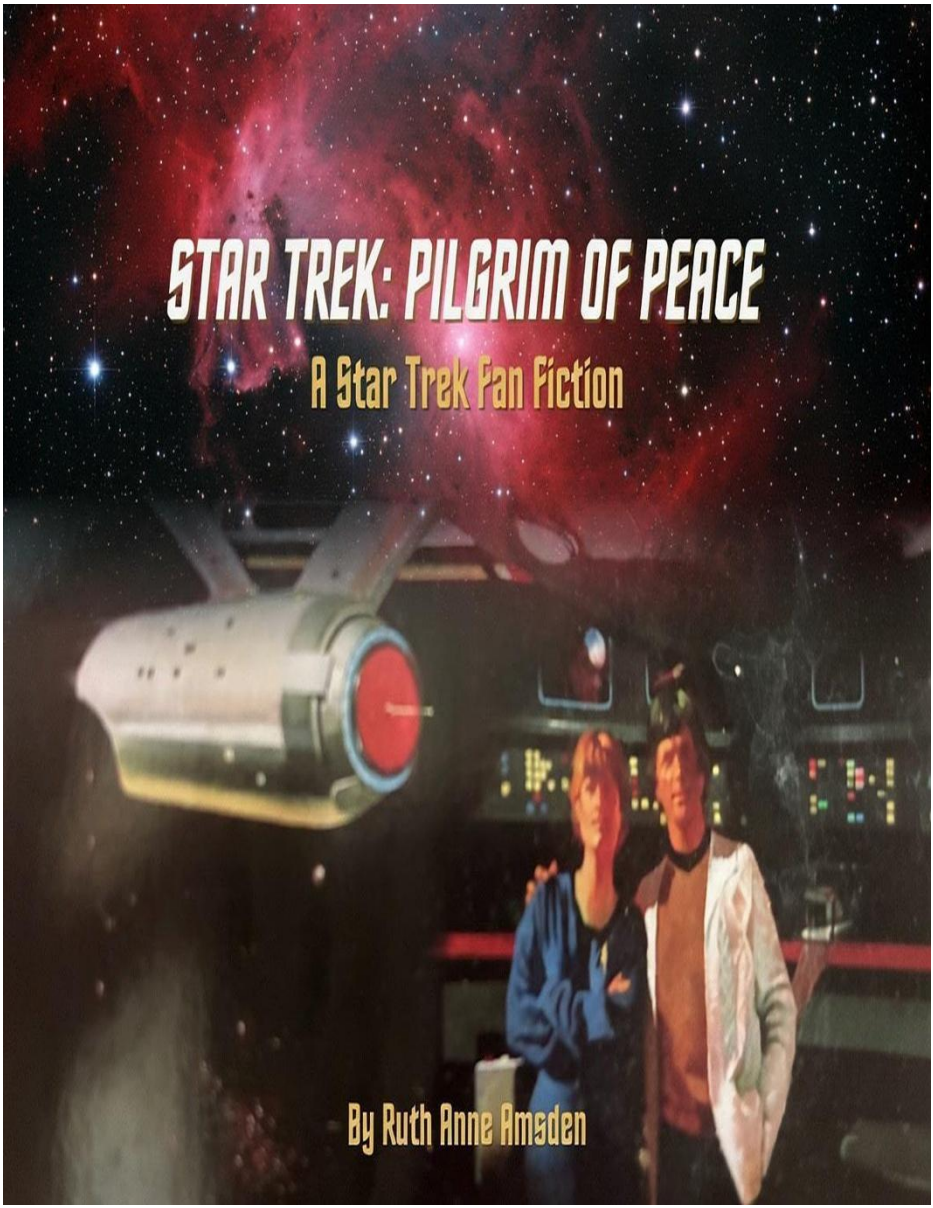
STAR TREK: PILGRIM OF PEACE
A Star Trek Fan Fiction
By Ruth Anne Amsden

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Quotations from Persuasion, Chapter 8, by Jane Austen.

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First edition

Historians Note:

The Organian story arc herein is a sequel to the Star Trek: Enterprise *episode,* "The Observer Effect," *and is meant to serve as a bridge between that episode and the original series episode* "Errand of Mercy."

The Sheliak story arc herein is a prequel to "Star Trek: The Next Generation" *episode "*Ensigns of Command."

The following account takes place immediately following the events chronicled in "Star Trek: Best Destiny" by Diane Carey and the reader may wish to refer to it and its companion volume, "Star Trek: Final Frontier".

Prologue:

Overture

The Council of Elders chamber on Organia seemed very small and stifling today. Perhaps it was because the council had chosen to take physical form for this gathering. Perhaps it was the contrast between the walls and low ceilings of the chamber to the vaulting freedom of traveling unencumbered by physical form in the void between the stars. Perhaps it was the gravity of their mission.

Prime and Second, who had taken to referring to each other as Malcolm and Travis, after their erstwhile hosts, slowly and reverently entered the chamber and made the ancient gesture of welcome and regard to Ayelborne, the Chairman. After so long in non-corporeal form, the gesture felt rusty and awkward. Prime and Second exchanged sideways glances as Ayelborne returned the gesture and invited them to take their places on either side of him. They had spent the entire journey back from the region of space the humans called the Blue Zone in yet another one of their endless arguments. If their report today swayed Ayelborne toward Second's viewpoint and away from Prime's, they would be spending a good deal of time in the physical form.

"Tell me, my children, what have you learned from the humans in the brief moment you have spent studying them?"

Ayelborne's gentle face, framed in ageless wisdom, bore a faint skepticism. He had strongly disapproved of Prime and Second's involvement and interference with Jonathan Archer and his crew, and it had taken them over fifty Earth years to convince him to let them have

another research assignment amongst humans. Second had insisted that preparations begin for an official first contact, and they had, but as Ayelborne was fond of pointing out, those preparations must not be made in haste.

The mission from which they had just returned had been unlike any other they had ever undertaken together in nearly one thousand years of exploration and observation. Always before, they had been observing species for signs of compatible intellect. This mission, they had taken Jonathan Archer's words to heart, and had begun observing two humans for signs of compassion. Report after report had been written and filed describing in detail what compassion looked like in these two humans. If their final report went well, it would be time for them to experience compassion for themselves, for the first time and for all time.

Prime and Second exchanged one final glance before beginning to speak. Be careful, *the look said.* If we don't follow protocol to every jot and tittle, we will never see the rules change, and we will never be permitted to make this first contact.

"You have read our reports on the human male named Robert April, and his human female companion Sarah April," Prime began formally.

Ayelborne nodded slightly, his mystical smile never leaving his face. "I never met Sarah, but Robert is a fascinating man. I enjoyed the conversations we had when he was on our world, many of their years back. Perhaps, if he had one thousand rather than one hundred years to live…"

"That's just it. We think they're ready for first contact," Second blurted out. He was regarded by the others as an impatient young upstart who couldn't be bothered with rules and regulations, but his

enthusiasm was a breath of fresh air in the stuffy chamber. "In nine hundred years of observations, Captain Archer was the first to sacrifice himself for his crew. On the mission we have just returned from, observing species reactions to the space pirates who operate around the Blue Zone, we saw not one, but four, people sacrifice their lives to save one person. Of those four people, one of them… Captain April… had very close ties to Captain Archer. He acted as mentor, second father, teacher, friend, to April, and we believe it was by watching Archer's example that April learned the concept of self-sacrifice, and went on to teach that to his crew. They did not complete their sacrifice because we—" Prime rather painfully elbowed him. If they let on that they had interfered, they could go back to the farm and forget observations. "We observed that their engines had a purge that would not permit them to overload," Second went on smoothly. "We saw them safely back aboard their ship, and came to make our report. That act of sacrifice is what makes us believe that humans, or at least these two humans, are ready for first contact."

"Respectfully, my esteemed colleague thinks *they are ready for first contact," Prime corrected. "I remain unconvinced. He is the captain of a starship, which carries weapons that can destroy entire planets. I have never known a human who could be trusted not to do violence with so much power at his fingertips."*

"Robert abhors *violence," Second protested. "Weren't you paying attention during the Romulan incident? And the Tarsus IV incident? And just now, when he prevented Commander Kirk from firing to destroy the enemy ship, at great personal cost, I might add—"*

"Oh, it's 'Robert' now, is it? How many times must I remind you to be cautious of emotional involvement—"

"I've been observing him and Sarah for twenty-five years, he has been my host on several occasions—"

Ayelborne held up both hands in a gesture of peace. "Come now, and let us reason together, my children. The council will deliberate after you have presented your reports. A first contact is a weighty decision to make and must not be made lightly. First of all, the facts. Who is this man, who is this woman, with whom you wish to make first contact? Second, you have the floor. Convince us."

The depth of conviction straightened Second's shoulders and strengthened his voice. "A man and woman of peace," he began. "Humans avoid violence—"

"Humans say *they avoid violence. Their actions don't always match their convictions," Prime protested.*

"Who has the floor?" Second demanded, and Prime subsided.

"But these two, if I might borrow a human expression, walk the walk as well as talk the talk. They put their currency where their mouth is."

Ayelborne's tolerant smile widened into amusement. "Go on, Second."

"Then how do you explain their service to Starfleet, which all reports indicate has a military as well as a diplomatic and exploratory branch?" Prime was neither asking quarter nor giving it.

"I'm coming *to that bit. Perhaps if I might be permitted to report undisturbed by interruptions…"*

Ayelborne gestured to Prime that he needed to simmer down. "Endeavor to hold your tongue, Prime."

Second nodded gratefully. "Let's begin with the formative influences. His upbringing has made it impossible for him to be anything but a man of peace. He grew up in the shadow of ruins that carry great historical significance to his country, and to him, personally. During one of their world wars, the Cathedral, an historical and cultural center for the city of Coventry, as well as a place of worship, was destroyed in a bombing raid. The next day, the stone mason found that two charred beams in the rubble had fallen in the shape of a cross. The cross is a Terran symbol of sacrifice. On the wall across from the altar is the neutral inscription, 'Father, Forgive.'"

Prime sniffed. "Typical human violence."

A single glance from Ayelborne silenced Prime, and Second went on. "The cathedral was rebuilt after the conflict. The shell and walls of the old cathedral were left standing as a symbol of the tragedy of warfare and a reminder that destruction on this level must never happen again, and the new cathedral became a center for peace and reconciliation. Yes, they believe in those things, Prime."

Prime was disinclined to rise to the bait, and Second continued.

"The story of the charred cross of Coventry, symbol of reconciliation and peace, became foundational to his being."

"How do you know?" Prime interrupted.

"I took him as host in order to learn about him, see? May I continue? There were other influences, though, and those influences both made him who he is and have torn him apart over the years. He grew up in the post WW3–"

"How many world conflicts have these humans had? Tell me again why we are considering first contact?"

Second crossed his arms. "If I may be permitted to continue, I will tell you exactly why we are considering first contact. As I was saying before I was so rudely interrupted. He grew up in the post WW3 Society of Friends. They are a group who embrace the tenets of peace and non-violence, of Love and Light, of the goodness to be found in each person, of community and service. And Robert as an adult embraces every one of those tenets himself." Second paused, expecting Prime to interrupt, but he held his peace and listened intently. "He was also deeply influenced by the Franciscan monks who had taken him to live with them at the monastery when he lost his parents at age fourteen. The Franciscans embrace similar tenets to the Friends."

"We got to know the Franciscans quite well when we first met April," Prime conceded. "A truly peaceful order. After his ordeal, it would seem that April found peace and healing amongst them. For a time, at least."

"For a time, the critical period for his healing process, a time of his life's greatest brokenness," Second continued. "We observed that the family ties further deepened his connections to both the Friends and the Franciscans. His brother William, a Friend, is what I've heard him call a 'bit of a Luddite, staunchly old-fashioned.' His Grandfather Evans was Abbot of the Franciscan monastery. A good man, benevolent, selfless, but quite stern and unyielding in his convictions. These family members wished for him to put his convictions to work amongst the people of Earth in the new era of space exploration, to do his work for peace and reconciliation amongst the citizens still troubled by the Xindi conflict of their last century and frightened that something similar could happen again."

"And it really looked as though April was going to honor those wishes." Prime was lost in memories and in the narrative, finally in the spirit of the inquiry. "He was so close to taking the vows when who should show up—"

"Who should show up but Jonathan Archer, whom we thought we were never going to see again!" Second caught Ayelborne's eye and reigned in his enthusiastic howl. "What a conversation that was. We learned about Archer that night, did we not?"

"Unquestionably," Prime said quietly.

"We hoped that night that one day we might be able to make first contact with him," Second went on more calmly, "but he 'shuffled off this mortal coil' some seven of their years ago…"

"He wasn't ready."

"So, what choice did April make as a result of the interview with Archer?" Ayelborne gently guided the two back on track.

"He chose to bring the message of peace, and non-violence, and community and service, to the service of Starfleet. He felt that was where it was most needed. Earth is now a United Earth. The 'bloody silly' conflicts, as he calls them, are things of the past. He believes, and nothing we have seen him go through in all these years can shake his belief, that since a peaceful United Earth is possible, peaceful alliances and friendships are possible between such powers as the Romulans, the Klingons, and the Orions, and he has devoted his life to making that a reality."

"As a starship captain?" Prime asked incredulously. "How can a man of peace live out his convictions in a military organization like Starfleet? Either he disobeys a few direct orders—"

"He's been known to—"

"Or he doesn't cleave to those convictions the way you believe he does—"

"He does, he's known for it. I've made a good many discreet inquiries."

"So how does he… what's their expression? 'Pull it off?'"

Second spoken slowly, thoughtfully. "He will not be captain of the starship for very much longer. He has been struggling for some time with a sense that he is not in the right place for what he feels is given to him to do in this life. I believe he is at a crossroads, so to speak. He is considering what the next step in his journey should be. Command has set uneasily with him from the very first day he accepted those stripes. And he didn't accept the captain's chair out of burning ambition or desire for power, I can tell you that unequivocally. He never felt himself destined to command. He accepted it out of a sense of humble servant leadership. He didn't want it. But when his Captain and First were killed in the line of duty, Command needed a Captain whose bravery, self-sacrifice, intelligence, and compassion they could rely upon, and that's Robert. I have watched that man torn in half between the strength of his convictions and the need to defend his ship and crew and the defenseless."

"Defend violently, I suppose you mean," Prime said pointedly.

"He abhors violence, I tell you. He doesn't choose it. He doesn't initiate it. It breaks his heart when he has to employ it. In fact, I've seen him hesitate when others urge him to act—"

"That violent companion of his, the military commander—"

"Yes. And even in that friendship he stands by his convictions. But his very dearest friend in the galaxy."

"Archer?" Ayelborne asked, still smiling.

"No. Sarah. His lifelong friend and soul's companion. Several years ago, they entered into the human covenant of… marriage?" Prime nodded. "She knows him better than anyone else in the galaxy. She tells him that it takes more strength to be gentle than it does to be violent, more courage to speak of and work for peace in a troubled galaxy than it did to hide behind one's might, and that he is both strong and brave. He relies upon her wisdom and judgement."

"Sarah April," Prime said slowly, deliberately, "is compassion personified. Everything I know about compassion, I learned from taking her as a host. She has learned how to treat Terrans, Vulcans, Andorians, Tellarites, and all manner of animals. Every single living being she has cared for, she has treated with compassion. I… did not know what compassion was, even when Archer admonished us to experience it for ourselves, until I took her for a host."

"A woman of peace," Second declared. "Who knows better than a physician the cost of violence? The pain, the disability, the death, that results from violence? Sarah April is a healer. Her entire life is devoted to healing—"

"What about the time she refused to treat a Romulan?" Prime had made enough concessions for one report.

"Because that being, in her sickbay, represented those who had caused so much pain and suffering to her crew mates. Pain and suffering she saw first-hand and up close and had responsibility to treat," Second said quietly. "She nearly lost Robert to those beings. She has since that

day become the only doctor that particular Romulan will go to. He trusts her absolutely. I've observed them together; there is warmth and trust and fondness between them. He is absolutely at ease with her, and she trusts him to teach her about the medicinal use of plants."

"This would seem to indicate an ability to learn and change and grow," Ayelborne said thoughtfully. "Very well, my children. You have given me much to ponder. Let us reconvene at sundown."

"Why so restless, Travis? Have you got ants in your pants?"

Prime's dry use of a human expression might have been funny if someone less anxious than Second had been his auditor.

"I'll just be glad when the Council makes a determination one way or the other, that's all— what's wrong, Malcolm? What do your Seer eyes see?"

Prime paused for a long time before committing himself. He scanned the horizon, seeing not only the pristine sky over Organia but the far off reaches of the galaxy and a fleet that amassed there. "It may be too late to make first contact," he finally said solemnly. "They're coming. They can't harm us, but the humans—"

*"*Who's *coming?"*

Prime's words might have sent a shiver down Second's spine as he spoke the name of a race another Organian team had been observing for years. They had read every single report, and first contact with this species was not on their radar.

"The Sheliak Corporate."

Introduction

Part One: Symphony of Swans

Historian's note: the author is indebted to Margaret Wander Bonanno for the depth of her insight into the character of Christopher Pike as explored in "Burning Dreams" and has done her best to honor and deepen that insight as she imagines Pike's relationship to Captain April. May Margaret's memory ever be a shining and guiding star.

CHAPTER ONE: THE FINAL MISSION

Captain's Personal Log, Captain Robert April recording. Earth Date June 23, 2249. Midsummer's Eve. Current mood: Brahms Third, Third Movement, Adagio

Over the past seven years, it has been my privilege to command the Starship Enterprise *on a series of stressing out/shaking down missions. We are preparing to embark upon the final mission of the Starship* Enterprise *under my command. It is with mingled relief and sadness that I am preparing to step down from the starship program when this final mission is completed, for reasons medical, professional, and personal.*

Communications failures across the Federation have made it very difficult for Commander Kirk, from his post at Starbase 2, Commander Simon whilst on assignment to Rigel IV, and Dr. April and I, whilst on medical leave, to continue our work of informing the families of the victims of the grey market pirates. We will be stopping at various colony worlds, Star bases, and deep space stations on our way out to help upgrade their communications systems with the goal of punching through the interference. We will be using this opportunity to contact families who have lost loved ones. Whilst the maintenance crews work on the communications systems at each facility, we will be holding a series of memorial services for those who were lost. To this end, we will

be taking aboard select members of the London, Berlin, and New York Philharmonic orchestras, along with their instruments, and a conductor or two who can be convinced to leave the planet, and the Coventry University singers, with whom I have an especial rapport, as my brother William is their choir director. My dear brother however cannot be…" Robert paused in his narration, almost said "cannot be arsed" but felt that was a bit much even for a personal log, and corrected himself to *"cannot be convinced to leave the planet… I don't even think I could convince him to leave Coventry and go to London to look at the King, God love him… so we are finding an interim choir director for this voyage. No, it's* not *going to be me and that's flat.*

I am heart glad that my daughter Lark Rise has decided to come along on this voyage as harpist and lead soprano. Although she is a singer and interpreter of traditional regional music, she is a classically trained graduate of Magdalen College, and I believe will be a most welcome addition to our choir. She is grieving a devastating loss and has expressed a need to be with her old father and her step-mum for a bit.

As musicians, Sarah and I believe that music is healing and unifying, and that live performances provide an expression and catharsis of grief that we all need right now. This mission is thus a response to recommendations from the two of us.

On a personal note, I am looking forward to singing with a choir in person rather than over subspace, and playing piano with an orchestra again. Sarah has been encouraging me to not neglect music as the starship project has been taking all my attention of late, and when she's right, she's right. A fine folk musician herself, I know what comfort she takes in her quiet hours with her guitar, and I need to emulate her.

It is with deep reluctance and sorrow that I have to choose replacements for my impulse engineer and my communications and telemetry officer. My sister, linguist, communications officer extraordinaire, and frontier midwife Lt. Cmdr. Mary Anne April, has been happily retired and keeping sheep in the Yorkshire dales for the past six months. To her dismay, her cruel brother, who has known and relied upon her skills for a lifetime, has invoked a little known and seldom used reserve activation clause to reactivate her commission and bring her aboard for one last mission. My sister has logged more EVA's working on communications platforms than any other officer in the fleet, and no one knows the old-style systems we are upgrading better than she does. She was also asked to join the orchestra as lead cello player and has agreed with alacrity. I need to brush up on my cello jokes.

I am hoping my sister will work well with our department head of communications, Lyra of Andoria. A powerful telepath amongst a race of telepaths, Lyra is the first Aenar to serve in Starfleet. They have devoted their life to the study of linguistics, dialect, and communications. They tell me that after a lifetime of telepathic communication, the exploration of languages is even more enthralling than the exploration of space, and this delights my linguist's heart. They are coming back to Enterprise *after an extended leave on Andoria to attend family matters, and Sarah and I are eager to welcome them back.*

My dearest friend and erstwhile brother-in-law, impulse engineer Commander Duncan McLean, who served for years with my sister upon the hospital ship U.S.S. Elizabeth Blackwell, *was coming home to retire, but could not resist the opportunity to get his hands dirty in our engine*

room. I cannot think of any two better suited to fill the terrible losses we have sustained.

