

EXORCISING THE PAST



Sean O'Keefe

Exorcising the Past
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Exorcising the Past

Piper beamed on board and looked around her at a transporter room that was at the same time one she was acquainted with, yet new. The *Constitution*-class ship was one she was intimately familiar with. She knew it had taken years to completely decontaminate her after the previous captain had allowed her to be infected with a pathogen that wiped out her previous crew.

Now, after two years of experience as the first officer of the *Hood*, Piper had been ordered to take over command of the *USS Exeter*.

While she was thrilled to have attained the rank of captain so young, she also realised this was the ship that nobody wanted. Indeed, her name had not been at the top of the list of candidates. However, everyone above her had turned it down. She understood why. This ship has a cursed history.

A whistle nearby drew her attention. She realised she was being given the royal treatment. With a smile, she watched as her new crew went through the ritual of welcoming their new commander and observing the transfer of command.

As her previous commander – her *official* commander – was in prison, an old friend and mentor had been able to find the time to take his place. It made sense, this man had been the one to bring the *Exeter* home.

Captain James T Kirk greeted his former pupil with a friendly grin. Piper had begun her career on the *Enterprise* under his command, and her meteoric rise to captain was second only to his own. In her case, however, it was helped by the passing of an entire crew and a stigma many did not want applied to them. He felt for her. Exorcising the demons of this ship's past would be difficult.

Piper's eyes lit up, delighted. "Permission to come aboard?" she asked. Tradition had to be respected.

"Granted," Jim replied, proudly.

The slightly taller woman stepped up to the Starfleet legend and listened as her mentor began the formal transfer of command.

"Captain Piper," his statement drew a few curious looks, "as of Stardate 5786.4, you are required to take command of this ship, the *USS*

Exeter, as her captain.” He handed her a padd that demanded her thumbprint.

Piper knew this was the make or break moment. Her final step towards accepting the role as master of this vessel. It was a journey that had already taken her through a number of amazing adventures. Once she took this padd and her thumbprint was recorded, the buck stopped with her.

Piper had commanded before. This was nothing new to her. She had even been the commander – ever so briefly – of a *Federation*-class dreadnought. After her time on the *Enterprise*, Piper has spent some time running the *Sparrowhawk*, a new, small science (and secretly, espionage) ship. Once a first officer, there had been times when the captain was absent from the *Hood* and she had guided her.

However, the *Exeter* would be hers from this day on. Her fears at her own adequacy screamed within her, but she stoically told them to shut up and, even though there was a slight quiver in her hand, she gratefully accepted the padd and applied her print.

“I relieve you, sir,” she said formally, grinning at Jim, doing her best to mask her trepidation.

Kirk had seen the slight shake. In his mind, he was glad. It told him that Piper was aware of the immense responsibility she was accepting. She wasn’t going into it blindly.

With complete certainty and delight, Jim answered: “I am relieved.”

Both of them relaxed and shared a warm handshake.

Now the formalities were over, the small group assembled gave their now commander a polite clap.

Piper did her best to keep her feelings to herself. She put on her best poker face and greeted the *Exeter*’s new command team. None of them were familiar to her, and deep down she was disappointed. Her requests had gone unheeded.

First up, she shook the hand of her new first officer, a tall Andorian male who reminded her a little of images she had seen of Commander Shran – who had been a good friend of President Jonathan Archer. This chan’s name as Rhian Ch’Alenathan, and his career had been long and storied. Piper knew. She had looked over all of their files.

Piper was also a good judge of character. While Rhian's face looked friendly, she knew she saw hostility in his eyes.

"Welcome aboard, Captain," he said in a polite tenor.

"Thank you, Commander Ch'Alenathan. I look forward to working with you." Piper kept her voice friendly and welcoming. However, the ice in his eyes showed no sign of melting.

She moved on to the CMO, a female who appeared to be from Cheron. Piper drew her eyebrows together in a confused frown. While she had seen this person's name in the file, she had no idea *how* they could be here. She took the being's hand in hers, the confusion in her mind clear on her face.

Piper wasn't alone in her mindset. Jim Kirk had joined her. He asked: "Are you of Cheron?"

The woman gave them both an almost apologetic smile. "Yes, Captains. I am from a colony of Cheron. I'm aware the two of you visited our motherworld, which was sadly devastated by our interracial hatreds. Cheron orbits 83 Leonis A, while our colony was placed on a class-M world we discovered around 83 Leonis B. We called it Ceruse, which in our tongue means: purity."

Jim narrowed his eyes. "In our culture, white is often associated with purity."

The young CMO gave them a knowing smile. "I believe I know where you're going, Captain Kirk. However, our colony was set up by people who wanted to put the racial hatreds behind us." She cheerfully added: "I'm born of mixed parenting."

