would never know how close he had come to being at the wrong end of an exploding rocket.

Continued in Fractured, Book 2: Shock Wave.