My First Officer Lorna Simon is presently on assignment to Rigel IV and so I have selected my protégé, Captain Christopher Richard Pike, to be my Number One. Many years ago, I served with his father, Charlie Pike, and have watched the Starfleet career of his son Chris with keen interest ever since. He is my top choice for my successor as captain of the Enterprise*, and if he comports himself as well on this mission as he has aboard the* Aldrin *and the* Yorktown*, I shall be proud to turn command of this vessel over to him.*

Number One, Lt. Una, has been reassigned from Enterprise *to oversee the refit of the* Yorktown *in Chris's absence. She will be missed.*

I have lost my helmsman, Carlos Florida, and my navigator, Isaac Soulian, to Captain Annie-Get-Your-Gun Maguire onboard the Border Patrol vessel U. S. S. Vimy Ridge*, affectionately known as the Auld Vimy, which shipped out a fortnight ago. Annie-Laurie's a good Captain, a good woman, tougher than tripe Maritime Canadian but fair all day long, and I know Carlos and Isaac are going to be happy serving with her.*

Commander Josephine Meier is coming back to active duty after a serious spinal injury and has been reassigned from the Border Patrol to serve with us as our helm officer. Cmdr. Meier served with me on the old Heart of Oak, *and I am looking forward to serving together once again.*

Ensign Jose Tyler will be our new navigator. I have not yet met him but he comes highly recommended.

Finally, it is with a heavy heart that I record the death in the line of duty of… Computer, pause recording."

He couldn't force himself to say the words out loud and commit them to the log.

Jonathan had warned him about these moments. Moments when one felt that speaking the words aloud would mean that one's crew member was really and truly gone. When he had got word that Jonathan Archer had passed away, all those years ago when his time as captain of the *Enterprise* was beginning, it had been days before he could log the event.

Alone on the bridge of the *Enterprise*, Captain Robert April pressed his fingers to his eyes. He and Sarah had come aboard late last night, the moment they got the word from Admiral Komack. They were expecting the recalled crew in the next few hours.

Without his "right good crew" to bring the ship alive again, his bridge was the adagio movement of a great symphony. The ghosts of his three lost officers haunted their stations.

His sorrowful solitude was broken by the sound of the turbolift doors opening and the only other person on board, the only person he felt he wanted to see at this very moment, nearly running across the bridge to him, like a homing pigeon, straight into his arms.

"My darling, what is it?" His wife had buried her face against his chest and was holding him so tightly it hurt. It was the sweetest pain he had felt in a long time.

Her voice muffled in the soft wool of his cardigan, she whispered, "I needed thee." It was an admission she would never have made if there had been anyone else on the bridge.

“I need thee too. Now for the love of God please tell me what is wrong and how I can help.”

He felt her shake her head and his arms tightened around her. “I just— I walked into the Intensive Care unit— and the bed was so empty— it hit me so hard—”

“I know,” he whispered, “oh my Sarah, I know, I went through the same thing coming onto the bridge—”

“So much loss—”

“Yes,” he whispered against her hair, “so much pain and loss. We have to think of them as off flying somewhere, in a beautiful place beyond all pain and tears.”

He felt her swallow hard as she took in his comfort, closed his own eyes to try to control their stinging.

“A far green country,” Sarah finally whispered, on a long sigh. “They’ll be in Yorkshire. That’s God’s own country.” He felt her desperate grief-stricken embrace ease into a gentler hold as she relaxed and rested against him.

Their moment was interrupted, as so many of their moments had been, by the chime of the comm panel. It was Commander George Kirk.

“Robert, I heard that you’re launching in a couple days, and I wanted to say, Fair winds and following seas.”

*“*George, I’m so glad you did. How’s Jim? Overhead and ears in study for the Entrance?”

On the screen, his friend’s ruddy face crinkled in distress. “*Yeah… that’s what I wanted to talk to you about. He trusts you, he’s close with you, maybe he could talk to you…”*

"What's wrong?"

George sighed. *"Well… we thought his experiences out in space with us had changed him… and for a bit, he was fine. He reconciled with his mother, had a heart to heart with her—"* Robert smiled privately; he had encouraged that conversation. "*He talked to me a bit. Got really excited about his studies. And then… a few weeks ago… the old sullen, rebellious, devil-may-care attitude came back, he's neglecting his studies, saying he doesn't need to study because he knows the material, he's disrespectful of his mother, moody… I'm at my wits end, Robert. I thought perhaps you could…"*

"I am deeply saddened to hear this. But I'm not surprised."

"Not surprised? What the hell…"

Sad brown eyes met somber hazel ones. "Jim went through a good deal, with us on the cutter, on his own on the pirate ship. It's natural that he's beginning to process the trauma. I'm certainly not a mental health professional, but I am a chaplain, and I believe what you're seeing is Jim grieving for those we lost. Sarah's next to me, she concurs."

"I'd recommend a course of trauma counseling," Sarah chimed in, over her husband's shoulder, "as a Mum myself, I can't bear to think what he's seen out there. I'm happy to recommend…" she listed a few trusted colleagues.

Robert nodded in agreement with his wife. "If I'm honest… I'd be surprised and troubled if he were *not* struggling right now, and there's no need for him to go through this without professional support. Grief can make it hard to think, to work, to concentrate, to have any interest in studies or play…"

"*If that's all it is, I understand. I… I was just so scared I was going to lose him again—"*

"He will come back to you, George. Just as my Lark Rise came back to me, and today we are dear friends as well as father and daughter. We revel in and savor one another's company."

"Jim took quite a shine to her, didn't he? Calls her his 'god sister.' Perhaps, he'd talk to someone closer to his age—"

"Perhaps he would but I can't put one more thing on my daughter's shoulders just at present—"

"That's right. Damn, that's right… look, I don't see him being open to counseling. Maybe you could talk to him?"

"With all my heart. I'd be glad to," Robert said gently. "I think we formed a very good connection over the past few weeks."

"Thanks. Look— what I said before goes, okay? Take care of yourself. Come back safely."

"It's just a routine mission—"

"*Yeah*," George complained, "*just like every other mission we've ever served on together…"*

The two sat together in companionable silence for a moment, as the memories of some of their shared crises washed around them. "Very true, but we've never not made it yet, have we?"

"Let's keep it that way. Godspeed."

"Sarah," Robert commented after the two men had said Goodbye, "Is it just me, or has George been checking in with me a lot more than usual lately?"

Sarah shrugged. "I don't know. 'E's mardy."

“It’s more than his usual moodiness. Something about the way he said Goodbye to me back on Starbase— George is savage Celt and he has premonitions. He’s almost never wrong. He says he feels them in his bones. He knows something terrible is going to happen but not what or when. He hates them.” Robert repressed a shiver, remembering a few times his friend’s premonitions had come to pass. “Lark Rise gets them too. It’s the Highland Scot in her that she got from her mother…”

Sarah sensed what a precarious state of mind he was in and hastened to change the direction of his thoughts.

“Speaking of our daughter, how much time do we have before she comes aboard?”

“I think she’s joining us tomorrow? She’s still trying to find us a choir director…”

“Good. Then we have the ship to ourselves, and I can kiss my husband on the bridge without having regulations thrown at my head—”

The kiss began soft as a mist on the Yorkshire moors but quickly turned into an autumnal rainstorm. In the absence of their crew, it might have led to other things, had not the chime of the comm panel rudely interrupted. Sarah gestured that she needed to get back to work, and slipped away.

His heart leaped with joy as he heard, instead of the formal “permission to come aboard,” a dearly familiar voice declaiming, “Behold, I stand at the door and knock!”

He sat down at the communications station and began to laugh with joy at hearing his sister’s voice. After years of missing one another, communicating across light years, and seeing each other only on hurried

leaves, he would be serving on the same ship with Mary Anne for the first time in twenty years.

The voice insisted, “If anyone hears my voice, and opens the door, I will come in, and will sup with him!”

He finally keyed his responses back to her. “Typical cello player, standing at the door because she can’t find the key and doesn’t know when to come in!”

Her hearty laughter was soul warming. She often said that cello jokes were the only thing that kept her going as a musician on days when she wanted to scream and burn her instrument. “I ought to have stuck with piano. You can tune a piano. Also, a piano burns longer. Permission to come aboard, Brother?”

Laughing back at her, “Permission granted, Sister. I will be there to welcome thee with open arms.”

“Dearest Sister! There was *no* need to bring thy own coffin with thee. I’m not as reckless a captain as all that.”

Robert spoke to his sister in his own plain speech, the language he spoke only to her, his wife, and his daughter. Not the plain speech of the North of England, which was Sarah’s native tongue, but the tender, intimate, familial speech of the post WWIII Society of Friends, also known as the Quakers. Far from the formal sense in which the Vulcans used it, and the indiscriminate way that North countrywoman Sarah used it, “thee” was to Quaker plain speech what the familiar pronoun was to the old Earth Romance languages. A cradle Quaker, he had heard the plain speech since birth, and had been told since he was old enough to understand that the Quakers had used the plain speech in their

underground peace and humanitarian movement during the war as code for who could be trusted. His fascination with coded speech had led to a career as a comm officer.

"Where I live and move and have my being, I'll have my cello." Mary Anne April climbed out of the small shuttle, her much-maligned cello case in one hand and her kit bag in the other. Like her brother, she also wore a cable knit woolen sweater, layered over a black tee shirt that bore the nickname of her old ship: *Tin Lizzie*. Just as Sarah did, she eschewed the short uniform skirts the quartermaster was experimenting with, and had retained her worn farm corduroys. Her long hair was plaited and coiled around her head to keep it from touching her collar, in part to satisfy regulation and in part because of her country woman practicality. Her face was the feminine copy of his, as gentle and wise and rosy as his, but more weatherbeaten. Her mouth was strong and tender and had a quirk in the corners that suggested she dearly loved to laugh. She was warm and wholesome as a floured scone, welcoming as an open gate leading into a garden.

Her nonchalant tone belied the leaping joy in her eyes. They clasped hands and kissed on both cheeks, continental fashion, and Mary Anne began,

"See thee, Brother, I have brought good things from Home. I know how hard the first homesick week in space can be, and I thought some gifts would help thee and Sarah."

She ducked into the shuttle and came back out with her arms full of packages. She held the first one out to him.

"I thought thee might need more of my homemade sheep's milk soap, so I brought thee some."

“Oh, much obliged, Sister, Heaven. We do, in fact. Mmmm. Smells of thy garden.”

“And I thought, thee wouldn’t mind if Sarah and I have a girl’s night or two—” Mary Anne’s eyes, as warm and brown as her brother’s, twinkled like stars—”so I brought us some of my elderberry wine I put down last year. And I didn’t forget my alcohol intolerant Brother, I made thee some of that elderflower cordial thee favors. All from my garden.”

She set down the bag of bottles containing the wine and cordial and ducked back into the shuttle.

“I brought some carded wool that needs spinning and winding into skeins. I thought in our spare time—”

“Spare time? On a Starship?”

“Oh now, Brother. I’m enough of a grizzled old veteran to know that it’s feast or famine in space. Either too much going on or not enough. And these plants are for Sarah’s Sickbay. The ones she asked me for and a few others, she’s had a hard time getting some of these medicinal herbs—”

Sarah April had been learning the medicinal purposes of herbs from her herbalist sister in love for many years, and had brought her herb garden along to the Starship Sickbay. She had wanted to bring a menagerie from Earth inspired by her predecessor, Dr. Phlox, but regulations had changed so much since those early days that even she, a former veterinarian, found that impractical. So she settled for an onboard herb garden.

“Sarah will be chuffed to bits. She loves the arboretum thee helped me grow for her. Wait until thee see it.”

Robert had known how difficult Sarah would find the transition to space travel. On their first official mission on board the *Enterprise*, he had taken her hand and led her to the arboretum he had designed for her. With advice from his gardener sister, he had nurtured varieties of heather, bracken, and cloudberry from the Yorkshire countryside, forced some crocus, hyacinth, and snowdrops bulbs into bloom, and brought them all back to the ship. On the day that he could finally invite her to "Come into the garden, Maud," Sarah's face and happy tears when she saw the arboretum had made all the work worthwhile. The newly married couple had that day set the precedent of the arboretum as the Lovers Lane of the *Enterprise*.

"I can hardly wait to see how it turned out. Speaking of things that grow—"

Mary Anne reached into the shuttle and emerged gingerly holding a jar filled with what looked like a bubbly sponge. "Evan is asking permission to come aboard."

"Evan!" Robert burst out laughing, "thee must be the only person in the history of Starfleet who's felt it necessary to bring her sourdough starter onboard. We aren't living in the days of the Arctic explorers, dear, we do have perfectly adequate food synthesizers on board, we aren't going away to starve—"

"Oh yes indeed, Brother, but there's nothing the synthesizers can make that can hold a candle to homemade bread. Remember Sunday tea with our Nan Evans? And she used to sing 'bread of Heaven' and we thought she was saying—"

“Oh yes, Sunday tea and always Bakewell tart for afters. So, thee are going to carry on the tradition with the bread of Evan—” Pausing to listen. “Am I hearing things? From the sound of things, thee has got a stowaway from Home onboard—”

A small but determined bleating came from the shuttlecraft floor. Mary Anne’s pleading eyes reminded him of Pilot’s when his old dog had known he had transgressed.

“I didn’t ask because I was afraid thee’d tell me it wasn’t allowed on board a Starship, but when I asked Cousin Ellen to care for my sheep in my absence, she said she could care for both our flocks or she could nurture a bummer lamb, but bless her soul she couldn’t do both.”

Robert slipped inside the shuttle and emerged cradling a three-day-old lamb in his arms. Murmuring softly to the little one, he fondled the baby head and buried his face in the soft woolen side. The lamb instantly began nuzzling him, looking for milk.

“Oh, my days. Who’s this, then? Has Mary Anne got a little lamb?” The lamb liked the tender cadences of his voice.

Her eyes suspiciously bright, Mary Anne watched her brother cherish the little motherless lamb. For no reason any shepherd could understand, occasionally a mother sheep would abandon a newborn lamb and refuse to nurse, and it would fall upon the shepherd to nurture that lamb. Her brother had pulled countless all-nighters with her back on the Home farm caring for these “bummer lambs.” In the same way, she and Sarah had many years ago nurtured her brother’s motherless babies, and the joint mothering had knit the two of them together for life.

“Brother, meet Baby Dilithium,” Mary Anne introduced with a perfectly straight face.

“Welcome aboard, little one,” Robert spoke tenderly to the lamb, “I guess if Jonathan could have his dog on his *Enterprise*, I can allow a baby lamb onto mine. What I cannot allow on my ship is a baby lamb with such an outlandish name. Upon my soul, Sister, how on Earth did thee come to choose such a name for such a wee creature?”

“Well, Brother, I wanted to give her a name no other lamb had ever been called before—”

Her brother was laughing at her. “Call her anything thee likes, but I shall call her Betsy. Heavens to Betsy, little one, who’s hungry, then? Please, pass me a bottle, Sister, she’s suckling my fingers looking for milk.”

“I’ll take her, Brother, I want her to imprint on me—”

The comm panel whistled at them, interrupting the joyous reunion.

“This is Chris Pike aboard Shuttlepod *Sagan*, requesting permission to dock.”

“Permission granted and welcome to *Enterprise*, Chris. I’ll be there to meet you in Shuttlebay 3. April out.”

Turning to his sister, who was crouched on the deck with the lamb in her arms, he asked, “Will thee be alright if I go meet my First Officer, Sister? Thee can get thy gear squared away and settle Betsy in with Sarah and maybe even inspect thy workstation on the Bridge.”

Mary Anne beamed up at him. The lamb was sucking hungrily on the bottle she held. “I know the schematics of my Brother’s ship by heart. I’ll be fine. Brother… it was hard to leave Home. But I’m so glad I’m here.”

“I am heart glad to have thee here with me.” Impulsively, Robert gave her one last kiss on her rosy cheek before setting off to greet his protégée.

Bedazzled by the up close and personal look at the *Enterprise* and trying to get control over his expression, Chris Pike emerged from the shuttle to be greeted by his captain and mentor’s outstretched arms and glowing smile. He wore command gold, with three stripes on his sleeve denoting him a commander.

“Christopher! How do you do! How splendid to see you.”

“Sir—” The two men shook hands warmly. “Sir, I’m still trying to understand why my orders changed and I was assigned to the *Enterprise* instead of supervising *Yorktown’s* refit…”

The captain squarely met Chris’s piercing blue eyes. He saw the joy in reunion, amazement at the beauty of the ship, and something else… could it be a hint of uneasiness, even mistrust? There was something about his body language that told Robert that his protégé was on his guard with him in a way he had never been before. Even in their handshake, he felt Chris’s air of restraint and holding back from the joy of reunion.

Careful not to betray what his intuition told him, Robert said gently, “Chris, you can drop the ‘sir.’ No one is onboard yet except my wife and my sister. This is us, Chris. At ease.”

“Sorry, Gandalf.” Chris had his own private nickname for his captain, born of difficult hours logged together in space, a shared love of reading, and frank comradeship. “Good Morning!”

“‘What do you mean?’” Robert’s eyes sparkled with delight at their familiar greeting. “‘Do you wish me a good morning, or mean that it is a good morning whether I want it or not; or that you feel good this morning; or that it is a morning to be good on?’”

“A bit of all of those, sir. It’s damned good to see you again.”

“Likewise, Chris. Tell me how you’ve been.”

“Better’n nothing, Gandalf.” His smile fading, Chris asked, “Could we talk, somewhere private?”

“Of course we can. There will be time to tour the ship once you and I have caught up. Chris, you must catch up with Sarah sooner rather than later. She’s longing to hear how Tango is. What do you think of our flagship?”

“Sir— uh, Gandalf— she’s a sight for sore eyes. I don’t know what to say. I never dreamed I would be serving aboard a *Constitution*-class vessel—”

“I am so glad to have you aboard as my Number One. Since Lorna was reassigned to put out fires on Rigel, I couldn’t ask for a better First than you.”

Chris was gradually warming up to him, and he kept a light conversation going as they walked the corridors of the starship.

“Fancy a cup of tea?” Robert welcomed Chris into the welcoming, if cramped, Ready Room, just off the bridge.

Chris turned from gazing at the pictures of British Royal Navy ships that adorned the bulkheads. Captain April was descended from a long line of shipbuilders and Royal Navy sailors, and he took a quiet pride in that fact. The next to last picture in the row, a space freighter named the *Coventry*, looked out of place next to the sea vessels, but Chris knew

it to be a picture of the captain's grandfather's Merchant Marine vessel. The final picture was Captain Archer's *Enterprise* NX-01, which had been the inspiration for 1701.

"As long as it's the finest tippy golden flowery orange Pekoe, sir. The best is none too good for me." The old joke had lost none of its delight, and the laughter they shared eased the tension between them.

Chris took the proffered chair at the desk and gestured at the small potted plant there. "I see you haven't managed to kill the cactus plant I gave you. You remember what I said about overwatering?"

Robert laughed softly. "Yes, miracles still happen. I managed to keep your cactus alive."

Upon crossing the English Channel to attend the Academy, Robert had developed a fascination with the desert, especially the plant life, and a climate so different from that of his home. Learning of that fascination, Chris had invited him to explore the Mojave with him, and had given him a small potted succulent to remember the trip by.

"Now, Chris. You're as uneasy as a long-tailed cat in a room full of rocking chairs. Tell the cactus what's on your mind and I'll listen in."

"Captain, permission to speak freely." Chris's blazing eyes finally met Robert's.

"Always."

"Sir, we are going to be working closely together over the next several months and I need to know whether or not I can trust you. Were you part of the group of ranking officers who set me up as a stalking horse to expose Captain Kamnach a couple years back?"

"Upon my soul," the captain exclaimed, "I could not have been involved in that debacle. At the time of the *Aldrin* incident, Sarah and I

and the *Enterprise* were leading relief efforts on Tarsus IV. I had no idea what had happened until we came home, and when I heard the whole story, I was… well, I was a bit cross. Had a word in private with Admiral Straczeskie. Used a few choice words he didn't think were in my vocabulary."

"Oh, Gandalf…" Chris's broad shoulders relaxed visibly and the air of restraint in his body language vanished. Warm esteem melted the ice of mistrust in his eyes. "That is good to hear. I have always felt you are incorruptible, but I confess, that incident spooked me, disillusioned me toward Starfleet for a while, if I'm honest—"

"I understand. I am so very proud of you. I know what you went through. I went through it myself long ago. You comported yourself as befits a Starfleet Officer. An unhappy situation, all round, but you did well. Now that is behind us, tell me about you. How's Charlie? I haven't seen the old space devil in years—"

Chris stiffened again. "Charlie's my father."

"I know, Chris." Robert's voice was mildly amused.

"No, Gandalf, you don't. Charlie is my *father*. Biological father, I mean."

"I *know*, Chris," Robert reiterated, his tolerant smile broadening. Seeing how deeply troubled Chris seemed and how restlessly he moved in his chair, he began to pour oil upon troubled waters. "Your father and I have years of service together in our back pockets. He's a good man—"

"That he is, if a damnably stubborn one—"

"You come by it honestly, Chris."

Chris started to protest, and then saw the twinkle in Robert's eyes and smiled self-deprecatingly. "You may have a point, Gandalf."