Piper thought for a moment, *It's a good thing they don't come out checked.* "I'm glad to have you here..." The distraction had left her at a loss.

Her new first officer chimed in: "Stella. The Cheron don't add a clan affiliation."

Piper couldn't help but wonder who he seemed to be annoyed at. Her for not remembering, or the Doctor for not honouring her family's lineage with a clan name. "They're not alone there. When my people came to Proxima, there were so few of us our parents decided to leave their pasts behind – and their family names. Hence, my moniker is simply "Piper"."

She didn't add that she had been named for the woman who had brought her mother to Proxima Beta, and that her mother's entire family had been wiped out. There *was* no family for her to cling to.

Once more, the Andorian seemed miffed somehow. Piper could guess. Names, and family affiliations, were very important to the Andorians. One had to *earn* their names with service to their people. She wondered just how much of an affront her people's lifestyle would be to the blue-skinned militants.

Putting the Commander out of her thoughts, Piper moved onto the next officer.

On the main viewscreen of the *Exeter*, the view had been panned aft at the request of the XO. It was simply an affectation for him, he liked the sight of the ship's upgrades.

"They do look great, don't they?" asked the young lieutenant at Helm, who had glanced up from his board.

Rhian's skin turned a deeper, proud blue. "They do, indeed, Lieutenant. They'll give us an extra warp factor at cruising speed alone."

Together, they admired the sleeker, more angular warp nacelles. They still had the red Bussard collectors, but they were rectangular and angled downward and aft, as if they were pointing towards the future.

To add to the overall, modern look, the new nacelles were attached with swept back pylons, looking more like wings than struts.

The young, human helmsman, Roger Corman, looked at it with a smile. In his eyes, the *Exeter* had become something of a hot-rod. "Speed works for me, Commander."

The XO gave him a slight smile. "Anything that brings us to the battle faster is welcome, Mr Corman."

The human's eyebrows jumped up at that. "Speaking of that, I hear that our departure has been delayed for twenty-four hours."

To Ch'Alenathan's ears, he sounded disappointed. All the same, he was happy to furnish the younger human with the reason. "The captain needs the time to compete in a competition before we leave."

Roger was certain the XO did not approve. "What sport?"

For once, the Andorian didn't have an answer. He wondered if it had anything to do with the bladeless hilt she had been wearing on her

hip when she beamed aboard. He had thought it an odd adornment. “I don’t know, but she has granted a twenty-four hour leave to the crew while she competes. Only a skeleton crew remains.”

Corman nodded. He was well aware of the fact. He didn’t resent not being one of the privileged masses, it was the luck of the draw. “I guess we drew the short straw, sir.”

Rhian decided to exercise one of his many privileges. He was bothered that the new captain would keep them from their launch. What could be so important? He decided he was going to find out.

“Mister Corman, you have the bridge. Let me know immediately if there are new orders.”

The younger man gave him a tight smile. He guessed where he was going.

The stadium was filled with the sight of blue-skinned people with antennae. Here and there were people of other kinds, a human here, a Vulcan there, even a woman of the Palkeo Est. They were easy to see in the sea of blue.

Piper made her way through the milling throng. This was the first time in years that this tournament was being held somewhere other than Andoria. This star year, the Federation was holding a festival featuring sports from many of its member worlds. As Andoria’s “sports” were all martial, Scheel-Tah had been chosen by them for the exhibition – and the annual challenge for its practitioners.

Starfleet’s newest captain made her way through the group towards the door, where she was intending to meet an old friend who had come to support her. Her eyes widened in shock as she found she was not alone.

Merete AndrusTaurus, her fellow academy graduate and now doctor assigned to Starfleet Academy, smiled up at her with her lovely slightly pinkish skin and almond-shaped eyes. Piper loved her friend, a woman without a mean bone in her body. They greeted one another with a hug. They had been through much since their Academy days and serving together on the *Enterprise*.

“Thanks for coming, Merete,” Piper said into her friend’s hair. “It means a lot to me that you’re here.”

“Anything for you, *Captain*,” the doctor replied with a cheeky air. “Congratulations on the promotion.”

Piper released her and turned to her other friend. She lifted her hand in the Vulcan manner and solemnly said: “Peace and long life, my friend.”

The brassy-haired Vulcan returned the gesture. “Live long and prosper, Piper.”

The formalities over of the way, Piper added: “Sarda! It’s so good to see you! I had no idea you were in the Sol system.”

Sarda lifted a friendly brow. “I am on leave – Captain’s orders. I have accumulated too much leave, she said, and ordered I take it all.”