"I'm the fine one to talk about stubbornness. Just ask my wife—"

"Due respect, sir, I will do that—"

Growing serious again, Robert went on, "Your father came to me for advice not so long after he found out there was to be a… a child. I told him I was blessed if I knew how he ought to handle the situation with your mother but that he should find a way to be in your life. I have been after him to tell you who he is for as long as I have known him. It sounds as though he finally got around to telling you the truth and it landed like a brick in a kettle of soup."

"That's… one way of putting it. I… we're not on very cordial terms right now. In fact, we're barely speaking," Chris confessed. "Hobelia has been trying to make it right between us, but…"

"I understand. I truly do." Robert offered a fatherly nod, gazed thoughtfully at the younger man. "Sarah tells me that I need to stop giving advice and instead give my heart. And she's right. She usually is. Chris, your father loves you very, very much. I haven't seen Charlie in many years, but I can tell you that with absolute certainty. And I can tell you another thing. I lost my father over thirty years ago now and I would give anything for one more heart to heart with him. You have the chance for that. Charlie is still living. You are still living. But life out here is so uncertain… I trust you understand what I am trying to say—"

"Noted, logged, and taken to heart, sir. I— I'll talk to him when we get back. Now… could you tell me what the hell I'm doing here instead of refitting *Yorktown*?"

Robert drew a deep, calming breath, folded his hands quietly on the desk, and leaned across the desk to meet Chris's eyes. "I wasn't going to tell you this until the end of the mission, but after what you went through on the *Aldrin*, I think absolute truth between us is the thing. I'm stepping down from the Starship Program at the end of the year, and you are my top choice for a successor."

Chris opened his mouth, but nothing came out. He shook his head as though to clear it, but the motion gave him no clarity.

"Take a deep breath," Robert said with quiet amusement. "You're gobsmacked."

"Damn straight I'm gobsmacked. Captain— I'm not ready for this!"

"Oh Chris." Robert's voice was both scolding and nurturing. "That right there is how I know you are ready. Think about it, now. Your Starfleet record is exemplary. I have known you for many years and I have seen how well you handle diverse situations. I know you joined Starfleet for the same reason I did, 'to see what's out there.' I am well acquainted with your character, your sense of adventure, your humble servant leadership…"

"Sir, I learned that from watching and trying to emulate you, over the years— you're the role model for every aspiring young cadet—"

"And as I tell them, don't try to be like me. Be yourself. Because that's who Starfleet needs." Robert's voice softened. "We have a six-month voyage ahead of us for you to become intimately familiar with this ship, her crew, and the concept of the five-year mission. We'll talk. I'll pass on to you words of wisdom that Jonathan Archer passed on down to me. If, at the end of that time, you genuinely feel yourself to be unready to command her, I will see that you are reassigned and go on

to the next promising candidate on my list. Do we understand each other?"

"Yes, sir. Gandalf—" Chris swallowed hard— "what will you do? This has been your project for so many years and now the ship is shaken down and stressed out and ready to embark upon the first five-year mission… you're stepping down? You're not leading the first five-year mission yourself to show the rest of us how it's done? Gandalf— *why?"*

For the first time, a hint of sadness came to Robert's voice. "Chris… if I may speak from my heart."

"Please do, sir."

"Space is a young man's game," the captain began slowly. "I've been out here for thirty years, give or take a few years of teaching when my daughter was a teenager and needed her father close by. And I'm not as young as I once was. I have old wounds that still trouble me, both physical and emotional. But that isn't the only reason why I am stepping down. Last year, on a mission to a colony world in the grips of a deadly virus, I had to send my wife down into a situation so dangerous it nearly cost her her life. I cannot ever again go through that, Chris. I didn't order her. She pleaded with me with tears in her eyes to let her go. Her passion to save lives knows no borders. She took every precaution and she still contracted the virus. She placed herself in quarantine while she worked on experimental treatments, and once she found one that worked, she tested it on herself first. Chris, words can not convey to you what a man suffers when he has to watch his wife in quarantine, suffering and struggling to breathe and dying on the other side of the glass, and whilst his every instinct is screaming at him to care for her and comfort her, he

can't even touch her—'' Robert shivered. Chris saw his hands locked together on his desk.

"We all worry about the safety of our crew mates. Over the years we become like a tightly knit family—"

"That is very true, and is something I have wrestled with my entire Starfleet career. But more than that… I'm not the captain for such a mission. I'm a husband and father. I cannot be the captain who sends someone's nearest and dearest into clear and present danger knowing it is likely they will not come back. That's the reality of space exploration and it didn't come home to me until just a few weeks ago, when three crew members who meant a good deal to me died on my watch." Robert permitted himself a sad sigh and then shook himself. "If I'm honest… I have always felt like a pilgrim. Not just sure where my place is. I'm a chaplain, a teacher, a musician, a diplomat, a linguist, and an explorer. The day may come when those qualities are the only ones necessary for the captain of a starship to possess, but in the present state of galactic unrest, it is not this day."

Chris shook his head vehemently. "Gandalf, just because you're less a soldier and buckaroo and more a statesman and diplomat doesn't mean you don't make a great captain. A great man. Respectfully suggest that excessive humility is just as distorting to the judgement as excessive hubris."

Robert's eyes were warm. "You know me too well, Number One. Sarah says that excessive humility is my tragic flaw. She says it's going to be the death of me one of these days. I drive her bonkers some days… It's just that… to paraphrase our Bard, some were born captains, some achieved captaincy, and others like myself had captaincy thrust upon

them. I see you as one who has achieved captaincy. I have just sponsored a young man at the academy whom I sense is a born captain."

"But Gandalf, why *did* you become a captain in the first place? If this is how you feel about it? And don't give me your self-deprecating jokes about it either, I've heard them all—"

"A sense of duty, Chris, old fashioned sense of duty and nothing else. The Fleet had suffered some heavy losses, and they needed a captain who is, as you say, incorruptible. I've never had the fire of ambition burning in my soul as some have and I guess the only motivation that would compel me to accept the center chair was duty."

Chris was listening intently. "But you're one of the Fleet's most highly decorated captains, you must have done something right these past twenty years—"

"For each of those medals, I lost someone, Chris," Robert said quietly.

"Oh my God, sir, I know about losing people. I… think I understand. But… won't you be sad to leave this ship, after everything you've put into this project?"

"Very sad indeed, but I've known from the day I began work on this project that this day would come. The *Enterprise* project in many ways is like my child… and I knew from the day my daughter was laid in my arms that one day I would let her go to find her own way in life. The path I began with this project, this ship, even with Starfleet, I have known that each one of these paths would one day come to an end. But the path I began with Sarah… that's forever. And the two of us at present are sorting out our options for the next step in that journey together. And that is all I have to say on this subject, Chris. Think about what we've

talked about, eh? And now I think it's time we toured this vessel before my crews arrive."

"Yes sir, I need to stop by Sickbay briefly and check in with Sarah."

Robert smiled. "Let's make that our first stop."

Robert never looked into his wife's domain without feeling a surge of love and pride for her. Sickbay was a different place than it had been seven years ago when she had first reluctantly come aboard. Since then, she had filled her space with equipment she had designed and worked with her close friend and engineer, Assistant Chief Caitlyn Barry, to build. One room was devoted to her medicinal herbs, and each plant had taken on its own unique personality.

Sickbay, hours before launch, was Pandemonium personified. The two men could hear Sarah and the Tellarite medical engineer, Lt. Grok, going at it hammer and tongs even before they entered the sickbay.

"*Khrught!* If brains were currants tha'd be a plain tea cake!"

"That's *khrught.* Not 'crowt.' If you're going to swear in Tellarite, pronounce it right!"

"My pronunciation has nowt to do with the fact that the *mukkin* diagnostic imaging system has been running on tea cakes since the last time thee faffed with it and and if thee can't get it fixed properly this time, thee is about as much use in my Sickbay as a chocolate teapot, Grok!"

"How do you expect me to get anything done when I'm freezing to death?" The guttural voice of Grok replied.

“You’ll live. Touch those temperature controls and your name is Mud. Oh wait. You *love* mud… Oh Chris. ‘Ullo, my ‘andsome. Robert, you’re standing in the way of progress—”

“I *am* progress, Sarah.” Robert handed her the data slate that contained clearance for her medical staff. “Your people are cleared for duty. I know you hate the last-minute rigmarole so I took care of it for you first thing—”

“Oh, ta, one less thing—”

“You and Grok got this place shipshape and Bristol fashion, have you?”

Grok spoke up in his great broad voice. “I like your old lady, Captain. Dr. April knows her alliums—”

“Onions,” Sarah corrected, trying not to laugh.

“Such a pity that a doctor so clever and so skilled at the Civil Conversation should be so *ugly!”* The Tellarite broke into a great broad laugh.

Robert immediately leapt to the defense of his wife, whom he felt was the most beautiful woman alive, but Sarah laughed with him. “‘Ark at pot calling kettle grimey arse, Grok! Your hog face would scare my plants out of ten years growth if I let you into my office—”

“Well, your face would scare my pups back home into—” Grok drew a deep breath, the better to pull off one of Sarah’s expressions— “*the high fantods!”*

“Ah! If thee cannot be making thyself of ornament, make thyself of use—”

“Chris, I believe we should make ourselves scarce,” Robert suggested, trying to keep a straight face. Grok was learning broad

Yorkshire from Sarah and Sarah was learning all the important words in Tellarite (id est, all the swears), and if he heard any more of it, he thought he might lose his professional composure.

The two men were in Engineering conferring with Chief Moves-With-Burning-Grace when his sister's voice came over the comm.

"Commander April to Captain April. Brother, you're needed on the Bridge. Whoever designed this comm board was drunk for two months—"

Shaking his head and laughing, Robert leaned over to touch the comm panel. "It was I, Sister. I'm the designer."

"Well, in that case you couldn't have been drunk, just daft as a brush—"

Another voice interrupted his sister. "It's not your design, Captain; it's Commander April. The pink skin is entirely unteachable!"

"Lyra, welcome aboard. We've talked about not using that term on my ship…"

"Yes sir. Sorry sir."

"Lyra, Sister, I will be right there."

Robert stopped short just outside the turbolift at the communications station to throw out his hands in shock and exclaim, "Was anybody killed in this wreck?"

"Captain on the Bridge!" The Andorian security chief's antennae stood at attention to match his posture.

"As you were," the captain said gently. He had never cared for this particular military protocol, but Shrax of Andor had seen service in the Imperial Guard before beginning his tour of duty in Starfleet, and he was

nothing if not military. *Since George had to get back to the Diplomatic Corps,* he reflected, *I'm lucky to have Shrax for the military aspects of the service that aren't in my wheelhouse.*

"Sir?" The familiar, eager, space-pale face of his well-seasoned yeoman, Grace Fletcher, smiled up at him. She held out a pad for his signature. "The last time I saw you, sir, you were quite unwell. Are you feeling a bit better?"

"I was feeling a bit better until I saw this mess." The Captain gestured to the comm panel that Lyra and Mary Anne had been disassembling, one trying to teach and one trying to comprehend. It did not appear to be going well. "Thank you for your kindness, Prevenient Grace."

The affectionate nickname was meant to differentiate the yeoman from the chief engineer, Chief Moves-With-Burning-Grace, but was also a nod to their shared Church of England background.

His sister was on the deck under the panel speaking such broad Yorkshire that no one but Robert could understand her. The Aenarian comm Officer crawled back out from under, shook their long white braid back over their shoulder, and threw out their hands in utter exasperation.

"I can't explain anything to… my esteemed colleague. She's too stubborn to learn! And I can't understand her language!" Lyra's antennae moved from the captain to the comm board to the captain again in utter frustration.

"She is stubborn. I should know, she's my sister."

"Oh yes sir, I know all about stubborn sisters, I have one—"

"My sister is old school Starfleet, and all the new technology frustrates and confuses her. Bit of a Luddite, she is, it runs in the

family…" with an affectionate glance at his sister's booted foot, the only part of her that was visible from under the panel. "Much as the old equipment confuses and frustrates the young Academy graduates. I know she'll get the hang of it if you have the patience to teach her, Lyra. As for her language, you're a linguist with a speciality in dialect, and you may find this one fascinating to learn. Tyke… or broad Yorkshire… is derived from Old Norse and Anglo-Saxon. Those are dead languages today, but they have found a way to live on in regional dialect."

"Due respect, sir, I didn't study Old Norse and Anglo-Saxon." The Aenarian's pale face flushed crystal blue.

"You know bits of it, Lyra, you just don't know you know it. Mary Anne and I developed a code using the language when we were both serving in the Border Patrol. That is one of the codes I taught when you were my student in Communications 101, remember?"

"Oh, that's right sir, I remember, but it's obsolete now—"

"So it is. Let me have a go at showing her the station, eh? No one knows it better than the designer…"

Lyra watched in amusement as the captain slipped under the comm panel with his sister. "It's all new technology to thee, Sister. Figured it out by now, have thee?"

"What does thee *suppose* I'm trying to do, trip the light fantastic?" Mary Anne grumbled. "Brother, thee makes a better door than thee does a window, and me as stout as a partridge—"

"Sister, thee are *not* stout. Thee are a covert from the tempest and a hiding place from the wind. Stop chelpin' and pay attention. Now *this*..." he began to explain the systems to his new comm officer.

“Why are they talking to each other in antique English?” Lyra had thought their own family complicated. It seemed that the captain’s was likewise.

“It’s not antique English, it’s the Quaker plain speech. ‘Thee’ is an intimate, familial pronoun. Corresponds to the French *tu* or the German *du.* They’re Friends.” Yeoman Fletcher had spent enough time around the captain and chief medical officer to become accustomed to their unique way of addressing each other.

“No one would ever have supposed it of them,” Pike muttered, listening to the brother and sister argue as they worked together.

“Do they *hate* each other?” Lyra was wide eyed, listening. They had had some damn good fights with their sister, and they finally realized what those must have sounded like to others.

“They’re devoted to each other,” the yeoman explained. She had handled the massive amounts of correspondence between the two for long enough to get a sense of their relationship. “They’re either practicing their Tellarite or they’re covering for how happy they are to be working together again, not sure which, six of one, I’d guess… They haven’t killed each other yet.”

“No, but I might if I don’t get out from under this comm panel and take a break for a cup of tea!” Mary Anne slid out and began, “How that Brother of mine ever ended up teaching a class at the Academy, let alone getting this ship launched, is more than I can fathom.” Holding out her hand to help him scramble up, something that as he said was easier twenty years ago minus a game leg, she said, “With a Ouija board and a Scrabble set I could have designed—”

“Now sister, you’ll feel better once you get a cup of tea. You and Lyra go mash some and make friends, and then come back to learning the systems. We’ve got some hours before the rest of our musicians and crew come aboard. Plenty of time for thee to learn if thee puts thy mind to it.”

“What mind?” Mary Anne grumbled, nodding to the Aenarian, “five minutes working with my brother and I’ve lost my mind… what I was thinking of signing on this voyage I don’t know… come on, Lyra. If you can help me with my *shocking* Andorian accent, I can teach you basic Tyke…”

CHAPTER TWO: THE FLIGHT OF WILD SWANS

If the not-under-command bridge of the *Enterprise*, dark, deserted, with only her captain to keep the watch with her, was the adagio movement of a great symphony, that same bridge moments before launch, brightly lit and yet shadowed, alive with the soft counterpoint of chirps and twitters of diagnostics and substations, all stations filled with familiar faces, was the allegro movement. The low hum of the engines warming up belowdecks was the bass line, and the voices of his crew, slightly raised with the excitement of the moment, were the main theme. Captain Robert April paused for one moment at the red railing to take it all in before beginning to make the rounds to his crew, touching shoulders, clasping hands, patting backs, assuring each one that they were cherished crew members and that he appreciated their work.

He paused at an intentional distance of Lt. Kizzmekia Corbett, seated at the science station and completely absorbed in modifications to her scope.

"*As-salamu alaikum,* Meek," the captain greeted her softly, not wanting to startle the somewhat reclusive science officer, welcoming her aboard with respectfully downcast eyes and a hand over his heart.

The South African science officer looked up from her scope, and her beautiful brown face glowed with shy warmth as she laid her own hand on her heart. “Peace be upon you too, sir.”

Her Captain had won her lifelong loyalty the day she approached him and asked, in a voice just above a whisper, if she might be permitted to break regulations and wear her hair down, as keeping it high and tight and off the collar was giving her tension headaches. He had explained to her that as long as she was working in the labs and could safely do so, she was welcome to wear her cornrows on duty. Today, her first day on Bridge duty, her glorious cascade of braids flowed down her back and fell over her shoulders as she bent back over her scope, and he forbore comment. His officers had learned long ago that he who wore a non-regulation cardigan on duty was lax in the more arbitrary protocols but stern when it really counted.

The captain smiled and moved on to his sister, Commander Mary Anne April, at the communications board.

“Got the new comm systems sorted, have you?”

“Near as makes n’ matter. Thy design will pass with a shove, after all.” Her warm brown eyes mirrored the twinkle in his.

“I’ll keep her in line for you, Sir.” Lyra attempted Terran humor and was rewarded when the captain laughed with them and said,

“I’m counting on you, Lyra.”

He was joyously taken off guard by his erstwhile brother-in-law’s famous bear hugs. The big burly Shetland Islander, Duncan McLean, was well known to spend his leaves clearing brush and planting crops on colony worlds, (“I am relaxing! Dinna fash.”). He loved to sing Johnny

Cash songs in a voice “like a rook’s”, hence his brother’s affectionate nickname for him. His true voice was the violin, which he played so beautifully he ought to have been a professional musician “but engineering’s easier.” He played “fair to middlin’” bagpipes but he swore he only knew two tunes: *The Flowers of the Forest* for funerals and *Mairi’s Wedding* for weddings. He wouldn’t have known what tact was if it bit him in the technical manual, but he had the tenderest heart in the galaxy. He had just come aboard to serve as replacement for the late Bill Thorvaldsen. If anything could make that loss ache any less, Robert thought, as he and Duncan joyously pounded each other’s backs, it would be the warmly familiar sight of his brother, the shaggy shock of mist silver hair and the shoulders broad and rugged as the Cairngorm hills.

“Old Badger!” Duncan’s voice was as colorful and rough and warm as the clan tartan he wore at the slightest excuse. “How the hell be ye? Workin’ hard or hardly workin’?”

“Now that you’re on deck, Rook, working hard to keep you from pulling a Panama with my ship! You’ve been working hard, I see. Too taken up with the engine room to come report to your Captain. What’s the good word?”

“Pure dead brilliant, Brother, this is enough to make me change my mind about retiring! I’ll stay in another five year if you and Sarah and Mary Anne will.”

“Commander McLean! When you get through fraternizing, I could use a hand over here!”

Duncan was already ‘hail fellow well’ met with Larry Marvick’s replacement, newly promoted Assistant Chief Engineer Caitlin Barry. He was on the Bridge with her making the final adjustments in preparation for launch. He gave his brother and Captain one last hug, and then settled back into his station, muttering jargon back and forth to Chief Barry, and occasionally swearing approvingly in Gaelic. His brother smiled, and turned to welcome another old friend and crew mate.

“Jo, how good to see you! Hard to come down to driving a starship after digging potatoes in Northern Maine, I know—”

Commander Josephine Meier at the helm turned at her Captain’s greeting to smile brilliantly up at him.

“Ayuh, it’s good work if you can get it, sir!”

“The farm will miss you, Jo, but space is glad to see you back. Wasn’t the same out here without you.”

Jo’s blue eyes sparkled back at him. “Wicked good to be back, sir. Didn’t I see you up to the Fort last fall for the harvest, you and Sarah? She was up on the back of the truck, stringing barrels!”

Robert laughed, “You did, Jo. Sarah and I were visiting her aunt and uncle on the old farm, and we thought we may as well make ourselves useful. Picked enough potatoes to feed our crew for a month of Sundays. What do you think of this ship of ours?”

Jo shook her curly blonde hair back and replied, deadpan, “She’s better’n a poke in the eye with a sharp stick, sir.”

“Handles a bit better than a tractor, I ‘magine,” Robert deadpanned back at her.

“Oh aye, sir, she’s the finest kind.”

“So happy to have you aboard, Jo.” Patting her shoulder, he moved on to greet José Tyler, at navigation.

Just as he was about to settle into the command chair to begin the familiar series of orders to make way, the lift doors burst open and his daughter appeared on the bridge, long skirts swirling around her in her excitement and haste. She had just come onboard and had not yet seen the bridge. She stopped in her tracks and took it all in, wide eyed as a child, her eyes drawn upward to the displays of star charts and sector maps, nebulae and gas giants, ringed planets and stellar nurseries. Her eyes moved to the view screen, open space framed by space dock, and a shiver of excitement ran through her slender frame. She had christened *Enterprise* four years ago, but she had not been onboard since that day. The glow on her face betrayed what it meant to her to be sharing his last voyage with her father.

Robert looked over at her with such love radiating from him that she felt it, with her back to him and her eyes on the star charts, and turned to smile at him.

“Lark,” he invited gently, holding out his hand to her, “there’s no need for you to stay in the ‘visitor section.’ This bridge is your home as well as mine. Come down here to the command deck with your old father.”

“I’ll be right there, Tad, I’m just taking it all in.”

“Sure would like to hear you sing, Miss April,” José spoke over his shoulder.

“I’m not Miss April. I’m just Lark. And I’d be glad to, a bit later. I’m hoping my Tad’s crew has a lot of songs to teach me, too.”

Lt. Meier looked up mischievously from the helm controls, where she was performing one last systems check before launch. “Are you up for learning a little Swedish, Lark? I can teach you ‘*O! Salla Land, O Skona Strand.’*”

Lark laughed, “My Tad’s the linguist, but I’d love to try to learn if you could teach me. I suppose if I can speak Gaelic, I can learn anything.”

From the auxiliary controls station, Chris Pike watched the informality and the camaraderie. After his last assignment on the *Aldrin*, the casual fraternizing, the warm fatherliness of Captain April’s command style, and the comfortable way his crew responded to that style, all seemed undisciplined to him. He made a mental note to discuss it with the Captain later.

As though reading his thoughts, his captain came to stand at his shoulder and say quietly, “It’s alright to enjoy the journey, Chris, even if we’re out here for a sorrowful reason. Let’s make some good music and raise a little Cain, eh?”

“Respectfully, sir, when was the last time you raised Cain?” Chris couldn’t suppress a grin.

“I’m Cain,” Lark called from the communications station where she was chatting with her aunt. “My Auntie and my Tad say I’m the only Cain they ever raised.”

“Sir, your daughter’s a character.”

“Much like myself, Chris. Would you like to give the first order to take her out?”

Chris straightened in his chair and shook his head. “No, sir. This is your last mission. I won’t take this away from you.” He saw the gratitude in his captain’s dark eyes, and smiled.

Robert took the command chair and glanced around the bridge at each of his officers. For each one he made eye contact with, there was at least one ghostly presence he acknowledged, with a surge of love and sorrow. He could hear Jonathan Archer's voice in his memory. *You can't be afraid of the wind, Robert. Learn to trust it.*

You're flying with me, dear friend, he thought, sure for one moment that if he glanced quickly enough to starboard he would see Jonathan's lined, rugged, kindly face smiling encouragement at him.

He had to clear his throat before he could speak. "Alright, everyone, suppose we spread some canvas and get the show on the road?"

"Brother, you're mixing your metaphors…" Mary Anne chuckled from the comm station.

"Nowt o' th' soart, Sister, think of nautical roads and space lanes. Please request clearance from the dock master."

Mary Anne touched her earpiece. "Clearance coming in now, Brother. He says 'Godspeed all travelers'."

"Jo, status of the helm?"

"We are go for command, sir," Jo turned to beam at him.

"Brilliant," the captain praised her. "Thank you, Jo. Cast off all moorings and docking clamps. Anchors aweigh."

"Anchors aweigh, aye, sir."

"Lay in standard angle of departure, Jo. Think you can avoid driving us into a potato house?"

The helm officer glanced good naturedly over her shoulder at her captain's teasing. "Can't hit the broad side of a potato house, sir, but I can drive to beat hell."

“I know you can. You’re a damn good pilot. Move us out, one fourth sublight.”

“One fourth sublight, aye, sir. No potato house in sight.”

“Don’t drive like my brother, Jo,” Mary Anne called over her shoulder. “Drives like Jehu, that one…”

Robert chuckled and beamed at his helm officer. “Ah, Sister, is it peace?” He watched as the open space displayed on the view screen. “Engage.”

Lark Rise had been standing poised, like the bird she was named for, waiting for her father’s final command. At the sound of it, she gracefully moved to the comm panel and tapped it. “This is it, everyone. Hit it.”

Over the bridge speakers, a sudden downbeat and a drumroll coincided with the low hum of the impulse engines belowdecks. Some of the crew raised their heads in mild surprise.

Every bit as gracefully as the starship was slipping out of space dock, Lark skipped down the steps to the command deck to stand shoulder to shoulder with her father. The sound of the strings, agitated and nearly frantic, soared over the speakers.

Soft brows raised and lips parted in amazement, Robert whispered to his daughter, “My darling…”

“Don’t you recognize the opening, Tad? Don’t worry, you will in a moment.” Slipping her hand into her father’s, Lark caught the sudden light of recognition.

“Why, Lark, it’s—-”

“It’s Sibelius’ Fifth, the final movement,” Lark explained, “the piece written to evoke the call and flight of wild swans. Last time I watched *Enterprise* launch, I asked myself, ‘What piece of music does this remind me of?’ And I found this. This opening bit, with the strings. It sounds to me like the controlled chaos on the bridge just before take-off. And it’s the way *Enterprise* feels when she’s stuck in space dock and she’s just raring to go.”

As if proving Lark’s point, the plaintive strings rose in intensity. His hand squeezed hers a little more tightly as the planets of the solar system slid by. He knew they were both thinking, as they watched, “Mars, bringer of war. Venus, the bringer of peace. Jupiter, bringer of jollity. Saturn, bringer of old age.” She had learned Holst’s *The Planets* at the same time as she had learned the names of the planets of the solar system and neither of them could separate the music from the sight.

And then the frantic strings rose to an unbearable pitch to be immediately soothed by the bass.

“Those horns,” Robert whispered, lifting his face raptly as one who sees visions, “Oh, those glorious, transcendent horns—”

The unforgettable chords of the French horns soared, and his heart soared to meet them.

“That’s what the *Enterprise* sounds like when she is flying free,” Lark whispered.

Her father couldn’t speak. He. closed his eyes in order to imprint every single second in his memory. Oddly unsurprised to feel his other hand taken by his wife… when had she appeared on the bridge? She could seldom get away from sickbay long enough to be on the bridge for

take-off, and it moved him that with the extra workload of a ship load of musicians, most of whom he suspected had not got their space legs, she would take a moment to be here at his side.

As the piece came to its majestic conclusion, Sarah whispered, “Somebody ought to say Amen.”

“Amen,” said Lark and Robert together.

At helm, Jo had tears in her eyes. “Sir, that was beautiful.”

Likewise moved, Mary Anne turned from the comm to say quietly, “I’ve played that with the orchestra. It is, as my Brother says, transcendent.”

“It’s better than opera, that’s for damn sure,” was Chris’s contribution.

“Did you like it, Tad?” Lark whispered, unsure how to interpret the look on his face.

“For one dangerous moment there when I first heard the horns I thought I was going to blub,” he whispered back, “but now… my cup is running over, Lark.” He knew he didn’t have to explain to her the bittersweet sorrow that overflowed the heart even at the most joyous of times. “Thank you for arranging that for me. Helm, are we clear of the Sol system?”

“Yes sir, we are crossing now.”

“Navigation, lay in a course for Starbase Two. Helm, ahead warp factor three.”

Jo looked over to meet his eyes for confirmation. He smiled and nodded. “Stand on.”

“Well,” Sarah finally sighed, tearing her eyes away from the mesmerizing stars on the viewscreen, “I’ve got to get back to the seasick musicians. What a midden that sickbay is, let me tell you… See you at tea?”

She subtly glanced over at the spot where they had been snogging a few hours before and winked at him. Robert looked warmly back at her with the quickest touch of his fingertip to his lips, and then the turbolift doors were closing behind her.

Behind him, Mary Anne and Lyra, already fast friends, were utterly intent on their monitoring. They were speaking to one another in Andorian, the Northern polar dialect, and Lyra was coaching his sister on her accent. Chris had taken the environmental control station in order to begin deep diving into the starship’s schematics, familiarizing himself with the ship’s systems. Lt. Corbett and Duncan were on the deck conferring about an upgrade to the science station sensors. Jo and Tyler were already exchanging flight stories… Robert thought he heard something like “he couldn’t find his ass with both hands, a tricorder, and a star chart,” and forbore comment.

At his side, Lark Rise’s face had lost some of the patient, plaintive weariness of grief, and was filled with awe and joy and child-like wonder again. For a moment she was the little girl taking her very first tour of the solar system from the security of her father’s arms. Before he could ask tuppence for her thoughts, she exclaimed,

“‘The poetry of motion! The *real* way to travel! The *only* way to travel! Here today, into next week tomorrow!’ Tad, what would Mr. Toad have thought of *Enterprise,* eh?”

Her father chuckled. “‘Oh bliss! Oh my oh my!’”

Lark glanced around at the puzzled faces of the bridge crew. “Were none of you brought up on *The Wind in the Willows*? Well then, I’m sorry for you. Tad, perhaps we can have dramatic readings of *Willows*?”

“It’s a long voyage out and I’m always looking for ways to improve crew morale,” her father said thoughtfully, “work something out with Yeoman Grace. Steady as she goes, Jo. Chris, I have more paperwork than you could shake a stick at and I need to girt up the loins of my mind and go for it. You have the conn.”

Perhaps now I could finish that log entry.

He settled at his desk and put out a reluctant hand for his reading spectacles to begin on the stack of reports. Thinking of each one of his cherished crew members, remembering the last joyous launch of his ship and the sorrowful homecoming, he felt once again the mantle of command settle heavily upon his shoulders.

This is command. I need to be honest with Chris about this, just as Jonathan was with me, he thought, but his deep knowing of his protégée whispered to him that Chris already knew. *And if Jim has the future that I foresee he has… I need to be honest with him, too.*

Jimmy, he thought wearily, *I need to reach out to Jim before we are out of range. I promised George… perhaps a direct communication would be a bit intrusive. I think instead, a simple transmission that he can respond to when he is ready.*

“Hello, Jim, this is your godfather. I’m feeling a bit lost in the blizzard. I was wondering if you were feeling that way too. Perhaps we could walk each other home.”

He hesitated a moment. *Vulnerability*, he thought. It was how Jonathan had long ago taught him to trust, and it would be how he would teach Jim to trust him. His finger came down on the Send button.

Perhaps now he could finish that log entry. The most logical way to begin, however, was at his last log entry before medical leave.

They were a fortnight out from their first stop. A fortnight in space, he had learned long ago, was a long, long time. Time to build relationships with his crew. Time to grieve. Time for introspection and reflection.

He put his head down on his arms and summoned up a remembrance of things past, the series of events that had led him here, to his last voyage as Captain of the *Enterprise.*

INTERMISSION: THE ORGANIANS

And far away, in the Council Chambers of Organia, Ayelborne reached a decision.

"The word has been given. This is it." Prime's voice was as solemn as it was certain. "This mission they are about to embark on is the final test of their readiness." His far-seeing eyes scanned the horizon. The Sheliak invasion force was approaching the perimeter of the farthest scope of Federation sensors, but he could see them as clearly as though they were an inch from his nose. "The humans respond to everything in either fear or love, agreed? And hatred and violence result from that fear, and connection and interdependence results from love?"

"That they do, according to our observations."

"And there is nothing they fear more than that which is Other. Have we ever encountered a race more Other to the humans than the beings they are about to encounter? If they can reject fear and respond even to these beings in love, then we will know that they are ready."

"Everything those two do, they do out of love. You just watch them. You'll see."

"I just want to be sure, beyond the shadow of a doubt. It doesn't do to be hasty."

"'Don't be hasty' he says. We've been observing this couple for twenty-five years."

“True, but at present we are concerned only with the past couple months. Could we review our reports one last time as we go forth to meet them? Where were we when they came back from the Faramond mission?”

“If memory serves, we were learning the game they call ‘cribbage’…

II

Part Two: Prelude and Fugue

INTERMISSION: THE ORGANIANS

"What color pegs do you want?"

"Red."

"Fine. I'll take green. Cut for crib?"

"Yes. Aces high. Alright, your deal."

The cards were dealt in silence. Discards made, and the two began to play.

"Ten."

"Twenty for two."

"Thirty for six."

"Go."

"Thirty-one for two. It's your crib. My first count. Fifteen two, fifteen four, a run of three is seven… and the wrong jack is still seven… this cribbage is even simpler than the chess Captain Archer's crew was so fond of."

"A game of chance," Prime mentioned, "that has been popular amongst seafaring humans for hundreds of years. Particularly those who manned submarines. Has enjoyed a resurgence in popularity amongst space farers in the last century. A very popular game on the Terran island the captain of this ship calls home. And still it strikes me as a most rudimentary form of entertainment."

Prime and Second had taken the forms of two of the Bridge crew… a venerable and eccentric older woman who served as First Officer, and the junior Bridge engineer Caitlin Barry… in order to conduct their

observations. They had chosen the crowded and noisy mess hall as a place to talk undisturbed. They sat at a table close to the viewport with the cribbage board between them.

"There are over twelve hundred thousand possible hands," Second, in the guise of Engineer Barry, returned. "Some strategy comes into play. I believe the expression as the game draws close to its completion is 'keep your peggin' cards'?"

"And 'never discard a five if your opponent has the crib'. A fiver is known in this game as 'everybody's friend.'" Prime, in the guise of Lorna Simon, lifted their teacup and took a cautious sip. "Do you know how many cups of this liquid we have consumed since this mission began…"

"Approximately eighty-four thousand, nine hundred and fifty-three," Second deadpanned.

"And I still don't think we have caught up with our— ah, there he is. Don't stare. Right then, two in hand and nineteen in crib, does not appear to be 'my game.' The custom of referring to a null score as 'nineteen,' then—"

"He looks ill," Second commented. "He's pale, and he's favoring his left leg again, and he appears to be in lower respiratory distress—"

"He'll get his cup of tea and feel better. I do not see how his appearance affects our mission here, which is, need I remind you, to collect our final report before recommending formal first contact…"

"I'm practicing my compassion, alright? He and his crew have suffered intensely. It's going to take time for them to recover. We should *have intervened before the pirates—"*

"You know the deal as well as I do! If we don't adhere to the rules and follow the protocol, we can forget about a first contact mission! No

interference means, NO *interference. And I'm growing weary of reminding you, avoid emotional involvement! Are we clear?"*

"Perfectly so. I won't bollox it up."

"You're even beginning to talk *like they do…"*

"Just getting ready for first contact. Your deal."

CHAPTER SIX: THE WRECK OF THE EDMUND FITZGERALD

Such was the wreck of the *Hesperus,*

In the midnight and the snow!

Haunted by the lines of a nineteenth century lament for a lost ship, Captain Robert April took off his reading spectacles, laid them down on the flimsiplast copies of lists of the ships pirated by the Moss gang, and rubbed his tired, burning eyes. He and George Kirk had been working over the lists together for hours, patching together crew lists and composing messages to inform the families. Each of them had learned the fate of at least one friend, acquaintance, or co-worker. It was heart-rending work.

"At least," they would take it in turns to point out to each other, "at least we aren't working with Starfleet Forensics scouring every inch of the pirate vessel. What an awful chore that would be."

"And at least we aren't doing autopsies on what remains we could retrieve with Sarah's surgical team," the other would obligatorily rejoin.

They tried to keep each other sane by quite a bit of graveyard humor as old friends can get away with in privacy, and by taking it in turns to step away from the work to fetch "rusted old buckets of brackish swamp water" as George described the tea his English captain was so partial to. To which Robert would retort "Tea is good for what ails you and if

nothing ails you it's good anyway." But George stuck with coffee which he called his "super unleaded."

George had left the conference room where they were set up some half an hour ago to let Doctor April, CMO of *Enterprise* and the captain's wife, into the holding cell where Roy Moss was being held so that she could check on the damage Jim had inflicted when he had knocked him down. In the emptiness of the quiet room without his comrade in arms, surrounded by casualty reports, Robert was realizing how worried he was for his daughter.

Lark Rise, he thought, hoping that his thoughts could reach her across the void of space, *you are missing from me. Please, please get your skates on and contact your worrying old father.* The thought occurred to him, with the old ache of regret, that this anguish of worry was what she had felt all through the years she had been safe on Earth with her mother's people and he had been living and working on the final frontier. *I'm sorry, Lark Rise. I just wanted to make the galaxy a bit safer for my little girl. I'll call the Bridge again. Perhaps the gamma shift comm officer filling in for Veronica has simply forgotten…* but the word from the comm station was the same as it had been for the past six agonizing weeks. "*No, sir, no word from Miss April. I'm sorry, sir."*

"Thank you, Ensign," he said out loud, and under his breath, whispered the prayer from the British Royal Navy anthem… "*Oh hear us when we cry to thee for those in peril of the sea."*

Surely if something were wrong, I would know, in the deepest part of my being. She's probably just completely absorbed in work and is absent-

minded like her old father. But she's always been so faithful about staying in constant contact when she can…

His daughter's life work, which her father loved to tease her was "good work if you can get it," was the preservation, interpretation, and performance of the ancient traditional melodies of the British Isles. She was an award-winning Celtic harpist and singer, and the sweet simplicity of her clear flute-like voice and the poignant beauty of her music had come to be known and loved through the Federation worlds. Like her father, she had a vision of galactic unity, but she believed that her contribution to that peace was not to be through defense or diplomacy, but by binding together the people of each disparate world with the golden threads of song. Her talent and her sweet nature, like her father's, made room for itself but she often credited her father for her popularity: being the daughter of a Starfleet legend made one illustrious. And when that Starfleet legend was the father from whom she had inherited her singing voice and who had taught her most of the songs she had made popular, and who was known and loved by countless beings throughout the known galaxy, well, as she said, all she had to do was learn to play Celtic harp, hammered dulcimer, and lyre, and she had it made in the shade.

Three years ago, her fiancé, Daniel Greyson, nephew to Amanda Greyson *aduna* Sarek, had disappeared under mysterious circumstances whilst serving as First Mate aboard Merchant Marine freighter *Edmund Fitzgerald.* She had spent the past three years traveling to many worlds, colonies, outposts, and star bases, searching for clues as to Daniel's fate, bringing her music to everyone who wanted to hear her. The personal sorrow she brought to her music had touched the hearts of her auditors,

and knit her tightly into the mysterious community whose passport was grief.

She and her father had spent those past three years trying with everything in their power to arrange to be together. But in a vast galaxy, the captain of the ship of the line went where he was needed, and an itinerant singer searching for her fiancé went where the clues to his whereabouts were. They had not been face to face in too long, and he missed her with a pain that was physical. They were in constant communication whenever they were in range, and in the mysterious silent communication of the spirit when they were not, the bond between them so strong that it set at naught the barriers of time and space to know if the other was alright or not. But nothing could take the place of her hand in his, and he ached for it.

He sighed deeply and ran his hands through his soft brown silver threaded hair, further standing it on end. His hair was always a bit longer than was strictly regulation, and he blamed it on his years as comm officer in the Border Patrol. Border Patrol personnel were noted throughout the Fleet for their wild and woolly appearance and their loathing of protocol and regulations.

Even after serving for many years as the Captain of the Diplomatic Corps frigate *Heart of Oak,* and for the past seven years as the flagship of the line, the old patterns established in those difficult years had won him the reputation for eccentricity. In a most unmilitary fashion, he thought nothing of showing affection to his wife before his crew, ("It's important for the crew's morale to know that I love my wife and that we are one," he would argue). He was on a first name basis with everyone

from cadets to admirals, ("because a comm Officer knows everybody and his brother, doesn't he?"). He had become legendary for his unique way of coping with a rare blood deficiency that left him almost always feeling cold. ("Ye're nesh," Sarah used to laugh at him, Yorkshire fashion for making fun of someone who wasn't used to the cold of the North, until she found out that he had an actual medical condition that made him vulnerable to the cold). Unlike any other officer in the Fleet, who would have felt obliged to add a thermal layer underneath the uniform, he didn't believe in it: "too much trouble to go to, in the Border Patrol, we might only have seconds to come up all standing and get to the bridge in a crisis, no time to faff with long johns." Instead, he layered a cable knit sweater over his uniform. It had been made, he would explain, "from the wool of my Nan's own sheep, spun and knit by her own hands, designed so I could be readily identified if I should be lost, and given to me as a Christmas gift when I went in the service." Over many years of service, the cardigan had become emblematic of this man, giving him an avuncular, professorial air that belied the rows of medals he kept in a private drawer in his quarters and preferred not to discuss.

These mild eccentricities made him stand out like a sore thumb in the Diplomatic Corps, and had caused plenty of friction between himself and his more conventional, regulation quoting, by the book colleagues. His naïveté of the realities of a dangerous galaxy had added further irritation, until those he worked with most closely got to know him well enough to realize that his seeming naïveté was cover for deeply painful experience and loss he was reluctant to talk about. Although his unorthodox methods drove his colleagues and Starfleet Command

nearly frantic at times, they loved him for his tenderness of heart, his insatiable curiosity and childlike wonder about the universe, and his dry, quirky, self-deprecating British humor. Those who had served with him the longest respected him for his steadiness of judgement, his hard-won wisdom, and the incorruptibility of his spirit. After all, if all diplomats were like him, they'd work themselves out of a job in no time.

As he replaced his reading spectacles, ("farsighted like my blessed Father," he would explain, "and I can't tolerate Retinax,") and bent his tired head over the casualty lists again, his anguish for the lost crews found utterance in the lines that had been haunting him all afternoon:

Christ save us all from a death like this
On the reef of Norman's woe!

It was a poem spacefarers understood only too well, and one he was often called upon to recite for lost ships. He did not even realize he had spoken aloud until the conference room doors slid open and George Kirk charged in, shouting, "Robert, you still here? I got a complete list for us! Roy Moss broke down and completed our lists of lost ships!"