Piper’s lips twitched. Leave for Sarda was a touchy subject as he could not return to his homeworld and family. He had been ostracized by his kin and there were many in Vulcan society who agreed with their stance. Sarda’s work and talents in weaponry were anathema to a peace-loving society like Vulcan’s. It stung Piper even more in that it was largely her fault they were even aware of it. “Are you spending your time here on Earth?”

Piper could swear she saw something in his eyes what realised she felt for him. Their friendship was long and tried by tribulations aplenty.

Stoic as ever, Sarda replied: “Indeed. I have been indulging in a study of the continent’s Death Valley. In its own way, it is quite beautiful.”

To their surprise, a fourth voice was added with a distinct southern drawl. “That’s right, Points. It’s gorgeous at sunset. There’s also plenty of good places to go rock climbing.”

The three turned to see an average-looking human in his late twenties and wearing a Hawaiian shirt, shorts and sandals. Judd “Scanner” Sandage was the missing piece of the Piper puzzle. The four of them had been a team since the Academy and seen one another through many trials. It was still a puzzle to her that they had been separated.

Judd, first, put out his hand and shook Sarda’s. The man was one of the few in the Universe the Vulcan would make this exception for. In turn, Merete and Piper gave him a hug.

Scanner gave a mock-embarrassed laugh. “Are there regulations against lowly lieutenant-commanders hugging captains?”

His friend laughed. “I’ll make an exception this time, Scanner,” Piper said, chuckling. “What are you doing here?”

The human looked up at her sceptically. “A captain and you can’t figure that out?”

Piper grinned. “OK, I deserved that. How did you get here?”

Scanner shrugged his pineapple-printed shoulders. “Our ship was recalled to Earth Starbase for an upgrade. The *Exeter* isn’t the only ship getting the new nacelles.”

“Ah,” Merete said quietly. “Why didn’t you let me know you were coming?”

Their comrade gave a chuckle. “Where’s the fun in that?”

An announcement echoed through the room. “Will the contestants please assemble on the floor?”

Piper shrugged. “I guess that’s me.” She made to leave, but felt a hand on her shoulder. She turned back and Sarda gave her a brief bow of the head.

“I have every confidence in you, Piper,” he said so sincerely it touched her heart.

She placed her hand over his. “How can I fail when I have friends like you?” she said, sharing her soul.

Scanner slapped her on the shoulder. “Kill,” he said grinning. “In a warm, loving Starfleet manner.”

Merete squeezed her other arm. “Chop down the forest.”

Piper gave them all a quick grin, then turned to go. She made her way through the entrance, having already been recognised by the tournament organisers. The human who had mastered Scheel-Tah was well known to them.

She quickly stopped by the change rooms and donned her ghee and left her shoes behind. The only thing she needed was her bone-handled hilt, which contained the blade she would need for the event.

Stowing her gear in a locker, Piper stepped out on to the tournament floor in time to hear her name being announced. She would be in the first round.

She smiled ruefully to herself. It was practically a tradition. The first time she had shown up for one of these, she had been selected in the first group because:

A: She was young and relatively new to the art and

B: She was not Andorian. Nobody expected her to win a single bout.

She had managed to win her first two bouts before being knocked out of the tournament.

Each year she progressed upwards through the ranks. Curiously, she was still being called in the first bouts. She mused to herself that there were some Andorians who could just not stomach that a pink-skin could wield a Vin-tah.

Piper patted her custom-made weapon on her hip. She took it everywhere. It was now a part of her uniform, and Starfleet had exceptions in their uniform code for such devices.

Her friends considered it an added appendage.

The six-foot tall human from Proxima Beta stepped out onto the competition floor. What she saw surprised her.

An announcer said for all to hear: "This year, we are trialling a new technology. All the contestants will be able to face off against one another using holographic technology. For their safety, they will not be in actual danger from one another's blades. All hits will be felt, but nobody will be injured. Points will be scored from body contacts, from either hands, feet or blade. This format will allow the players to essentially "cut loose" and go for the kill. A "kill" will immediately eliminate a participant."

As it should, Piper mused to herself. She tuned out the rest of the instructions as she presented herself and was guided to her place on the mat.

Within moments, her opponent appeared on the other side of the square. She knew he was actually on the other side of the room, but he looked pretty real to her. He was a chan she was acquainted with. They had fought several times over the years.

He had never bested her.

Piper was not one to become complacent. A year was a long time to improve one's skills. She nodded at him. "Chrella," she said, acknowledging him.

He did not return the gesture. He simply charged.

In Scheel-Tah, there was no moment of mutual respect. This was simply kill, or be killed.

Nothing's changed, Piper thought as she watched him move. *Doesn't he have a different tactic?*

Piper easily deflected the blade's slice, then took her opponent by surprise by spinning and catching the side of his head with the arch of her foot.

Chrella went down, hard, on the floor. While he was not rendered unconscious, the automated judge announced: "Piper, winner, round one A."

Normally, Piper would help her opponent up, but she caught herself and resisted the impulse as she remembered he was not actually here. Indeed, to confirm her thought, Chrella's image disappeared.

The one thing about the encounter she found odd was there was no steel-on-steel "chink" when their blades connected. Just a peculiar thumping sound. She considered giving the organisers some feedback later on that regard. If you were going to have your opponents replaced with holograms, at least make it feel and sound real.

Piper stepped to the side of the arena and waited as round one B through V were played out. Most of them took longer than hers. She noted many familiar faces competing as she made her way to the stadium seating area. There noticed a number who would present a challenge to her – some she doubted she could beat. While she had reached the level of Master of Scheel-Tah, she was not a Grand Master, and some of them were present.

Noting her friends in the crowd, she gave them a friendly wave.

Blending in with this crowd was not in the least bit difficult for Rhian Ch'Alenathan. He had dressed in Andorian civvies, which was actually an outfit that looked as militaristic as his Starfleet uniform, such was the mentality of his people.

An hour ago, he had no idea what sport his new captain was involved in. The Federation event had many different sports on display this day, including things like the Australian humans displaying something they called 'AFL', which appeared to be a peculiar game where they chased a leather ball around an oval and kicked it through upright poles to score points.

Pointless, was his thoughts on the sport. There were many others from around the Federation on display. If he hadn't done a little detective work, he would never have known.

His first thought was that Piper might have played basketball or perhaps the human game of badminton.

This was the last thing he had considered. The captain's beam-down point was right outside this venue. The only thing being explored here today was Scheel-Tah.

Inside, he was quietly delighted to be surrounded by his own people, even if the temperature in the room was still too high.

On the other hand, he was annoyed that Piper had adopted a martial art from his own planet.

In the corner of his mind, he was having a conversation with himself. *Why are you offended by this? Should I be offended at all?* Scheel-Tah was an art he admired, even though he did not practice it. He had always considered himself too busy in his career in Starfleet to adopt such an art.

As he mounted the steps to the seating area, Rhian wondered why he was taking this so personally.

Within moments, he found a seat with a good view. When he sat, he heard his captain's name being called.

This should be quick, he thought to himself.

A three-dimensional image of Piper's grid square appeared above the players in the middle of the arena. He could clearly see the captain and his Andorian opponent.

The two of them began moving. It was all over in seconds.

Rhian had to admit to himself, he was impressed. Piper had laid the man out flat. She didn't need to continue. An unconscious man on the floor would – in reality – have quickly become a dead man on the floor.

He partially covered his face as he watched her step out and eventually make her way towards the front of the area. He saw her wave at some people and Rhian's attention was drawn to an eclectic group of three who seemed to be here to support her.

He had no idea who they were.

It wasn't his fault. Most of their exploits were state secrets.

He noted one was a reasonably tall Vulcan with oddly red hair. His people's ingrained distrust of his people kicked in, and he found himself having to fight the old urges. This being, who was wearing a Commander's uniform in the Starfleet clearly deserved respect. He considered introducing himself to the man later. One can learn a lot about a person from their friends.

Next to the Vulcan was a much smaller female from Altair IV. He didn't often meet someone of the Palkeo Est. Their natural inclination towards pacifism usually kept them out of martial services. He found her presence here odd. She wasn't wearing a uniform, but her bearing suggested she too might be in the services.

On the other side of the Vulcan was a male who had to be the most average-looking human being he had ever met. Average height, colour, hair, bearing. Everything about this man suggested *average*. Perhaps a man with little drive.

Yet he was standing with a Starfleet Vulcan and a Palkeo Est who was probably also Starfleet. He wondered about the peculiarly loud outfit the man wore and considered the possibility that he was Section 31. He had heard of beings like this in their service. People who wouldn't draw attention in a crowd. He made a mental note that he was not going to underestimate him.

These three were here to "cheer on" Piper, as the pink-skins would say. He pursed his lips. He was still not impressed. Humans, being a genial species, made friends.

Yet something bothered him about these three; completely different people drawn here by Piper for some reason. What brought them together?

He took his communicator out of his pocket and called the ship.

"What can I do for you, Commander?" Corman's tinny voice asked.

“Look up our new captain’s history for me. Particularly who she went to the academy with. Send the details to my tricorder.” He was all business.

“No problem, sir. I’ll get it done right away.”

Without a further thought, Ch’Alenathan snapped the communicator shut. About thirty seconds later his tricorder chirped its acknowledgement of the receipt of the information. While he watched Piper out of the corner of his eye he glanced over his new captain’s record. Yes, there it was. Her time in the Academy was marked by several scandals, several sections of which was classified. He noted that even his clearance couldn’t open the files.