"George," Robert said wearily, "this is capital news, just capital, but I don't believe I want to know how you accomplished this feat—"

"I didn't lift a finger. Wait for it now. It was that wife of yours. God, Robert, you should have *seen* her! I had her come down to check on Roy after Jim knocked him down and she had a word. Is she happy in Medical? Because I could put her right to work in the Security division. She put the fear of God into Roy, who obviously has never met a woman

he respected. He respected Sarah fast enough. Told him she was a Yorkshire farm lass, a former veterinarian, and a surgeon, and terribly, terribly handy with a scalpel. How you can sleep at night with a woman like that next to you is more than I can fathom. She's wasted in Medical; we need to take her across the Neutral Zone and drop her on top of the Klingons. She'd straighten them right out."

Robert was shaking with suppressed laughter. "That's my ladylike wife, Lord love her. I sure enough do. She's got all sorts of research and design projects she's working on. I don't think wild horses could drag her out of Medical, but you're welcome to mention it to her."

"I had no idea, when I first met her, what the hell you saw in her. I thought she was just plain rude."

Robert laughed out loud. "That's what I told her, the very first day I met her. As I got to know her, and lived for four years in Yorkshire, I realized that's just their way up North. They don't mean a thing by it, any more than Andorians and Tellarites do."

His voice faded and his eyes became faraway as the memories flooded over him.

He was fourteen again, struggling to come to terms with an intolerable loss. How could two people who had been so vitally alive one moment, so useful and so beloved, be gone? How could his whole world have changed in one moment? Once, Home had been a family house in Coventry, close enough to the Uni that his parents walked to work every day. Home had been his own room that looked out over the ruins of the old Cathedral, his own tree, the garden, and his family. And the next moment, there wasn't any family. Only his sister on the other side of a

locked door, and his little brother crying in his arms until he couldn't cry any more and fell into exhausted sleep.

Home was now with his Grandparents, Abbott and Abbess of the old Franciscan monastery in North Riding. There were so many rules he was sure he would never get used to. His grandparents loved him, of course, but why couldn't he have gone to space with his Grandfather April? Surely it wouldn't hurt so much in space…

He needed to run, and run, and find a private place where no one could see him cry. He had spent his childhood summers exploring the moors and knew them to be the perfect place of concealment. What to bring, besides a water bottle? He snatched an apple and a slice of crusty bread from the refectory. That was all he really needed. He couldn't force himself to swallow much, in spite of his Grandmother's insistence that he keep up his strength.

The solitary moors took him to their heart. In the green places that kept the secrets of many a thrush's nest and fox's den, the young boy found the safety to let the tears and sobs wrack his body. There was no one here to witness his agony, no one here to tell him to be a man.

Sinking exhausted upon a stile after hours of walking, he lifted his tear-stained face to the evening sky. And then he saw her.

She must have followed him for hours. *A lithe but sturdy country girl in farm dungarees, muddy boots, primrose yellow hair in a messy bun, and eyes the color of the moor.*

"Wot the bloody 'ell fire ye doing here? This is my family's land!" she exclaimed, hands on her hips, indignantly.

He had never been so furious to be caught out in such a vulnerable state. He was shy of girls, and these Northern girls were a completely unknown quantity from his classmates back Home.

"Why are you people in the North so rude?" he burst out. "Rude, rude, rude, horrible and rude. How you people haven't taken each other out yet, I simply do not know. I'm from Coventry and we wouldn't dream of speaking to one another the way you people do."

The girl shrugged. "It's just our way. We don't mean a thing by it. Listen, your parents were on the New World Colony, weren't they?"

"What's it to you?" he asked, almost rudely.

"Because my parents were too." She held out her hands to him.

He slowly reached out his own hands and placed them in hers. They felt warm and strong and calloused, but gentle. Gruffly, she said, "'Appen you've been crying? Can you teach me how?"

They sat on the stile for a long time, helping each other cry. The mist mingled with the salt tears on their cheeks. They didn't let go of each other's hands until the vespers bell ringing from the monastery and her Aunt's voice calling to her summoned them to their separate homes.

They had been inseparable ever since.

Seeing his friend look at him questioningly, he shook off his reverie, his homesickness, and his aching yearning for Sarah's hand in his. "Do go on. Tell me more about Sarah putting the fear of God into Roy. This is better than a circus."

Laughing hurt his sore chest and aggravated the cough that had been troubling him all day. He tried to take a deep breath and found that hurt, too. To take his mind off the myriad aches all over his body,

he relived for the thousandth time the kiss his wife had given him the moment she saw him safely home from the Blue Zone.

She had thrown off her Northern dislike of public displays of affection and jumped up onto the transporter pad the moment he materialized. She had drawn his head down to hers, giving him a long, sweet kiss square on the lips right in front of God and everyone. He had gathered her close, near tears as he whispered to her, “God, Sarah, I thought I was never going to see you again—” He felt the preciousness of her small bones and the tears on her cheek as it pressed against his own, breathed in the sweet herbal fragrance of her hair. He had held her closer and closer until at last she had squawked for mercy and broken away to begin the long battle for Veronica Hall’s life. That long embrace and kiss would have to sustain him until they could finally have a proper reunion in private.

“Nobbit a bairn, she is!” Sarah had cried in anguish, echoing George Kirk’s “she’s just a kid” and Robert April’s unspoken but deeply felt “she’s younger than my daughter.” The young ensign had heroically thrown herself into a coolant explosion to save the life of George’s young civilian son Jim Kirk. In doing so, she had lost an arm, a leg, and an eye. Robert, who kept his certification as a field medic current, had put to use all his first response training in a desperate attempt to save her life, and Sarah threw herself into continuing that effort.

Whilst Sarah had examined and immobilized his own injured shoulder and bandaged his burned right forearm, the love and warmth in those gentle hands easing the pain at least as much as her medications, he had pleaded with her for a prognosis as to Veronica’s

recovery, but she had remained evasive, saying only, “you did everything you possibly could under the circumstances, Robert. We need to trust time, her youthful resilience, and skilled nursing.” Then quickly changing the subject and refusing to let him get a good look in her eyes, she had admonished him, “now this is going to take time to heal so don’t bloody muck it up by trying to use it too soon. No, you cannot go to the gym. No, you cannot go swim. No, you cannot teach your Aikido class. You cannot go faffin’ about until this heals, see thee?”

After that first long embrace she had been chary and distant with him. Her coolness stung like the biting winter air of northern England, but he knew from past experiences it was because of how deeply frightened she had been for him. She needed time to be furious with him for “sodding off trying to get himself killed.” Time together to reassure herself that he was alive. They both did. The mop-up operation and the gravity of Veronica’s medical condition was not going to make that easy, however…

He nudged away the ever-present yearning for his wife and tried to concentrate through the wool gathering of exhaustion on what George was saying.

“And Bob’s your uncle, Fanny’s your aunt, as you always say, Roy yelled ‘I’ll talk!’ And he did! Sarah said something about not having packed a dinner bucket because it wasn’t going to take her all day. Then she said something about gum, not sure how chewing gum could have improved the situation—”

“She didn’t mean a chuddy.” Robert laughed out loud. “My wife was invoking the deity. Gave you a bit of Yorkshire, did she? When she’s tired

or worried or upset her North Country dialect is almost unintelligible if you don't speak the language. She once tied the Universal Translator up in knots by speaking to it in broad Yorkshire. It was simply unable to render Standard out of her dialect. She says it's the proudest moment of her career. Tell me again. Roy talked?"

"Every name. Can you believe it?"

"Oh, my giddy aunt." Robert shook his head.

"I served with your giddy Aunt when I first joined Starfleet. What a piece of work she was."

"I've never met a tug Captain who wasn't, eh? Comes with the territory. But Aunt Mabel was a real character. Tougher than old boots, she was, and the kindest heart you ever knew. Ran a tight ship, that one."

"We used to call her 'Ain't it awful, Mabel,' back in the day."

"I called her that too. Not to her face. Does not seem possible she has been gone fifteen years. I still miss her. My First makes me think of her, I think that's why we work together like grease and gears…"

"Robert, you have the most colorful family of anyone I ever met… "

"The next time you ask yourself: Why is Robert the way that he is? Call to mind my family. See here, we're both bloody knackered. Let's finish up the lists we've been working on and save this new information you've got until tomorrow. No point losing our damn minds, we might need them later…"

"Speaking of losing our damn minds. What were you going on about when I came in? Talking to yourself? Something about Norman's Woe? Is that more of your comm code for the Blue Zone?"

“Last two lines of ‘The Wreck of the *Hesperus*.’ A poem by one of your American poets. Henry W. Longfellow. Sarah and I visited his home in Maine just last summer when we were planetside.” He rubbed his forehead as he spoke, as if trying to erase the ache there.

“Rob,” George looked up from the pages in his hands and for the first time in a while looked, really looked, at his friend and captain, “You look like the wreck of the *Hesperus*, and you’ve been screwing up my concentration with your coughing all day long. You really do need to go see Sarah. She’ll never speak to me again if she finds out I know you’re not feeling well and I keep you working.”

“I can’t mither Sarah right now…”

“Everything alright between you two?” George asked absently.

Robert sighed, “I’m not sure… she’s taking it hard, this last close call of ours. I feel I am a beastly husband to put her through this hell.”

A lifetime of regrets and missed opportunities with his own family shadowed George’s face. “Robert, just talk to her. Trust me, as a man who made a god-awful failure of his own marriage, I am telling you, I’d give anything in the galaxy to have what you two have. Don’t screw it up.”

Robert turned to face his cross-grained old friend, surprised by his earnestness. “I’ll make a deal with you. If I talk to Sarah, you talk to Wynn. We both married good women, George. We owe it to them.”

George held out his hand. “Deal.”

The two men shook hands on it, and Robert continued, “Any road, she’s got all she can handle with Veronica, and she is giving Starfleet Forensics a hand in her… ‘spare time.’ I’ll get by. What’s this, then. Clap cold, this tea is, how did that happen…”

“Judas PRIEST!”

The two men had been working in companionable silence for about half an hour, interrupted only by a couple wracking coughing spells from Robert, who avoided George’s worried eyes and murmured something about “a bit of a cold coming on.” George was no medic, but he knew that was no ‘little cold.’ But long experience had taught him also how stubborn his captain was when it came to taking care of himself. *Thank God,* George thought, *he’s got Sarah now.*

Robert’s hand came down on the table with enough force to bring George straight out of his chair. His captain’s sharp cry brought him instantly to his feet and around the table.

“Robert, what the hell’s wrong? What’s happened, what are you seeing—”

Through white, trembling lips, Robert managed to say, “Forgive me, George, such an unseemly outburst on my part— this whole ordeal with the pirates just hit home to me—” he held up a shaking hand and George took it in one of his own, gripping his captain’s shoulder with the other hand.

“Dammit, Robert, you look like hell. Look, I’m calling Sarah. Commander Kirk to Doctor April? Come in please. Sarah? That you? Can you come to conference room two on the double? Robert needs you. He’s not been feeling well all day, and he just got some very upsetting news on our casualties list.”

“George? I’ve been looking for Robert; he was meant to stop by my office hours ago so I could check his shoulder—”

“Sarah.” The sound of her husband’s voice, husky and strained, so unlike his usual soft English warble, brought Sarah up standing. “Listen to me. The gales of November came early.”

A long pause. Whatever code had just been passed between the two, the message had been received loud and clear. Her voice in response was clear and stern. *“Robert. Sit down this instant and put your head down. George. Stay. With. Him. I will be there in two shakes of a lamb’s tail. Sarah out.”*

“George, I’m alright. My wife worries too much about me. I’m not going to faint or pass out. That’s not the British thing to do.” Robert’s breath came painfully short. George sat next to him, helplessly patting his friend’s back, not sure what was wrong but wanting to comfort him.

The doors of the conference room slid open, and George was instantly on his feet to make way for Sarah. Small and slender in her medical blues, her eyes the color of the Yorkshire sky at sunset with one white star in it, as her husband was fond of telling her, her honey blond hair falling around her shoulders, Sarah April was at her husband’s side in a breathless whirlwind. “It’s alright, Robert. I’m here.”

Robert felt his wife’s arms gather him home, holding him strongly, being to him what they had been to each other for many years, a safe place to break on. “My dearest—” she so seldom used endearments that the tender words reached him through the blur of shock, just as she had intended— “Be reight.” She spoke the terse Yorkshire phrase that expressed deepest empathy and reassurance that everything would be alright in time, knowing the familiarity and the thousand associations of their long friendship would comfort him more than any soapbox speech. She gently cradled his head on her shoulder. The room was eerily silent

but for the soft murmurs of her voice. Her North Country dialect had become so pronounced it sounded like a foreign language that only they two knew, soothing and comforting, spoken low and with unwonted tenderness. George felt like a voyeur as he watched a side of his friends he had never seen before, feeling even in the midst of his worry stabs of jealousy quickly repressed. If only Wynn would cherish him as Sarah was cherishing Robert, and if only Wynn would let him cherish her as he had seen Robert cherish Sarah. *But in all fairness,* George thought, *he waited a long time to have this.*

Finally lifting his head from his wife's shoulder, Robert tested his voice before saying "A bit calmer now, thank you, dear."

George finally spoke up. "What the hell was that November stuff all about? Robert turned into the face of Armageddon when he saw this one ship on our lists—"

Sarah's sea green eyes were filled with tears. "It's Daniel's ship, George," she whispered. "Lark's fiancé. Robert and I loved him like he was our own son. She's been out looking for him for three years—"

"Yes, I remember how broken up Robert was when he first contacted me. I've been keeping an ear to the wind ever since hoping to discover what happened. Well, now we know. Yet another good man lost to these pirates!" George slammed his fist down on the table.

"*How* am I to face my daughter with this—" Robert brushed an unsteady hand over his eyes. "These three years she has refused to give up hope; how shall I be the one who takes that hope from her—"

"It will be closure for her," George said soberly. "The not knowing, the mystery, must have been torture for her." He was fond of his

captain's daughter and hated to see her hurt almost as much as he hated to see his captain in pain.

"Lark Rise is a very brave, strong woman, and she is absolutely surrounded by a loving family," Sarah said quietly, wiping her own eyes on her scrubs sleeve. "She's going to need you more than ever, and this isn't the kind of news she should receive over subspace. Now what's this about not feeling well? Your hands are like ice—" realizing that he was pale and shivering, she laid her hand on his forehead and both cheeks, "Ee, by gum, tha's starved—" then began to chafe his hand to warm it.

"No, we had dinner as we worked, Sarah. It's a bad habit of ours to eat at our desk, but we knew you'd be after us to keep up our strength and we didn't want to leave this—"

"George, 'starved' means 'very cold' up North," Robert translated. "Up North when we want dinner we say we are 'famished and we want our cooked tea.' Yes, Sarah I am indeed starved, and your hands are so warm—"

"If 'e goes into shock it is a terrible thing, 'e never knows what it is to be warm at the best of times, 'is blood isn't what it ought to be— Take a deep breath for me, Rob—"

"Oh Sarah, it hurts to breathe—"

"Oh no, not again— Why the bloody 'ell fire didn't you unlash yourself from the mast and come below when you started feeling like this—"

Sarah's practiced ears heard the telltale rattle and wheeze of one of the stubborn lung infections his flesh was heir to, courtesy of a long ago mortal struggle with a virus that had permanently damaged his lungs.

She slipped her hand under his ivory cable knit sweater to gently touch his chest, partly to comfort him and partly to check his breathing.

"I kept telling him to go see you, Sarah, but he thought it was just a little cold coming on—"

"I didn't want to mither you, Sarah, not when you're working so hard to save Veronica, but I'm so glad you're here now." Robert's normally musical voice, the voice of a trained tenor singer, was reduced to a harsh whisper by the last terrible coughing spell.

"Mither me, it's why I make the brass around here. My hands-on diagnosis is aspirant pneumonia brought on by a full dose of coolant and chemical fumes and smoke, and the dear knows what else was on that mingeing pirate ship. I have told thee before, and I tell thee again, thee just can't be faffin' about with pneumonia like people who haven't got old lung wounds can."

As a medical professional, Sarah had worked very hard to tame her Yorkshire dialect, but when she was tired, upset, or worried, her dialect grew stronger and more pronounced. Robert's own Coventry accent (a particularly mild accent not, he would explain to anyone who commented, to be confused with that of the Midlands sister city, Birmingham, because Brummie was as distinct from Coventry as Coventry was from Cornish), had a habit of intensifying under the same circumstances, although his dialect was, as he liked to tease her, "much closer to the King's English" than hers was.

Sarah took charge, scattering her 'h's' on the ground like bird seed on snow.

"Reight then, we're goin' to be years sortin' this" — nodding to the casualty lists— "but right now, Robert is flaggin', and just once in 'is life,

‘e needs to come first. ‘E’s ‘ad an ‘orrible shock. ‘E’s sick. ‘E is worn out from keeping Veronica’s morale up. The precious ‘’eart of ‘im is breakin’ for ‘is daughter. ‘E is coming back to my sickbay, picking out a bed ‘e likes the looks of, and making himself at ‘ome. ‘E needs to be medicated and ‘e needs to rest—” the dropped “h’s”’in Sarah’s speech were in direct proportion to her worry and urgency.

“Sarah, I just need a minute, alone, in the chapel.”

Sarah took a deep breath. “No, Robert. I need you to come down so I can start you on a course of antibiotics, and a—”

“Please, dear. I need to say Shabbat Shalom to Daniel’s spirit and hold my daughter in the Light—” Robert’s eyes pleaded with her, “I trust you to keep me from pushing myself past my breaking point. I need *you* to trust *me* that I know—”

“Alright. But go *straight* to the chapel. Say what you need to say, and come *straight* back to sickbay—”

“May I mash a cup of tea?” Robert asked meekly, sure he was pushing his luck a bit far.

“You may not. Jim is in sickbay now sitting with Veronica. His legs are younger than yours, he can run and fetch his captain some tea—”

“Very well. Dearest—”

Sarah caught his subtle signal, and she came closer to stand on tiptoe and hold up her lips to gently brush his, completely undeterred by George’s eyes on them. Before he could open his mouth, she snapped, “No, George, it’s not sodding regulation. But we’ve been married a long time, we’ve done a lot more than just kiss—”

“Sarah, that’s a bit naff…” Robert’s eyes were simultaneously warning and laughing at her.

“Get a’gate wi’ ye now before I change my mind.”

“Sarah? You OK? Come on, I’ll walk you back to sickbay.”

Sarah had been standing in the conference room staring at the doors that had whisked shut behind her husband with what George was embarrassed to describe to himself as dove’s eyes. He gave her a minute, and then spoke up.

“I love that man,” Sarah said suddenly, as if forgetting she wasn’t the only person in the room. “No one can make me as mad as he can, and sometimes he makes me cry, but I love the bones of him.”

“I love him, too,” George blurted out, shocking himself into silence. Sarah had spoken with such unreserve that he had followed her lead without thinking. What was he thinking? What a thing to say…

Sarah wasn’t the least bit taken aback. “I’d be shocked if you didn’t, George. He’s a good man. Like the rest of us, he’s far from pairfect, but as we always tell each other, ‘Perhaps it is our imperfections that make us so perfect for one another.’”

George shook his head. “I don’t know about him sometimes. He hesitates and second guesses himself about something like… fighting the Romulans…” the two were alone in the conference room and could afford to refer to a classified mission… “but when he has the unshakable conviction that he’s right about something, wild horses can’t drag him from his stand— God, now I need to go apologize to him and tell him he was right. I hate to give him the satisfaction…”

Sarah laughed a little sadly. She had been down this road with Robert many times herself. “He’ll just say ‘I told you so’ for years to come, that’s all…”

Of one accord, they had begun walking back to Sickbay. “You really do love him,” George began, once again surprising himself. “When Robert first told me about the two of you, I… Well, I’m a little jaded about marriage…”

“I understand…”

“But I’ve served with him for going on fifteen years now and was friends with him before that and I’ve never seen him as happy as he is with you.”

“He makes me happy too,” Sarah whispered, ducking her head to hide her tears.

“Tell him that,” George snapped, his nerves suddenly giving way. “He feels he’s a beastly husband to you—”

“He’s daft as a brush, then,” Sarah snapped back. “A more faithful and loving husband never drew breath. A one-woman man, he is, and I’m his one woman. Married to him I wouldn’t call the Queen my cousin.”

“Tell him that,” George repeated, more gently. “God, Sarah, tonight I saw a side of you two I’d give anything to have for myself.”

“You know, George…” Sarah’s own voice had softened. “When we first got married… I didn’t think it would work out. He’s been my friend for so long, how could I feel romantic toward someone I knew so well? Can love and romance even work in space? What we have learned is that marriage isn’t found in the candlelight, it’s found in the darkness. It’s being cared for and cherished by your spouse when you’re at your absolute weakest and most vulnerable, and you can’t bear for anyone else to see you or come anywhere near you in that state. We have been

that to each other from the beginning and that, George, does not sound one bit romantic but I assure you, it is the sexiest thing there is."

I saw that aspect of their marriage just now and it was beautiful. How come Robert and Sarah have it and Wynn and I don't?

"So that's your secret," George said huskily, his throat closing over the words. "I never saw that side of you guys until tonight."

Sarah went on as if he had not spoken. "And I can't… I *can't* bear to lose him. When you were all missing I was so scared—"

"You know, Sarah, I always thought you were pretty lucky to have him." George paused. In the past few minutes, he had come to know his friend's wife better than he had in the past few years. Funny how a crisis could open hearts and throw reserve to the winds. "And now, I think he's pretty lucky to have you."