However, he did note that a woman who was finishing her final year at the Academy finished a Lieutenant Commander. His antennae shot up in shock at that. Whatever this human female had done must have been spectacular.

He noted that she was decorated because of her exploits. Several times. Clearly, she had done something of significance, but most of that period of time was *classified*. Was she a member of Section 31?

He glanced over at the man in the bright shirt. Perhaps she was.

He noted the names of the people she had served with back then. Sarda, a *Vulcan*, Sandage, a *human* and AndrusTaurus from Altair IV.

His eyes were drawn back to the three. They were clearly her friends from the Academy.

There were several things about this that drew his attention. One being that she had the loyalty of a Vulcan. There were few humans that he knew of that had created that level of trust with one of those walking computers. Archer and T’Pol came to mind. Kirk and Spock as well. Considering these three had served with Kirk and Spock, perhaps he shouldn’t be surprised.

He turned his attention to Piper and accessed the Starfleet files on his new captain. Her early days were often *classified*. There was even a period of six months where she – and the other three – were working together on a project that was totally redacted. The only thing he drew from the files was the word *Sparrowhawk*. Was that the name of a vessel?

He glanced back at the people assembled below. He noted that the second draw was now up on display. He didn't recognise the name of the person she was up against. He wondered to himself how well she'd do. Her first bout was finished with a cheap shot. Legal, but a cheap shot.

Piper walked out onto the floor and took up her position once more. Again, her adversary appeared before her.

Ch'Thenarian. They had fought before. She remembered their last sparring session. He was good.

She took up her usual fighting stance, focussed and ready. As usual, she let him make the first move.

She's into counterpunch, Ch'Alenathan thought. She lets her opponent reveal their strategy so she can consider her reply. I wonder if she got that from Kirk.

He watched as they circled one another, their blades sometimes slashing, other times nearly connecting with their hands.

He too noted the odd sounds that carried to his ears. He found the artificial sound a bit off-putting. It seemed to take something from the import of the occasion. As if this marvellous art had been reduced to a sideshow entertainment.

He watched Piper as she continued to parry her attacker's attempts. In the end, she made a feint, and her opponent over-reacted. Now off balance, Piper spun and neatly chopped his head off.

The Andorian had to laugh. *Good thing for him they're using holograms.*

There was no collected gasp of horror from the audience. Andorians were quite used to the martial arts. Indeed, there was polite applause for her actions.

Ch'Alenathan did think it odd that her opponent's head didn't just fall to the floor, but that was holograms for you. Indeed, he noted that he had already left his square and was making his way, quite dejectedly, towards the door. There was no shame in losing, Ch'Alenathan thought. *Except if it was to an offworlder.*

The old prejudices still reared their heads from time to time in the back of his mind. His parents had raised him old school, expecting him to become part of the Imperial Guard, to protect the homeworld as his people found it hard to put all their faith in Starfleet – and offworlders – to protect Andoria.

However, that was not to be. At the time he was of age, the Guard wasn't looking for new recruits. Far too many of the higher families had put their children into the fighting force to prove themselves and earn their names.

Starfleet was always looking for new recruits. He took their offer and, fortunately for him, an opportunity to not only serve the Federation, but Andoria in particular, had helped him earn his name – without the help of the Imperial Guard.

Ch'Alenathan had served in Starfleet now for over twenty of their years and had attained the rank of Commander. However, he feared he would never make captain.

Those fears seemed confirmed as *Piper* – a woman who had not earned her name – was given command of the *Exeter*. He had to admit to himself he was angry.

Knowing such a reaction was beneath a being of his station, he tried to squash them. Even though he did now know a lot of his new commander's history, that did not mean that she was unworthy.

The redacted sections – and there were many of them – of Piper's history *did not help*.

Rhian watched once more as Piper stood at the front of the crowd and offered a friendly wave to her friends. Scanner seemed to smile at her in encouragement. Merete gave her a jaunty salute.

The Vulcan he could not work out. He sat there stoically, as their people were known to do, but he noted that Sarda's eyes did not leave Piper. Loyalty indeed.

It finally occurred to him that it was odd for Starfleet to overlook this. This was a team – its effectiveness was up for debate – but a team, nonetheless. Forged in its own fire. Why that illustrious organisation would separate them was beyond him.

The second round was finished and the winners declared. The contestants for the next round were announced.

Piper waved her friends down closer to the front. Now more than half of the contestants had been knocked out, the crowd had thinned considerably, and patches were now available in the front rows.

Merete led the three of them down and they found great seats at the front.

Delighted, Piper walked over and gave them a confident grin. “So far, so good,” she said.

The doctor gave her a slight smirk. “At least I haven’t had to medicate you yet.”

Scanner snorted. “The night is young.”

Piper looked fondly at her Vulcan friend. “Any words of encouragement, my friend?” She could swear the corners of his eyes crinkled ever so slightly.

In his solemn, baritone voice, Sarda announced: “You have the situation well in hand, Captain. Your skills have improved over the last year. I expect you to be an excellent challenger for the Grand Masters.”

Piper was touched. This was high praise indeed. “Thank you, Sarda. I’ve only ever been as strong as the team behind me.”

No one spoke. There was no need. They weren’t just comrades, they were family.

Piper heard her name called. She frowned at the name of her competitor: Ch’Cenathor.

“Why does this concern you, Captain?” Sarda inquired.

Piper smirked. “You missed last year’s tournament. I beat him – badly. He did *not* take it well.”

Merete’s brows came together. “Perhaps the organisers of this event aren’t the same as last year.”

Piper shook her head. “No. There’s only one Scheel-Tah organization. They would know.” She pursed her lips. *Am I overreacting?* she asked herself.

It was time. She shrugged to herself and stepped onto the floor once more and made her way to the fighting square. Hers was the one of two lit now there were fewer contestants. Ch’Cenathor’s square was on the opposite side. She could see him already standing there, ready, Vin-tah in hand.

Piper tapped the button near the hilt of her custom sword and the blade slid out, shining in the light. Her newly honey-blonde hair was tied back in a ring, her eyes watching. *This could get nasty.*

She took her place and gave her opponent a respectful nod, which he, surprisingly, returned. The two began moving, slowly circling, looking for openings.

From his place in the crowd, Ch'Alenathan watched the spectacle, entranced. They looked like warriors from the vids he used to adore as a child. Mythical beings of old battling for honour and glory.

He frowned after a moment. Piper's usual strategy was not working. It was as if her opponent was mirroring her actions. Had he been studying her? If so, why?

The Captain realised she was going to have to change tactics. They had been moving for about a minute, and nobody had yet to strike. She tried a feint to the right.

Ch'Cenathor didn't bite. He simply kept circling... watching.

In the crowd, Scanner sat forward, his eyes narrowed. "This doesn't feel right," he said slowly.

Next to him, Sarda had not let the two contestants out of his sight. Ch'Cenathor was moving like a predator, not a competitor in a sporting event. "Perhaps his defeat at Piper's hand has... disturbed him."

Merete tilted her head to the side. "I don't like the look of his eyes. I'd say he was as mad as hell."

Sarda shifted slightly forward in his seat, as did his friends. They were preparing themselves to defend their friend if necessary.

He shifted his view to the far corner where the *actual* contestant should be presently circling. He frowned. "Ch'Cenathor is not moving."

Scanner shook his head. "What do you mean, Points? I can see him right in front of me."

The doctor twigged to his line of thought. She looked hard at the far corner. Sure enough, the Andorian figure within was *not* moving.

Piper was surprised by the speed of the attack. Ch'Cenathor came at her hard and furiously. She deflected his blade with a clang and spun out of the way.

The Captain didn't have time to think about it. He came at her again, trying to use his larger size to his advantage. Again, she deflected, and it was only this time she realised the reality of the situation. This was no hologram. This was the real thing.

And judging by the look in his eye, he was out for blood.

Clang, clang, clang, Piper defended his attacks. The weapon vibrated in her hands every time it reverberated.

He lashed out with a foot and caught her in the midriff, knocking the wind out of her. Seeing it coming, she began to fall to cushion herself, but in the process lost her grip on her sword.

Fighting the pain in her stomach and the urge to retch, Piper watched as Ch'Cenathor stopped for a moment as if considering. He kicked Piper's Vin-tah aside and then threw his after it. He then advanced and delivered a brutal punch to her temple.

Piper saw stars. She almost lost consciousness, but clung to reality with all her will.

Her opponent was still moving and she felt him come behind her. Then she felt his arm around her throat.

Ch'Alenathan watched in stunned horror as the drama played out before him. Indeed, the whole crowd was watching the scene play out in three dimensions above the actual players. It took a moment to realise he should be *doing something*.

As he began to react, he looked over to where he had seen Piper's friends relocate to. Their seats were empty. He glanced at the competition floor and noted they were already moving.

Seeing their friend in mortal danger, the three jumped the railing together and began moving towards the competition. An official moved to block them and Scanner got in her way, preventing her from becoming a problem.

Sarda and Merete kept moving. Fortunately for Piper, the square she was fighting in was lit in such a way that it was hard to see outside it from within. That fact gave the tall Vulcan an advantage.