Before Sarah could respond, he said, "You've given me a hell of a lot to think about. Guess I'll run down to the chapel and make sure he gets back to sickbay alright. He seemed pretty shaky."

George Kirk had been standing watch by the doors of the chapel for fifteen minutes, making sure no one disturbed his captain, and he was beginning to get twitchy.

Sarah urged him to say what he needed to say and get straight to sickbay, he thought uneasily, *I wonder if I should just check on him. And I need to just* say *it…*

He tentatively walked through the chapel doors. He had attended too many memorial services to be comfortable in a place set aside for such ceremonies, but he might not get another chance to speak to his friend in private…

He found his friend sitting meditatively on one of the red benches by the chapel's podium, cradling something in his hands as though it were infinitely precious. Even from this distance, George could hear his captain struggling to get his breath. He came to sit next to him on the bench, placing a steadying hand on his shoulder.

"Robert, we've got to get you to sickbay. But first— could I have just a word—"

As though he had not heard his friend, Robert murmured, "George, I was just sitting here thinking. Did you know my Lark Rise has a sister?"

Taken aback, George tried to remember a second daughter and came up blank. Had he committed some unpardonable social gaffe—

"I never met her," George finally admitted. "Where is she now? Perhaps we can contact her. She may know where Lark—"

Robert shook his head. He held out his hands. Cupped tenderly in them was a medallion on its silver chain. He held it out for his friend to see. Ashes had been cast in resin and overlaid with a simple silver inscription: "Candle."

"Would that we could," Robert whispered. "She is in the land that is very far off." He bowed his head for a moment. "She only lived a few hours. Long enough for me to fall fathoms deep in love with her. Long enough for me to see the beautiful spirit looking at me out of her wide innocent baby eyes." His voice faltered.

George had to clear his throat before he could speak. "So, what happened to her?"

"She and her sister were born in a rescue pod. She had a congenital heart defect, and we could not save her, we simply didn't have the

medical resources. She didn't suffer. She just… fell asleep forever in my arms as I sang to her."

George could see, past the tears in his own eyes, the shimmer of tears in his friends'.

Regaining some semblance of composure, Robert went on, "I would not let Sarah take her out of my arms until she promised to cremate her so I could bring her Home. I saved some of her ashes to have this medallion made so I could carry her on my heart, and so her sister could have something tangible to remember her. The rest I buried in the ruins of the old Coventry Cathedral opposite the charred cross of reconciliation. The most sacred place in this galaxy for me."

There was a long, heavy silence. George finally broke it.

"My God, Robert. I had no idea— but why are you telling me this now?"

"Because times like these have a way of throwing the heart's doors wide open," Robert said quietly, "and I… wanted you to know why I did what I did in the cutter, why I would not permit you to destroy the pirate ship if there was even a chance Jim was still alive onboard. I know what it is to lose a child, and I— I couldn't, not for any cost of respect or friendship or galactic peace let any friend of mine go through— oh for the love of God, George, words are failing me, I hope you can understand what I am trying to say— I know you feel you can never trust me again and I understand why but all I ask is that you try to have a little faith in me—"

George managed to choke out, "Rob, guess I owe you an apology, too… I guess in the midst of the crisis I said some things I didn't mean…

God, you think you know someone, work with them for years, and then… I just wish I'd known this…"

Robert cut him off by holding out his hand. The handshake unaccountably turned into a bear hug and a good deal of mutual back pounding. The moment had finally come right for the two of them.

"Now, then. Sarah'll skin me alive if I don't get you to sickbay—"

CAPTAIN'S LOG: SUPPLEMENTAL

Captain's log, Captain Robert April recording. Earth Date April 30, 2249.

Commander George Kirk, his son Jimmy, Ensign Veronica Hall, and Lt. Carlos Florida and I are safely back aboard the Enterprise *after a mission to Faramond was interrupted by an attack by grey market pirates. The pirates who are still alive are in our brig. It is with a heavy heart that I record that Engineers Bill Thorvaldsen and Gregory Bennings lost their lives in the line of duty. I will presently be visiting their families. They were lovely and pleasant in their lives, and in their death, they were not divided.*

We are diminished.

Ensign Hall is in my Chief Medical Officer's care until we arrive at Starbase One, when she will surrender her to the much more extensive medical facilities of the Starbase. Sarah cannot give me a prognosis for Veronica's recovery, but she says we have all done everything we can, and now the assignment she gives us all is to help keep Veronica's morale up. She says that will do more than anything she has got in her medical stores.

As we travel back to Starbase, George Kirk and I have been working on the lists of casualties of ships taken by the pirates, piecing together crew lists from our own records and informing families. Of all the duties

a ship's Captain is given, surely the most painful is informing families of the loss of a loved one.

On a more personal note, I am deeply concerned that I have not been able to contact my daughter in weeks. As a former comm officer, I am well aware of the many kinds of interference to subspace communications. As a command officer and a loving father, I am very well aware of the dangers on the frontier, and I simply hope and pray that my Lark Rise is safe.

INTERMISSION: THE ORGANIANS

"Do you still doubt their readiness for first contact? Look at the love and compassion between those two. Watch the tenderness of his wife for him and his for her. It's beautiful! After so many years together—"

"We've seen affection between spouses before, in 98.2% of the species we've studied…" Prime refused to be impressed. After all, someone had to be the levelheaded one.

Second was not deterred. "But just look at that beautiful moment between Commander Kirk and Dr. April! They have almost the same level of devotion toward their crew mates as they do toward their spouses!"

Prime shrugged. "He's being put to the test again. It was one thing for him to take a stand for non-violence before he learned that his son-in-law was a victim of the pirates."

"I've observed those two in conversation. Their relationship was deep and tender, based on mutual understanding and respect. I heard him tell Daniel that he thought of him as his son."

"Now he knows that the pirates who caused him and his crew so much suffering were also responsible for taking the life of someone he loves… how do you think he'll react?"

"I know *how he'll react, but you, it would seem, still need convincing… There are surviving pirates still onboard as prisoners, correct?"*

Prime nodded. "Let's inhabit the security guards standing watch over the brig. See if he makes a move on them."

"You'll be watching till the eyes fall out of your hosts heads," Second scoffed. "I'm telling you, I know the man. And you can watch the brig all day long. They're going into sick bay and I, for one, want to follow them. Do you think they know they can't save that young woman? Do you think we could, just— you know—"

"Don't you remember the trouble we got into after we revived Archer's crew? Do you want to risk that happening again? Do you want this to be the prelude for a first contact mission or not?"

"You know the answer to that. I know where we can observe unobtrusively."

CHAPTER EIGHT: FIRESIDE CHAT

As the two men approached the sickbay doors, Sarah was there to meet them. Robert seemed calm, dry eyed, and composed, sorrowful but at peace in his spirit. His eyes bore none of the puffy, bloodshot telltale signs of recent weeping. *He needs to* cry, Sarah fretted, *that devastated about Daniel, he is. But there, he needs inviolable privacy for that, and as a starship commander, well…*

"Before we go in—" Sarah paused before the sickbay doors. "I need you two to keep up Veronica's morale, because it's slipping. The protective numbness of shock is wearing off and the reality of what happened to her is setting in. She's beginning to experience phantom limb discomfort—"

Robert's eyes were stricken. "Oh my God, Sarah, is she in pain?"

"It's all inside of her, and I haven't got analgesics for the soul. God knows I wish I had. That's where you two come in. She looks up to you both, especially you, Robert. If you two could just… tell sea stories and give her something to focus on, share some of the things you've gone through together, give her some *hope…"*

"An anchor to windward," Robert said thoughtfully, "just as you were to me all those years ago…"

"That's it, Rob, give her something to anchor to."

“Sarah…” George was hopelessly out of his depth, worried sick about Veronica, but lost without the medical training his friends had. “Is she going to be okay?”

Sarah’s eyes were anguished. She had worn herself to exhaustion trying to ensure that Veronica would be okay. Robert squeezed her hand so tightly in support that she felt her fingers would break in his clasp. She felt the tears spring to her eyes under the loving concern in his.

“It’s too soon to tell, George. We have done everything we can medically. Now we focus on boosting her morale, see thee? Jimmy and Carlos are with her now, but they need to eat and sleep.”

“Anything for our girl Veronica,” the two men said nearly in unison, and the three walked into Sarah’s sickbay together.

“Veronica, ‘appen you could do with some company? Our right good Captain is feelin’ nobbit middlin’ and I need your ‘elp to keep ‘is spirits up. And don’t let ‘is coughin’ flay [frighten] ye, barkin’ dogs don’t bite.”

“Is thy servant a dog, Sarah?” Robert rejoined mildly, holding out his good arm in greeting to his “right good crew.” He smiled warmly at the small gathering around Veronica’s bedside, putting aside as Sarah had known he would the crushing weight of grief for the sake of his crew’s morale.

“Pardon me— I need just a moment with her.” He nodded at Jim and Carlos and bent close to speak quietly to Veronica. No one heard the words that were exchanged, but the light in Veronica’s one remaining eye and her faint smile spoke volumes. He touched her cheek with gentle fingertips, a gesture of a loving father.

Sarah's voice broke in on the quiet communion.

"Eh, gi' over chelpin' and come lie down."

"Sir— sir—," Veronica whispered, trying to turn her head toward her captain, who had settled onto a diagnostic bed and was submitting himself to Sarah's ministrations. Blue curtains for privacy hid them from each other but they could still hear one another distinctly.

Sarah's authoritative voice cut across Veronica's soft one. "Mel, tri-ox stat." A spray hypo hissed and the captain's breathing was almost instantly less labored. "Now broad spectrum antibiotic— no, not that one, 'e's allergic— nor that— Mel, tha's thick as two short posts, the man's allergic to anything penicillin derived— like plaitin' fog, trying to treat a man who's allergic to 'alf the chemists', and wot the bloody 'ell fire good is it that he's immune to R-fever if 'e comes down with pneumonia every time 'e turns around twice— sorry, Veronica, thee were trying to have a word with thy captain—"

"Yes, dear, your captain is reading you—"

"You've made me a promise you have forgotten to keep," Veronica whispered, sounding slightly miffed with him.

"What promise is this, dear?" Robert croaked, his voice muffled as at Sarah's behest she helped him slip out of his sweater and uniform tunic to grant her access to him.

"Flippin' 'eck, don't bloody muck up your shoulder, let me *'elp*, dammit— now. Wrap up in this blanket. I need to get to your chest so I can drain your lungs— this is going to hurt and I'm sorry, but we have

got to get those lungs clear so they can heal up. ‘Ark at thee, can ‘ardly get tha’ breath—”

“Though you slay me, yet will I trust you, Sarah. Now Veronica, your Captain has got his ears on…”

“Sir, remember in your Advanced Communications and Telemetry class, you told us that next class you’d tell us about the time you sang opera for all of Starfleet HQ and the entire solar system? You and Dr. April got called away and you never did tell us.”

“Veronica, dear one, I have not got the breath to tell sea stories at present, my wife’s trying to kill or cure me over here, haven’t sorted out which… Sarah, let me know when I can open my eyes, I don’t feel that I want to know what you’re doing…”

Proud as he was of his wife’s accomplishments as a designer of medical equipment, he nevertheless liked to tease her about being her “test subject.”

“This is my story and I’m telling it!” George spoke up with relish. “I was just trying to think back to how Robert and I met and ended up friends and Veronica’s question brought it all back. It’s all thanks to John Williams!”

“George, please—”

“Come on, Commander!”

“Tell us the story, Dad!”

“Rag on your captain now while ‘e can’t talk,” Sarah called from behind the curtain, “the dear knows this opportunity doesn’t come up too often—”

George was grinning as he began, “Captain April, here, he’s into music in a big way. Always has to have his Gregorian chant playing while

he works on paperwork. Always singing when he thinks he's working alone."

"Possesses perfect pitch, 'e does, shy as 'e is about 'is gifts. What else would you expect from the son of a concert pianist, now I ask you?" Sarah called.

"I never knew your folks, Rob—"

Sarah answered as he couldn't speak, "They passed away before you met 'im, George. Long ago. 'E still misses them dearly."

George continued with his story. "This is back when he was a— Rob, what were you, a newly-made lieutenant commander, or you'd say LEFT-tenant, you Brits do talk strange—"

Finally able to talk, Robert glanced up at the ceiling as if supplicating for patience. "For the umpteenth time, George, I have not got an accent, not being Brummie. I do speak North Riding and Northumbrian as second and third languages. Sarah tells me I won't fool any of the locals, but I can make myself understood more or less up North…" Casting a mischievous grin at her as her hands were busy and she couldn't swat him. "The further we all get from home, and the more we mingle, the more precious the distinctions that make us unique to our regions become."

The dialect question settled, George went on. "Anyway, he was a newly made Lt. Cmdr. back from a two-year stint with the Border Patrol and getting ready to go back out, reassigned to the Diplomatic Corp."

"'E earned 'is promotion out there in the field," Sarah called, "but 'e is threatening me with battle, murder, and sudden death if I tell you what 'e did to earn it, 'umble as Uriah 'Eep thought he was, the man is—"

“A man’s character can speak for itself, my dear friends—”

“So, here I am, an enlisted man,” George raised his voice to be heard over the interruptions, “a security guard at HQ. I’ve heard stories about this elite communications officer, whose comm code helped break up an Orion slave trade route. I’m thinking he’s some swelled headed hero with an ego bigger than the galactic arm. It’s not the first time I’ve heard this name in connection with the Star Cross and the silver palm and star for conspicuous bravery—”

“Onion sauce! Onion sauce!” Robert called from behind the curtains, as usual completely dismissive of his own heroism. “Did what I had to do to sleep at night, eh?” he would explain if pressed. In true English fashion, he couldn’t bear a fuss, and was well known to refuse medals and decorations until he was driven to accept them. “The Fleet needs this boost, Robert, take one for the team,” more than one flag officer had urged him over the years. But Robert felt that the love, trust, and loyalty of his crews spoke more of his character than all the medals Starfleet had to offer.

In spite of the rough roads they had trod together, George had all of the above for his captain.

“Robert, have you completely taken leave—”

“George, ‘e’s banging on about *The Wind in the Willows.* ‘E’s got his daughter on his mind, see— ‘e can’t stand being reminded of ‘is ‘eroism so pack it in, see thee, ‘e’s about to burn to death blushing back here—”

“Sarah, I’m not blushing, I’m feverish, I’m fair maftin’—”

“So, anyway, as I was saying, Robert’s all about his music, always was, and he figures his comm board is his own personal stereo set when

his ship is in dry dock for maintenance. So, he was cleared to come aboard his new assignment, diplomatic frigate *U.S.S. Heart of Oak,* a few days before she shipped out, in order to work on his own modifications to his comm panel. And he's got his music, something by John Williams—"

"It was Ralph Vaughn Williams. He was an English composer and preserver of our folk melodies. Take note that the first name rhymes with 'safe' and not 'elf'"—

"Whatever the hell—"

"You tell my story, George, you tell it right. Our young people are listening."

"So, there he was, he's listening on his headset and he's working on his board, got the whole bridge to himself and he's singing his blessed heart out to one of the melodies—"

"Either '*Star of the County Down'* or *'Blow Away the Morning Dew,'* from the *'English Folk Song Suite,'* I was thinking about my daughter, that's her favorite—"

"And he's just as happy as he can be. And then all hell breaks loose. There's a whole slew of Merchant Marine boats coming into the service docks, and a couple clippers coming into the moorings for resupply, all of Starfleet Headquarters, even a passenger liner coming back from Alpha Centauri—"

"And the rubbish scow waayyy out by Pluto!"

"And the rubbish scow way the hell out by Pluto. Before they can say Zefram Cochrane, they've got John Williams coming up their asses! Robert had all his frequencies open, and he was broadcasting by accident!"

“Confounded habitual absentmindedness on my part,” Robert commented, joining in the laughter that followed. “Inherited from my father, the uni professor of literature, rest his soul. As I tell my students, Not a Good Thing to Do. Broadcasting on an open frequency, not singing, you understand. I think everyone should sing at his work. It lifts spirits.”

“Rob, what would you say to me if you caught me singing at my work? Performing an autopsy or surgery or something?”

“Sarah, you can be the exception that proves the rule…”

“So anyway, I was the Security Officer who ended up traveling up to the ship to make sure everything was OK— wasn’t sure what I’d find when I got up there. An officer struck by space madness? A drunk? Someone on a fraternity dare? I mean, the voice sounded like a professional singer, so it was hard telling not knowing. None of the above, just this completely unassuming British fellow you all know as your Captain. He was mortified to be caught singing at his work by a security type—”

“I knew I was in treble—”

“Don’t laugh, crew,” Sarah warned, out of long experience with musicians’ humor, “it will only encourage him to jump off the clef—”

“He’d been through the Academy and several years of service keeping it a secret that he was a classically trained singer and sang with the Coventry Cathedral Choir anytime he was home,” George explained.

“Don’t let it get around, eh?”

“Too late for that. He thought his fellow officers would think his singing quite a punchline, like something people only do when they become intoxicated, but ever since that incident, he’s been asked to sing

at memorial services and Fleet weddings, and the dean of the Academy asks you to sing *The Impossible Dream* every Commencement—"

"Must've been desperate," Robert shrugged off.

"And he's been stuck with me ever since, for weal or for woe!" George finished triumphantly.

"I heard him sing for the first time last night," Carlos spoke up from where he was seated on Veronica's other side, "The minute we felt the *Enterprise* tractor beam get ahold of us, he threw his head back and began to sing *'Swing Low, Sweet Chariot*.' I don't know too much about music but that sounded pretty to me."

"Now I really am blushing. Sarah, whatever you did, I can breathe again. I had rather gotten into the habit of breathing, you see. Thank you, dear, you do take the best care of me. I think now I'd like to have a bit of a fireside chat with my crew."

"I do think you will find it easier to breathe sitting up than lying back," Sarah said thoughtfully, "but at the first sign that you start feeling badly again, back to that bed you go—"

"Any bed you like as long as you're next to me, my love. You know, Sarah, George got me thinking about the old days. Should we show these children our stuff? *The Road to the Isles*?"

"Yes, why the 'ell not. Thee are bound and determined to muck up thy shoulder and thy lungs so let's at least do it in style and raise morale while we do it. 'Road to the Isles' is it? Tell me how thee are planning to take sweetheart position with me?"

Robert looked thoughtfully at her, then back at the injured arm, and then back at her. "Perhaps I'm not. Could we try *Mairi's Wedding* instead?"

He slipped his sweater cozily over his bare shoulders and came to stand beside his wife. She held her left hand out for his right and he took it in his. Side by side, locked into one another as two people who had been dancing together since childhood, they elegantly bowed to each other, counted beats, and together began the simple but elegant reel. As they danced, they sang:

Step we gaily, on we go,
Heel for heel and toe for toe,
Arm in arm and row in row,
All for Mairi's wedding!

Finally, Robert held up their clasped hands so that Sarah could turn under them, and drew her back in so their lips could meet in a quick kiss. Flushed, breathless, and laughing, they dropped into hastily placed chairs by Veronica's bedside to the cheers and applause of their crew.

"That was beautiful, you two!" Veronica whispered, and they could see from her smile that their efforts to boost her morale were already working.

"There was a time," Robert began, "about fifteen years ago now, that I was told I would never walk again. Today, I'm dancing with my wife, just as she promised me she would if I would persevere through the sheer bloody hell of treatments and therapy to get better. Veronica, I am telling you, your Captain has been where you are. He *knows."*

"Rob, it's been 'orrible!" Sarah's sparkling eyes betrayed her teasing.

“I have loved every minute, dear, and we need to do more of it. I think we may have forgotten how to do the schottische.”

“You know we’re bad Quakers,” Sarah commented, as he slipped his arm around her shoulders and drew her close to him.

“Haha, but we’re good Friends!” He laughed back at her, and the two of them chuckled in a shared joke only the two of them understood.

“The schottische will come back to us. We’ve got some leave time coming, you and I.” She leaned shamelessly against him, her head on his good shoulder, her hand resting on his thigh.

“Sarah, behave thyself. Our people can see us…”

“So? They’ve likely never seen such a good-looking couple together. We’re married, we’re off duty, and we just survived a crisis.”

A sense of unreserve had fallen over the group. It was as though they were settled together around a hearth, their souls and bodies warmed by the fireplace, listening to the wind wuthering around the eaves. If they half closed their eyes, they could see bookshelves full of well-worn volumes instead of respirators, and oil paintings on the walls instead of medical monitors. Their captain’s habit of calling “Fireside Chats” after a stressful mission was one of the many ways he had built relationships with his crew over the years and kept morale from plummeting in dangerous situations. Sarah could sense that his heart ache was eased by the closeness to her and the crew mates he had shared an ordeal with. His cough and labored breathing had responded well to her ministrations and the feverish flushes and chills were much less.

“Jimmy,” Sarah felt her husband trying to repress another cough, “tha’s about as much use in my sickbay as a chocolate teapot, would tha’ run

and mash thy Captain a cup of tea? Do 'im more good than all the drugs in the chemists, tea will. Frame thyseln now."

Jim had heard the story of Dr. April's interrogation of Roy Moss and understood that she was a force to be reckoned with. Here was something he could do to help.

"Plain orange Pekoe, no cream, no sugar, sir?"

"Just plain orange Pekoe, not that fancy finest tippy golden flowery orange Pekoe they drink at Headquarters," Robert joked, "I'm not posh enough for that. Thank you, Jim."

"Bit too big for his britches, that one," Sarah murmured to Robert, who had a hard time with the corners of his mouth as he admonished,

"Ah Sarah, we were sixteen once, we can afford to be tolerant."

"Ee, by gum, but thee were never a hooligan, with thy tomfoolery, see thee?"

His captain received the tea gratefully. "Much obliged to you, Jim, I'll do the same for you when you're the one sick abed in the woodbox. This brings it all back… your father talks a lot of stink for someone who tried to murder his CO, a while back." Robert looked over his teacup at the Kirks with raised brows and mischief in his twinkling wood brown eyes.

"Robert, for crying in the bucket, would you quit beating that poor dead horse! I meant well, how was I supposed to know you're allergic to alcohol! You always said you 'gave it up for Lent' and so I thought you abstained because it's one of your strange old-fashioned Quaker things, like the way you call your daughter 'thee' and you had never kept Christmas in all your born days until I invited you back to spend one with our family—"

“Dad, what a thing to do! What happened, Captain?” Jimmy seemed gleeful that the adults he so looked up to had had their share of screw ups as well.

George held up both hands in surrender. “We had just come back to our ship after a hellish mission— we can’t talk about it but let’s just say I’ve never seen Captain ‘Keep Calm and Carry On’ April fall completely to pieces like that before or since.”

Looking at his captain, the memory of that awful day superimposed itself over the Sickbay tableau. Stepping out of the shuttle to the remains of an Orion raid, Captain April had kept his own reactions to the carnage private so as not to add to his crew’s distress.

“We will grieve for the dead later. At present we must focus all our energies on the search for survivors, whose suffering is not over yet,” he had directed his crew.

Directing his crew to fan out and gesturing George to remain at his side to cover his back, the captain had caught sight of a faint movement. A very small hand reaching up in supplication from the rubble. He had dropped to his knees to uncover a dying child. Taking her condition in at a glance, he had gathered her into his arms so that she didn’t die alone. Whispering comfort to her, he was completely oblivious as the child’s blood soaked him. He bowed his head over hers as she took her last breath. As soon as the search was complete… no survivors… he had insisted upon erecting a burial cairn over her body with his own hands.

Later that day, safe aboard their ship, George had found his captain alone on the observation deck, seated at the piano, but with his head in his hands and his shoulders shaking. Torn between giving his captain his

privacy and real concern for him, George had come to stand beside him and ask quietly,

"You okay? Hitting you hard?"

For once in his life unashamed of tears, Robert had lifted his head from his hands said quietly, "Her parents are dead. There's no one left alive to weep for her. So I shall."

George had known then that this was a man he would follow to the end, into the very fires of Hell.

Shaking off the memory, seeing the sorrowful shadows in Robert's eyes, shadows that said, "I haven't forgotten that child, I have made my life work trying to prevent horrors like that from ever happening again," George took a deep breath and went on,

"So, anyway, like a good friend, I got him a cup of tea and added a little medicinal brandy to it. Thought that would help, right? Well, I didn't tell him what I had done, just gave him the cup. Alcohol, even a tiny bit, causes a dangerous drop in his blood pressure—"

"Sure enough, over I went on my beam ends. Your father thought he'd put me out of my misery for sure—"

"Thought I was facing courts martial that time—"

"Not for an honest mistake, George, not on my watch. Ever since, I have run dry ships, I just can't risk accidental contact putting me out of commission. I don't care what anybody does on shore leave as long as they leave me out of it and report back sober. Any road, a man can only support one vice, and mine's my pipe," Robert explained comfortably. "My sister says it's a vile habit and she does wish to goodness I'd give it up. But I can't because my wife likes it."

“Makes me fancy the arse off you,” Sarah looked at her husband with affection, mischief, and memories in her eyes, “watching my yummy, fit husband in a hand knit sweater lighting his pipe. Ee, by gum…”

“Oh, my days, Sarah, you’re the only person in this galaxy who feels that way toward me, thank God for that, don’t wreck my Uncle Charles Dickens image.” He laughed softly, and the look in his eyes was a kiss.

George, who was not as happily married as Robert and Sarah, felt it was high time to change the subject.

“Rob, I was thinking. Do you have a declassified comm code you wouldn’t mind letting Jimmy have a go at breaking? He broke the security on the strato tractor potato on the way up to the *Enterprise*, I thought if he could break that he might get a kick out of trying to break yours.”

“I would be honored to let him have a go,” Robert assented, gently setting his wife aside with mutual pats for reassurance, and walking over to the computer console in the center of the deck to open the file. “Keep in mind, Jim, this is a code that hasn’t been used in nearly twenty years. Did I truly make Captain that long ago? Ah, here we are… There aren’t so many of us Code Talkers left as there used to be,” he explained, with the deep and ineradicable sadness of a man who had lost many good people in his years in the service, “and those of us who are left are no longer serving in the Border Patrol. That’s a job for young people and much as we all like to think we’re still young people, well… this code has been declared obsolete. I use it in class for teaching purposes, but I thought perhaps you’d like to see what you can make of it, eh?”

“But, sir— this looks like… Greek!”

“Not Greek, my boy,” Robert replied, smiling and gesturing to the computer, “give it the Old Academy Try.”

“Sir—” Jim did a double take. “Sir, what happened to your *chest*… my God, sir, that must have hurt— is that what you meant about not being able to fight a dirty soul and win?”

The sweater had fallen open in front as he worked with the computer, revealing a gaudy patchwork of scars.

Robert glanced down and wrapped his sweater more securely around his lean frame. “Oh, I am sorry, my boy. Those are my souvenirs from my first and last mission with Starfleet Intelligence. Took that on when I was young and foolish. For the sake of a beautiful lass, if you understand me. Not A Pretty Sight, but they’ve been painless reminders for so many years I forget what they must look like to others.”

“Robert knows what I will do if I ever get my hands on the bastards who gave him those,” George growled from his corner.

“Peace, George, no more violence on my account. There has been far too much of all that. Sarah, remember when my daughter was little… oh, about five… her life’s greatest ambition was to have ‘stripes’ like her father?”

“Wanted them for her ‘birfday,’ she did. What a little bairn she was in those days. Sithee, our Jim. I have summat to tell thee.”

“Doctor April, I can’t understand your language…”

“There are few who can,” Robert chuckled.

Sarah drew herself up to her not very imposing full height. Her face was grave and stern. “This is what we like to call a ‘teaching moment.’ You’re going into the Academy, Robert tells me, and I want you to take this with you. You’re going to meet a lot of people who are carrying scars

from their years in the service. And not all of those scars are going to be as visible as Veronica's. Some, like Robert's, are hidden under a cable-knit sweater. Some are on the inside where you can't see them. You're going to meet and serve under people who are just as scarred as he is but who 'ave a completely different persona. 'Appen a much more authoritative one than Robert has. What I am trying to say is, before you shoot your mouth off to a superior officer, stop and remember how you felt when you saw Robert's scars for the first time, and have a little good goddamn respect. A report has reached my ears—" Jim winced under her severe gaze— "that earlier on this mission, you felt that life had treated you so badly that you were entitled to be a smart ass to Robert—"

"*Peace,* Sarah—" he held up a calming hand.

"Jim, you pull a stunt like that at the Academy, and you can bet your sorry arse you'll find out what happens so get it sorted out, right?"

Having put the fear of God into Jim, Sarah turned to her husband. "Robert, I think you should stop faffin' and tell Jim how you got those scars because it's important."

"You know the details of that mission are still classified—"

"I'm not talking about the mission, Robert. I'm talking about *you*. I heard you talking to Jim earlier. 'A clean soul can't fight a dirty one and win' my sweet arse! How many times have I heard you quote Dr. King: '*Returning violence for violence multiplies violence, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars. Darkness cannot drive out darkness: only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate: only love can do that.*' I know you believe that with all your heart. Ee, by *gum,* for a wise man you're daft as a brush sometimes—"

“Dr. King was describing overcoming, not winning, Sarah, and he was willing to die for what he believed, just as I am. He’s the case who proves my point, in fact. He didn’t ‘win,’ he lost his life, but his words are so powerful we live by them today, three hundred years later. He is a personal hero of mine and I think his work is more relevant than ever today, as we learn to work with many different species. I believe humanity is where it is today in part thanks to his life work… But overcoming, as opposed to winning, is a difficult and complicated concept, and one I wouldn’t expect a sixteen-year-old boy to grow into for some years. God knows I, at nearly fifty years old, barely have a grasp on the concept, I couldn’t even think of trying to explain it to anyone else…”

“And what I am trying to tell you, if you would stop arguing with me for five minutes, is that you don’t need to be giving these children *advice*. You need to give them *yourself.* Show them your heart, Robert. Show them your life. Tell them your stories. You can give no more, after the fashion of the Great Teacher who on his last night before he died gave his friends himself.”

“Sarah, it is *difficult,* you don’t know what you’re asking an Englishman to do, to show emotion, to talk about himself, all without a pipe to hide behind—”

“‘Appen you recall, I’m just as English as you are?”

“Ah, but you’re a plain-speaking Yorkshire farm lass—”

“I’m telling you what they need from you, Robert—”

“Sarah, when you’re right, you’re right, and this time you’re right. Jim, to answer your question, I endured the Klingon torture known as ‘death by a thousand cuts’ for some time in the defense of a fellow

operative and her two unborn children. That operative was my first wife and those children, my children." Robert's voice was so quiet that everyone had to lean forward to hear him. "I had gone into the mission hoping that we could prevent war with the Klingons from befalling the entire Federation, and we did. But it cost us. We were rescued, but Jenny… my first wife… had already suffered up to and beyond her breaking point, and she died giving birth to our children."

"My God, sir," shuddered Jim.

Veronica's eyes never left her captain's face. "But sir— I have always thought of you as such a happy person—"

"And I am, dear, very happy indeed in my life. I'm alright, children. This was a *long* time ago… twenty-five years and how can my little girl already be twenty-five! I have since come to have a full, rich, and wonderful life. As Sarah says, every one of us in the service have got our broken bits. And this is what I want you children to take with you. Joy is best appreciated after great grief and pain. And by 'joy' I don't mean self-centered jollity. I mean overcoming sorrow and suffering. Coming out of a time of sorrow and suffering a better person than one was going in. After all, how can one learn compassion if one hasn't suffered? And as the great mystic Gibran says, *'The deeper that sorrow carves into your being, the more happiness you can contain.'* This is not to say that grief and pain are good in and of themselves. They aren't. They're stink. It's what we do and become in response to them that matters. And that's the good word for the week from your friendly neighborhood chaplain…"

Sarah's eyes were full of feeling as she looked up at him. "Captain April here chose to become a man of compassion and peace in response

to his pain. He decided the best revenge would be to live a joyous, productive life."

"Would that it were that simple. Being up against it made me realize what I am capable, not only of suffering, but of inflicting, in defense of my dearest ones, and the knowledge frightened me more than anything ever has. It isn't that I don't understand the realities of the galaxy…" glancing meaningfully at George… "it's that I also understand the realities here—" laying a hand on his heart.

Jimmy was looking at his captain as though he had never seen him before. "But, sir— Klingon torture— I mean, you survived that?"

"'E damn near bled to death," Sarah snapped, "and 'e's never been the same since."

"Captain, I'd like to shake your hand. I never knew you were such a badass."

"*Jim*!" George remonstrated, but Robert laughed and held out his hand.

"The honor would be mine, Jim, if you wouldn't mind coming to the Ancient Mariner…"

After sharing a warm handshake with his godson, Robert went on, "I owe my life to a young physician who didn't listen to her mentor. She was meant to keep me warm and comfortable, hold my hand, and let me die with dignity. Instead, she told me to stop bleeding all over her Sickbay floor and threatened me with battle, murder, and sudden death if I died on her. She told me I'd hate her by the time she was done but that I'd live, or she'd know why. My dear friends. Can you guess who that doctor was?"

The crew exchanged glances, but it was Veronica who spoke up. “It was Dr. April,” she whispered with assurance, “she’s just that kind of doctor. She doesn’t give up on a person.”

“You go to the head of the class, Veronica. And amongst other excellent reasons, that’s why Sarah is the CMO who is taking such devoted care of you.” Looking warmly at his wife, Robert went on, “And I know you didn’t think I heard what you said to him in response, but I did and I’ve been trying to be worthy of your high opinion of me ever since. No, my friends, I can’t repeat it. Sarah stated her opinions forcibly and her language was simply shocking.”

“I’ve heard worse language from you, Rob.”

“Ah, but I say my wicked words in Welsh Gaelic I learned from my Nan, no one understands the Welsh anymore so I’m not setting a bad example for the young ones.”

“Jimmy,” Robert addressed his godson. “Could you take a break from my code for a moment? I have another assignment for you.”

“Yes, sir?” Jimmy looked up from the screen to meet the steadfast brown eyes that sought his.

Robert tried to clear his throat to make his husky voice more intelligible, and said, glancing at Veronica, “It is one thing to be grateful to a person for saving your life. It is quite another to realize that the process of healing is longer than years of torment. Something else again to stay by that person’s side through that process. Sarah is always saying she thinks the healing process is more messy and painful than the injury

itself and having gone through the process a few times myself I can't argue with her. Sarah and I will be there for you in every way we can as you go through this, Veronica. But we don't know where we will be assigned in a month's time. Could be teaching at the Academy, could be back on the frontier. But Jim, to my understanding, you'll be close to the facility where Veronica will be in care. I would like for you to visit her every single day, no matter how busy you are, no matter what else you may want to do with your free time, and help keep her morale high, until she comes out. Can you do this?"

"Yes sir, I promise you I will. Veronica, can you put up with me that long?"

Veronica smiled up at him. "That would mean a lot to me, Jimmy. Thank you."

"Your Captain here knows what it is to spend months in 'ospital and then 'ave to learn to walk all over again," Sarah began, "and 'e knows what it is to live with pain from those injuries many years later."

"It's just a bit of a bother, Sarah, like this lung unpleasantness that catches up with me now and then. Jim, Sarah did for me what I am asking you to do for Veronica. It is my hope you may be the anchor to windward to her that this brave, good woman was to me."

"Yes, sir, I'll do my best."

"That's the old Academy spirit."

"Captain—" Jimmy glanced back down at the computer terminal. "I think I broke your code and it was a hard one." He turned the screen so that his captain could see the decoded message. "The question is, what does it *mean*?"

After one quick glance at the screen, Robert leaned his head on his wife's shoulder and began to laugh until a painful bout of coughing put a stop to that and brought Sarah to her feet to make another nebulizer treatment for him.

"That's it, laugh! Sit there and tee—hee like a Bedlamite! That'll show your pneumonia who's captain around here! When you find you can't breathe you won't feel so funny!"

Robert gratefully received the treatment Sarah held out to him, still chuckling. "Oh, my giddy aunt, Jim, Sarah will have your hide for making a man with pneumonia laugh this hard, but I'm glad you did. Sarah, 'a merry heart doeth good like medicine,' eh?"

Sarah glanced over at the screen to see what was throwing her husband into gales of mirth. "Robert, that's unseemly!" she snapped, and began to laugh.

"Well aware, my love." Seeing Jim's crestfallen look, Robert made an effort to subdue his merriment and explained, "I'm not laughing at you, Jim, I'm laughing at the dog's dinner the Universal Translator has made of my perfectly good code. This code is a bit of an in-joke we had with Hoshi—" looking around at the puzzled looks directed at him. "Children, you must know Commander Hoshi Sato, who served on the NX-01 as comm Officer, and helped develop the algorithms for the Universal Translator. She was my communications instructor at the Academy, and she became a second mother to me and my sister. Mary Anne and I worked with her on the development of the UT, many years ago, and we played many a lively game of 'stump the linguist.' This code—" gesturing to the computer terminal— "is the result of many hours of 'stump the linguist.' We developed this with her shortly before

going to the frontlines on the Border Patrol. So that we would have an unbreakable code with which to communicate, inspired by WWII Code Talkers, we spoke Hebrides Gaelic, regional Welsh, some Anglo-Saxon, and even some of Tolkien's Elvish. Hoshi, well… she neglected to put the translation algorithms for those languages into the translator. As a result, the translator can translate the words, just fine, but it does not have a grasp of the nuances, inflections, contexts, and allusions in the language. The translation without those things is gibberish. We've had some rather funny mistranslations over the years, but I am thinking this one takes the biscuit."

George spoke up. "Robert gets ragging on you too bad, Jim, you could always ask him how he got out to space when he was sixteen!"

Robert shook his head and laughed.

"Oh no, George, that story is privileged information. When Jim passes his Entrance exams to become a Starfleet cadet, only then will I tell him the story of how his Captain ran away to space, unlike young Robinson Crusoe here who ran away to sea—"

Jimmy flushed under Captain April's laughing eyes. And then realized that the captain was speaking to him.

"My Grandfather made the same bargain with me, my boy. If I passed the Entrance exams, he promised to tell me some stories from his years in space that I'd been teasing him for. He was a veteran of the Romulus wars and there were stories he would tell whilst the tears ran down his face… ah me. There was a time I didn't think I was going to get into the Academy, not being so good with the maths, but my grandfather threatened me with battle, murder, and sudden death if I

didn't make an effort. He always said he wasn't going to have any grandson of his coming in through the hawsehole—"

"Don't hurt my feelings, Robert," George protested, chuckling, "I came in through the hawsehole myself."

"And are none the worse for it, my friend."

Jimmy felt that he had betrayed enough ignorance for one evening and forebode to question, but Robert caught the boy's puzzled frown and explained, "Not a literal hawsehole, Jim. It's British Royal Navy speak for an enlisted person who works their way up through the ranks to become an officer. Just as your father did, which tells you all you need to know about his grit and determination. Sarah, all of a sudden—"

Sarah took charge. "That's it. You're white as a sheet, back to that bed you go—"

"Please Sarah—" so quietly that only his wife could hear— "please, don't ask me to stay in sickbay, away from you, tonight—"

"I won't, if so you come straight back to our quarters and don't stop to do paperwork or talk on the way—"

"And so, Goodnight, my dear friends." Robert felt this was the best way to have the last word. "Call us if you need us. Peace."

"But don't need us!" Sarah rejoined, "Peace!"

"Peace," Veronica whispered to them, "and thank you for sharing your stories."

"'Night, Robert and Sarah. Sleep well."

"Goodnight, Captain, Doctor. Peace."

"Now then, my darling." Holding out his good right hand for his wife, he said, "Step we gaily?"

“Step we gaily.” The two joined hands and walked out of the Intensive Care unit singing and swinging their clasped hands with complete unselfconsciousness.

George was shaking his head. “I’ve got to know Robert better in this past hour than I have in the past some odd years. He’s English, he isn’t much for talking about himself, but he really opened up tonight. Remember this and don’t expect him to do it again anytime soon.”

INTERMISSION: THE ORGANIANS

"That was well done. Handed Dr. April the wrong antibiotic, you did! NOW *who's bolluxing up the mission?" To hide the fact that his emotional involvement had just risen a few more levels after that conversation, Second decided to take a rare opportunity to rag on Prime. He had learned from his observations that ragging on each other was a form of affection amongst the humans.*

"Yes, well. She caught it. I haven't spent as much time around them as you have," Prime explained away. They were posing as two nurses just going off shift so they could follow the captain and the ship's doctor.

Seeing that he wasn't going to get a rise out of Prime, Second took another tack. "Well, I think we saw something special tonight. We've seen conflict plague Commander Kirk and Captain April, and by default Dr. April, nearly from their first day of friendship. They seemed to have a moment of reconciliation and understanding."

Prime was not impressed. "Typical, the conflict between the military mindset that most humans seem to espouse, and the pacifist mindset… your Captain April is an exception, I grant you."

"*We heard his secret, didn't we? We've waited a long time for him to share that…"*

"What secret? I heard a lot of stories, a lot of wisdom, lot of tomfoolery, but the only secret I heard was some sexual allusion the captain and his wife exchanged between themselves—"

Second would have sighed impatiently if he had been fully human. "Not that *kind of secret. I mean the bit about compassion! I think our mission here is over. We got what we came for! They took the step we missed in our evolution. They transcend suffering, not by avoiding it, but by allowing it to teach them compassion for those who suffer! Perhaps that is what is missing in our formulae for experiencing compassion. Experiencing suffering!"*

Prime looked thoughtful. "I suppose, if I'm to be permitted to work with you on this first contact mission, I'd better work on my own compassion. I'm heading back to Sickbay. You?"

"I think those two are engaging in human mating rituals. I've always wanted to watch—"

"That's unseemly!"

"Well then, maybe I can just ask if they do it for the purpose of procreation or merely to strengthen the bonds of the relationship. I know someone who can get quite close to their quarters without arousing suspicion. Meet back in Sickbay in an hour to compare notes?"

CHAPTER 10: LOVE AND PERSUASION

The lift doors barely had time to close behind the lovers before they were in each other's arms, kissing with the thirst of people who had come upon an oasis in the desert. He covered her cheeks, her forehead, her eyes, with kisses, before finally crushing his lips to hers. She stood on tiptoe and kissed him back with equal fervor. Resenting the fabric that came between them almost as much as she had the time, space, and danger that had kept them apart, Sarah slipped her hands under his sweater so she could touch his skin, only to have him wince under her loving hands.