They padded over together towards the players and came up behind them as Ch'Cenathor began strangling Piper with an arm around her throat. As the officials finally called a *foul*, which Scanner later thought was ludicrous, Sarda simply clasped the Andorian's shoulder in a vice grip, crushing the nerve cluster. Piper's antagonist fell limp, fortunately relaxing his grip on the human's windpipe.

Merete shoved the Andorian aside and checked Piper. Her face had turned blue, but now she was free to breathe, she was gasping like a drowning fish.

"Go easy, Piper," Merete warned, soothingly, lovingly. "Don't hyperventilate." She knelt beside the taller human and laid her head on her shoulder, calming her and giving her a safe space now the horror was passed.

Scanner joined them and reached into one of his short's pockets. Surprisingly, he withdrew two thick nylon zip ties. He knelt down behind Ch'Cenathor and wrapped one tie around each wrist with the two running through one another, effectively tying his hands behind his back. He patted the man on the shoulder. "Good luck getting out of those," he said cheekily.

Sarda knew his friend's humour was a mask for anger. The human would have happily vapourised the Andorian if he had a phaser handy.

The Andorians who were running the event finally got their act together and created a cordon around the square. Ch'Alenathan showed one of them his ID and they allowed him to pass.

Sarda slipped a communicator from his pocket and called for Starfleet security. "Captain Piper has been physically attacked and injured. I need a detachment at these co-ordinates to take the assailant into custody."

"Acknowledged," was his only answer. About twenty seconds later, three Starfleet security guards appeared in the empty portion of the square and reported to Sarda.

“Commander?” their leader asked. One quick look at Captain Piper told him all he needed to know. She was alive but injured. A doctor was with her, and that was good enough for him.

Sarda stood stoically and pointed at the Andorian on the floor, still out cold. “This is the Captain’s attacker. I believe his name is Ch’Cenathor. This was attempted murder. You can check the vid of the event for evidence. Commanders Sandage and AndrusTaurus here,” he indicated each in turn, “are witnesses.”

“As am I,” said Ch’Alenathan who was standing only a metre away.

The security officer addressed the newcomer. “And you are?”

The tall Andorian drew himself up. “I am Commander Rhian Ch’Alenathan of the *USS Exeter*. Piper, here, is my captain.”

Piper’s friends stiffened as one. They each turned their full attention to the interloper.

Ch’Alenathan was surprised by their reaction. He found himself mentally recoiling.

Sarda spoke for the group. “You are Captain Piper’s new executive officer?” he asked.

Rhian nodded. “Yes.”

The Vulcan continued his interrogation. “You were here for the entire tournament?”

Again, he nodded. “Yes.”

Sarda looked down at his friend who was still shaking her head, trying to get away from Merete’s ministrations. He could hear her say: “Cut it out, Piper. Your windpipe is bruised. Just let me fix it.”

The captain acquiesced.

Sarda lifted his head once more and caught Ch’Alenathan with a piercing gaze. “Your captain was in mortal danger.” His next words came out with steel he had never heard from his species. “*Where were you?*”

Ch’Alenathan was about to speak, feeling the need to defend himself, but realised the man was *right*. He had failed her.

Sarda continued. “You may not be aware of this, but Captain Piper is a hero of the Federation, decorated many times. Her exploits...” Sarda was for a second lost for words.

Scanner completed the sentence. "...would keep you up at nights."

Merete turned her gaze to the *Exeter's* XO. "She has thoroughly earned the right to sit in the captain's chair, and she *absolutely* deserves the loyalty of her crew."

Ch'Alenathan's skin was a dark shade of humiliated blue. "I understand, Commander..." he noted the three of Piper's friends "...Commanders. You have my word I will do better."

Scanner gave him a very unfriendly scowl. "Make sure you do."

By this stage, Piper had recovered enough to rise to her feet. She gave her friends a smile, then a hug in turn. "Thanks guys," she said roughly. Her throat was still a little sore. "It's nice to know you've always got my back."

Piper turned and retrieved her Vin-tah. With a click of a button, the blade retreated into the handle. She saw Ch'Cenathor's blade and thoughtfully picked it up.

The other Andorians around watched as she handled it. She stepped over to her now conscious attacker, who was looking up at her with unbridled hatred. She motioned for the security guards to bring him to his feet, which they did unkindly.

Piper called her friends over with a flick of her head. In the sight of Ch'Centhor, she laid down his blade and had Merete and Scanner stand on it, careful of the sharp edge. She then invited Sarda to put his right hand on the hilt with hers next to it.

"One, two, three," she counted. On three, Piper and Sarda jerked upward. The blade came apart at the hilt with a resounding clang, dropping Merete and Scanner slightly.

All of them had kept their eyes on Ch'Cenathor. The message was clear. You come after one of us, you come after *all* of us.

Piper handed the pieces to the security officer leading. "You might need this for evidence," she said calmly, quietly, confidently. "I think we've wasted enough time on this excuse for a sentient."

The leader handed the sword components to his second and third, who beamed away a moment later with the captain's assailant. He needed to remain to take statements.

Ch'Alenathan watched as they disappeared in the transporter beam. It seemed as if Ch'Cenathor was about to say something, but it was lost to the stream.

Piper turned back to her friends and began asking questions.

Behind her, Ch'Alenathan could only marvel. Who was this woman? Who could gain such a level of loyalty from her comrades? What was this mystery woman's secret history? He had to find out.

He also found he had some reflecting to do. Was he capable of generating such a team spirit as Piper had? He doubted it. Was he in the presence of a great Starfleet team? He didn't doubt *that*.

Had he failed his new commander this day?

The answer was a definite: Yes.

Shore leave was over. The bridge was completely staffed and the crew was readying for departure. Rhian was sitting in the centre seat, suddenly feeling a little out of place. This was Captain Piper's chair, and he – for the first time – felt that he was an interloper somehow. That he was guilty of stolen valour of some kind. He shook himself a little. He had to get past this one way or the other.

Behind him, he heard someone call: "Captain on the bridge!"

As if spring loaded, Rhian fairly jumped out of the Conn and stood respectfully for his captain.

Piper had a very keen eye, and she noted the change in the man's demeanour. All the same, she had business to deal with. She tugged at the sleeves of her gold uniform with its captain's braids (which she was still getting used to) and stepped down next to her chair. "Are we ready for departure, Number One?" she asked, all business.

Ch'Alenathan wasted no time. "We are, Captain. All stations have reported ready – and we're prepared for our five-year mission."

The captain gave him a broad grin. "Excellent, Commander. I'm eager to see how these new warp engines perform."

The XO paused, unsure of himself. "Err, Captain. May I have a word with you in your ready room before we leave Spacedock?"

Piper's curiosity was engaged. She had an idea what was on his mind, but she liked to hear people's thoughts without assuming anything. "Of course, Number One."

She led the way to the side of the bridge and the new office that had been installed along with the bridge module. It was her first time seeing it. At a glance, she realised it was spartan for a reason. She had yet to give it her touch.

Piper stepped around the desk and lowered herself into her new chair. Comfy, she thought. All the while, she kept her eyes on Ch'Alenathan. She indicated the chair opposite and offered for him to sit down.

He politely refused. "Captain, in light of my actions yesterday, I feel I must offer you my resignation. We can organise another XO for you. Perhaps Commander Sarda is available."

Piper noted the tone of regret in his voice. Yesterday, he had been arrogant and haughty. Today, he had been taken down a notch. Several notches. She nodded quietly.

"You believe you failed me, Number One?" she asked quietly.

Ch'Alenathan wondered why she kept calling him that. "I know I did. I've given a lot of thought about it, and I realise that some of my old racial prejudices had skewed by view of you and your fitness to command. It was an unworthy mindset, not only of your XO, but of a Starfleet officer."

Piper took a deep breath and gave him a moment to steady himself. A part of her had seen this coming and had already prepared. "You're right, Number One. You could have done better. However, the mark of a good Starfleet officer is their ability to recognise their shortcomings and *overcome* them. You've been humbled a little, and that could be good for you."

She got up from her chair and stepped around the desk, taking a seat on the edge of it. "You're not the only one who made mistakes yesterday. I made *assumptions* about my environment that nearly got me killed. Fortunately, I had a good team to pull me out of the fire."

Ch'Alenathan nodded to himself, trying to hear her and learn from the lesson.

"I've learned from the fracas yesterday – including the annoying rule that had me declared disqualified because I had received medical treatment." She pursed her lips, annoyed. "Stupid rule," she muttered.

She looked up into her new Number One's sapphire eyes. "Mister Ch'Alenathan, we live and learn. Personally, I think that should be Starfleet's motto. As long as I see that you're still learning, I believe you're qualified to be my XO. I don't believe you're going to let me down again."

The Andorian drew himself upright. "No, Captain."

Piper nodded, pleased. "Good, Commander. Resignation denied."

Ch'Alenathan almost laughed. He *did* smile. "Thank you, Captain."

His new commander stood up and looked him in the eye. "Now, Number One, I think it's high time we got this show on the road."

To Ch'Alenathan's surprise, she checked the time on an ancient gold wristwatch above her left hand. He had heard of them, but never seen one before.

She looked him in the eyes once more. "Do you have anything else to add, Commander?"

Ch'Alenathan came to attention. "No, Captain!" he said crisply.

Piper started moving towards the door. "Then let's start turning this green crew into a team," she said.

The Andorian smiled. He knew that, with Captain Piper in command, it would be a good team.