"Dammit, Robert," she finally exploded in frustration, "where *can* I touch you that doesn't hurt?"

He looked back at her with quirked lips and twinkling eyes. "Only one place I can think of, dear—"

"Just you wait until we get back to our quarters, then." Sarah settled for holding both his hands and leaning her head on his chest. "I'm sorry. I know you're sick, and hurting, and you haven't got any strength, but my heart will burst if I can't hold you and touch you— oh my God, what I went through—"

"Sssshhh," he soothed her, "I'm home safe— and all I wanted the whole time I was missing was to have my wife in my arms and ourselves in our bed. Here's our deck. On three, *scoot."*

The lift doors opened and they scooted like teenage lovers, holding hands, laughing softly, making a run for their quarters before anyone

could see them. What they felt for each other was not for the curious or amused eyes of their crew.

"There now, here we are. *Dulce domum."*

The doors of their quarters shut them away in their private little world.

"I'll be so glad when this shoulder heals so I can love my wife properly—"

"If you aren't feeling up to this—"

"I'd have to be dead not to be up to loving my beautiful wife— dear, if you would—"

"I've got you."

Her hands even more gentle than usual as she knew how bruised and sore his entire body was, she tenderly helped him undress. He pressed closer to those embracing hands, signaling to her that bruises or no bruises, he needed her touch as desperately as she needed to touch him.

'So fold thyself, my dearest, thou, and slip/Into my bosom and be lost in me.' "

No one, Sarah thought, running herself through the sonic shower in record time, *who thinks of Robert as everyone's favorite uncle, would have dreamed of this side of him, the side who invites his wife to bed by quoting Tennyson, and is such a tender, sensitive lover both in bed and out. I have to share so much of who he is with the service, the galaxy, his family, and the crew. This side of him is just for me.*

Freshly scrubbed and clean, she came to him, and for a long moment they simply held each other, skin to skin and spirit to spirit, letting their

bodies warm to oneness. Her face pressed into the little hollow on his chest that perfectly fit her head, and his head bowed over hers, breathing in the faint herbal scent of her hair.

"Dearest," he finally whispered, "I wish I could scoop you up and—"

"No need. Come home to me."

Feeling how stiffly he was moving as she led him by the hand to their bed, she cradled him in her arms and helped him ease down into a position that would not put any strain on the injured arm. Seeing him biting his lip and wincing, she snapped, her concern for him making her short,

"You've got to *tell* me when the pain medication starts wearing off. I'm jolly well not a mind reader— let me give you something—"

"No, dear, I just need you."

From their very first night together, Sarah had always been the gentlest of lovers. Even in the heat of passion, she never lost sight of how vulnerable he was, body and soul. He saw the hunger in her eyes reflecting the hunger in his own, but her hands as they reached for him were almost as tentative as they had been their first night together.

"My darling," he finally said with a little chuckle in his voice, "stop being so afraid to hurt me and just love me."

They gave themselves to each other then, becoming one flesh with the gentle passion and fierce tenderness of a couple, no longer young, who had sailed some stormy seas before finding safe port in each other's arms. He felt some of the aches and pains in his body and the quiet, smothering grief in his heart ease in the love emanating from his wife's small, strong, gentle hands. She felt the terror, stress, and strain of the past two days she had thought him lost melt away as he loved

her. He wasn't cold and dead somewhere in space, he was safe and warm in her arms, deep inside her, responding to her and glorying as she responded to him, whispering to her the words of their wedding vows, "with my body, I thee worship," and reveling in her soft, inarticulate little cries of reply.

The door chime sounded. "Yeoman Jones, sir, I've got those papers you asked me for!"

"Ignore him and he'll go away," Robert whispered against her lips.

"Nowt o' th' soart!" Sarah extricated herself from him, threw a sheet over her bare shoulders for warmth, sprang up and hit the comm panel with more force than was strictly necessary. "This is Dr. April. For crying in the bucket, Yeoman, Robert and I have been trying for *three straight weeks* to be intimate and not *one* single time have we not been interrupted. We are making sweet love at this moment, and we don't care if the universe is imploding, we just want to be left the hell alone for *five damn minutes*. Do you copy?"

"But Dr. April, I just wanted to ask if you and the Captain were—"

"Ask us in the morning, Dr. April out."

"My darling," Robert said when he could speak, wiping the tears of laughter from his eyes, "You *could* have just told him we were indisposed—"

"What's the fun in that, then? Now. Where were we?"

There were no stars going supernova, no nebulae scintillating in the dark night of space. For them, it was the long, quiet surge of the impulse engines as they were lifted up and borne powerfully along on the back

of a white swan on a sea of stars until the moment the stars went wild at warp speed and their cries stifled against each other's lips.

Afterward, they rested in each other's arms, thanking each other as they always did, and then started laughing again.

"Bless my soul," Robert finally said, "now our yeoman will let everyone on the ship know that their captain and CMO are indeed happily married. As if anyone was in any doubt before…"

But Sarah's laughter had trembled into tears.

"What's this, then? Have I hurt you somehow? Have I not met your needs?" Concerned, he painfully reached up to touch her face, tenderly tracing the lines around her eyes.

"Yes— no— I mean—" Sarah's moor green eyes met his earnestly. "Robert, I don't want to go through this again."

"Lovemaking? My darling, why didn't you tell me—"

"No, you daft ha'porth. It was graidley. Every time more graidley than the last time. Married to you, I wouldn't call the Queen my cousin. I mean almost losing you in space. I know we're Starfleet officers. I know we know and accept the risks. But it's one thing to intellectually acknowledge and accept them, and quite another to stand there on your bridge while Lorna struggles to find the words to tell me that you're missing. She was very kind. She waited until she couldn't possibly keep it from me any longer, she didn't want me to worry—"

"I know, dear, it's what I have felt sending you into hotspots and then watching you sick and suffering in quarantine—" as if to make up

for not being able to touch her then, his hand moved caressingly against her rib cage.

Sarah's hands absently traced the scars in his chest as she replied, her eyes never leaving his. "But as you always say, All's well that ends well. I just… we've done what we set out to do, when we first agreed to share our lives together on the Starship. Even George Kirk admits he was mistaken in his judgments about your Starship program, and we've got the program off to the right start. I've had the chance to learn and grow so much as a physician, and I just think it is time to go Home."

"But you had the chance to go Home a few months back, and you turned it down cold… I don't understand, Dearest…"

Sarah's eyes looked earnestly into his. "Because I want you to come home to *me. I* want to be the doctor who patches you up after a misadventure. *I* want to be the rock of refuge you break on when you need to break. I don't want to be separated from you, and I thought you'd see that…"

"What I see is a very loyal and loving woman who has made great sacrifices so that we can be together."

"'Sacrifice! What do I sacrifice?'" Sarah burst out, unconsciously quoting *Jane Eyre,* her favorite book, "'To be privileged to put my arms around what I value— to press my lips to what I love— to repose upon what I trust— if this is sacrifice, then I do delight in sacrifice.'"

"I know, Dearest. I feel the same. I know that space travel isn't your cup of tea, and it moves me beyond words that you put up with it for my sake. It won't be for much longer, my love." Robert's voice, still husky, but lilting and warm again, carried a tender ache. He reached up to brush the tears off her cheeks and stroke her hair out of her eyes so

he could meet them frankly. “I know this isn’t the life either of us wanted… I as ship’s Captain, you as ship’s physician… when we agreed to share our lives together. But I think we’ve built a beautiful thing out of it. Have you been unhappy, my love?”

Sarah lifted her head from his chest to shyly meet his eyes. “To answer that question, I have to ask a question, Quaker fashion. Who do I know who has a birthday coming up in May?”

“Lark’s is in June and yours isn’t until October—”

“Ye daft ha’porth, you’ll never think of it. Got you a little something before we left on this mission. Thought to save it for your birthday but perhaps you need it now.”

“Oh, *Sarah*…” Sarah’s gift was a small bound copy of Jane Austen’s *Persuasion*. They had read it together many years ago. Of all the books he treasured and reread, this was his favorite. “This book is why I had to become a captain,” was among the many self-deprecating jokes he loved to make, and he had lost his own treasured copy when his old ship was destroyed.

“I haven’t got my reading spectacles—”

“I know. I’ll read to you. This is Mrs. Croft.” She began to read softly, “*I can safely say, the happiest part of my life has been spent on board a ship. While we were together, you know, there was nothing to be feared. … The only time I ever really suffered in body or mind, the only time that I ever fancied myself unwell, or had any ideas of danger, was the winter I passed by myself at Deal, when the Admiral (Captain Croft then) was on the North Seas. I lived in perpetual fright at that time, and had all manner of imaginary complaints from not knowing what to do with myself, or when I should hear from him next; but as long as we could be*

together, nothing ever ailed me, and I never met with the smallest inconvenience."

Looking up, she saw that his eyes were very bright. He gently took the book from her hands… "*'Anne was tenderness itself, and she had the full worth of it in Captain Wentworth's affection*—'that's you, my love."

Sarah leaned against him to read aloud, "*'His profession was all that could make her friends wish that tenderness less, the dread of a future war all that could dim her sunshine.'"*

"I know, my love. I know." He opened to another portion and read back to her… no need for his reading spectacles as he knew the passage by heart… in a tone of at least as strong a feeling as Captain Harville's…

"'If I could but make you comprehend what a man suffers when he takes a last look at his wife and children, and watches the boat that he has sent them off in, as long as it is in sight, and then turns away and says, "God knows whether we ever meet again!" And then, if I could convey to you the glow of his soul when he does see them again; when, coming back after a twelve months absence, perhaps, and obliged to put into another port, he calculates how soon it may be possible to get them there, … seeing them arrive at last, as if Heaven had given them wings, by many hours sooner still! If I could explain to you all this, and all that a man can bear and do, and glories to do, for the sake of these treasures of his existence! I speak, you know, only of such men as have hearts!' Pressing his own with emotion."

"I know." She rested her hand on the side of his face and looked deep into his eyes. "I've seen your eyes when you say Goodbye to Lark. I know how terribly you miss her and how worried you are about her. My heart hears yours."

“And when I have thought that I wasn’t coming home to you—” Turning the page, he began to read the words of another captain.

“I offer myself to you again with a heart even more your own, than when you almost broke it—”

Gently taking the book back, she turned to the final page and read softly, “‘*She gloried in being a sailor’s wife, but she must pay the tax of quick alarm—*‘that’s how I feel. Would you just think about it?”

“I’ll do more than think about it, Dearest. I’ve got a heart to heart with Nogura and Komack I’ve been putting off, until I knew your mind.”

“Then we’ll say no more about it until then.”

The same nightmare he had had ever since Candle’s death stalked him that night. Every time he thought he had laid that small ghost forever, it returned to haunt his dreams. There was never any visual… if he could only see her face, her innocent baby eyes once again, it might not have left him feeling so bruised inside. But he never did. He only heard the tiny plaintive voice endlessly crying for her father in the cold dark of space, only the endless searching for her, despair even colder and darker than space filling him—

He mercifully woke with a gasp and sat bolt upright in the bed, in cold sweat and hot tears. And Sarah was there, as she had always been, whispering to him, kissing away the tears, gathering him into her arms and easing him back down on the pillow.

“Same old dream?” she whispered. “The crying baby?” She had had her share of similar nightmares.

He nodded silently, grateful for her steadying hand over his wildly pounding heart, pressing her hand there to make sure she didn't take it away.

"Sarah—" he whispered hesitantly. "There was— a moment. Back in the cutter. When I knew we were all about to die. And all I could think of was— I'm seconds away from seeing Candle again—"

"Robert, you need to cry," Sarah said gently. "I know you. You keep a stiff upper lip whilst the crisis is on, you're the shelter of a great rock in a weary land to your crew, but once it's all over you need to fall apart—"

Sarah's holistic approach to practicing medicine meant she was constantly encouraging him to find healthy ways to deal with the stress and grief of missions gone wrong. She had seen too many illnesses and injuries that were the direct result of unprocessed trauma and grief, and she was always reminding him, and the crew, that mental health and physical health are inextricably linked.

He shook his head, worried about what crying might do to his already stressed respiratory system. Ceremoniously, he gave her hand back to her and slipped out of their bed.

"The crisis isn't over, dearest, and I still need to be strong for my crew. I don't want to keep you up, Sarah. I think I'll go practice the piano for a while. Still struggling with the Rachmaninov."

The door hissed softly behind him. She turned away to face the wall and wept silently in the dark.

CHAPTER 11: THE GREATEST OF THESE IS LOVE

What felt like minutes after she had fallen asleep, the intercom brought Sarah up all standing.

"*Sickbay to Doctor April."*

Oh no. No. Please don't let it be— "This is Doctor April."

"*Doctor, could you come down here? It's Veronica."*

"Be there in five. Dr. April out."

Her hands shaking so badly she could barely throw on her scrubs, Sarah fastened her hair up into a bun and was running out the door when her husband's drowsy voice called to her— "Dearest? Is everything alright? Can I help?"

"Hold Veronica in the Light!" Sarah called back over her shoulder, and was gone.

"Damn. Damn damn! We have got to get her to Starbase One, they've got much more extensive medical facilities than we do— bridge! This is Dr. April. What's our ETA to Starbase One?"

"*Our ETA is 0900 this morning, Doctor,*" the third shift duty officer who had the conn responded.

Sarah glanced at the chronometer. "That's still three hours from now—"

Robert was there, in the doorway of the Intensive Care unit, still straightening his uniform, easier said than done with one shoulder immobilized. “Sarah? Please, let me help— “

“More speed? We need to get her to Starbase. It’s urgent.”

Robert spoke to the conn officer in a low but urgent voice.

“Rob, in my office. Mel, stay with her and call me if her condition changes.”

“What’s happened— she seemed stable last night— did we talk too long? Wear her out?”

“No.” Sarah had tears in her eyes. She gestured to her husband to sit across from her at her desk. “No. She’s badly. It’s coolant poisoning setting in. That is wicked stuff and it’s so slow and insidious. You think the patient is fine until she suddenly stops responding. She went into a coma very early this morning as the coolant began to affect her brain. It’s gone to her kidneys and she’s stopped producing—”

“Oh no. No.” Robert had been married to a CMO long enough to understand how serious Sarah’s report was. He locked his hands together on her desk to try and stop their shaking and looked across at her in anguish. “What did I do wrong? What could I have done differently? Did—” there were tears in his own eyes— “did we save her life just to prolong her suffering? Did we inflict needless pain on her just to try and make ourselves feel—”

Sarah came around her desk, seated herself on his knee, and took his face in her hands. The tears glittered in the smile lines around his eyes. She brushed them away with her fingertips. Looking deep into his stricken eyes, she said quietly, “and you still wonder why I got the hell out of practicing medicine? This is what I felt, Robert. Everything you’re

describing. This is why I was so mad at you when you brought me back in for this."

"Small blame to you. This is just about hellish. I had no idea, what a beastly husband I am to you—"

"Nowt o' th' soart. That's not what I'm driving at. I came here because I promised you I'd come back out to space if you ever needed me, and stayed because I wanted to. Because I can make a difference. I am telling you that you did everything in your power under the circumstances. Morally, you could have done nothing but what you did. Come here. Just be with your Sarah."

For a long moment, they sat together in silence, comforting each other, each drawing strength from the other, ship's captain and ship's doctor both with the lives of young people on their hearts as a most precious charge.

Finally, she stirred, patted his shoulder gently. "Have you been able to notify her family?"

He shook his head. "There has been some communication disruption and we're having a hard time getting messages through to her family. They're scattered all over our colonies and I'm worried it might be some time before they can get here. I'm guessing that there are going to be some decisions to make that only her family can make—"

Sarah nodded brokenly. Patting his shoulder again, she got up off his knee and settled again across her desk from him. She picked up a pad and handed it to him.

"Autopsy reports you asked me for. They… aren't very pleasant reading, but you wanted to know—" seeing his face change as he read, "Oh God, are you feeling sick? Let me get you a cup of ginger tea—"

“Not that kind of sick. Heartsick.” Robert set the pad back down on her desk with more force than he was wont to use. “There has been too much death and destruction on this mission, and it needs to *stop.”*

He bowed his head in his hands for a moment. When he raised it again, there was quiet resolution in his eyes.

“Got inner light, have you?”

“I have. I need to speak to Roy Moss.” She parted her lips to protest, and then, seeing the steadfastness in his face, closed them again. He would confide in her when he was ready. He got up from her desk and came around to help her up and gather her into his arms. “I love thee, dear. Always thee give me strength. Thank you for last night.*”*

She looked up at him with tears in her eyes, remembering the heart melting tenderness of their lovemaking the night before. “I love thee.”

They kissed quickly, and then hand in hand, walked back to Veronica’s side.

*“*April to Commander Kirk.”

“*Kirk here. Robert, how are you feeling?”*

“So’s to be up and about, thank you, George. Could you let me talk to Roy Moss for a moment, please?”

A long pause on the other end. *“Where are you? I’ll be right down.”*

“Sickbay. Sarah won’t let me return to duty, so I thought I’d stay with Veronica.”

“*Acknowledged. Kirk out.”*

“Robert, first things first. Thank you for opening up last night. I know that’s not easy for you to do, but it meant a lot to Jim. He really looks up to you.”

Robert nodded in a subdued way. “George, somehow the bit about getting older that I can’t seem to reconcile myself to, has been realizing that the old ones I have always depended upon to draw strength, courage, wisdom, and experience from have passed away one by one, and I am now the older person to whom young people turn for the same. It gobsmacks me sometimes.”

“Yeah, tell me about it. So, you want to talk to Roy? I don’t mind saying, I don’t think it’s a good idea. I know you abhor violence but if it were me, and I’d just found out that Aurelan had been murdered by those pirates—”

“It was something Sarah said last night that got me thinking. She likes to quote myself at me—” with a warm, twinkling glance over at his wife— “she keeps me on the straight and narrow and I love her for it. She reminded me of Dr. King’s words… ‘hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.’ And I just had inner light about what to say to Roy, that’s all.”

“Maybe you better let me in on— walk with me, there’s too much coming and going in this Sickbay—”

“It came to me,” Robert said slowly, as the two men walked a deserted corridor of the great ship… “when we were talking last night. How I wished Roy could have heard us. He doesn’t know anything about the kind of people his father and their, well, their associates tried to kill. And he can’t be blamed for that. My heart goes out to him. He’s only nineteen. He’s nobbit a bairn, as Sarah would say. And I thought perhaps

if Roy knew there was another way to live, a way he'd never seen before but a way that appealed to the great good inside him, that perhaps he could be spared a lifetime of crime and regret. That's all. He didn't choose to be born into such a midden any more than I chose to be born to some of the kindest, gentlest, wisest people I can imagine…"

"This just isn't the time to mount your dearly beloved hobby-horse of nature versus nurture and put your heart above your head! You didn't see what I saw on that ship! Roy is dangerous and he's ruthlessly cunning! He tried to kill Jim! He's already made his choices, and they're following in the footsteps of his own father! Whom he killed damned brutally, may I remind you! You just can't go overboard with your universal brotherhood ideal!"

"There but for the grace of love and light go I. Is Roy any more dangerous than you or I would be had we not received the nurture and guidance we did at young ages?" Robert's gentle voice, husky with illness and emotion, was a soft but insistent counterpoint to George's sharp one.

"I am dangerous, Robert. Very, very dangerous. You, on the other hand, the only way you could be dangerous is if someone lit you on fire and—"

"And Sarah would frown upon that. A man who has a family he loves more than life itself is a very dangerous man should anyone touch those dear ones to their hurt, as you know only too well. I'd like to go in and have a word with Roy. Have you got my back?"

"I've always got your back. OK, here we are, detention area…"

George Kirk, backed by his best friend, Drake Reed, was an imposing man. A "crimson dragon," Robert sometimes called him. Robert April,

on the other hand, a tall, thin man who had earned the nickname of "Mr. Rogers in a Starfleet uniform," whose mild, fatherly manner and cable knit cardigan hid in a professorial image long, difficult years of experience in the service, was not physically imposing at first sight. He had an edge as a teacher of peaceful self-defense classes, as his students would underestimate him until the moment they hit the mat. Crew who saw him for the first time in full dress uniform on the way to ceremonial events he couldn't dodge would stop to count the medals displayed there, and would look at him with new respect. He had a presence that suggested he was a man in the habit of sculpting souls in his own gentle way. He nodded for Drake to release the force field, and stepped into the holding cell.

"Roy, we have not met formally. I'm Captain Robert April."

The first thing a person would notice about Captain April was the intensity of his eyes. Calm eyes the color of brewed tea, deep as a lake, full of gentle wisdom and light. There was a deep and ineradicable sadness if one looked deeply enough to see it, but there was also playfulness and laughter. After all, life was pretty damn funny in spots, and people were funnier than anybody. They were space farer's eyes, far seeing, vigilant, and visionary. They were eyes that saw the good in everyone he met. Eyes that had looked on death, pain, long-term disability, and grief. Eyes that delighted in small children, in newly made cadets strutting their stuff on his bridge, in his beautiful wife doing the healing work she did best. Eyes that had seen and loved the wonders of space and the green hills of home. Roy, in his limited experience of the humanities, had never looked into eyes quite like them in his life.

Roy's own eyes were empty. They hadn't seen any of the things the captain had. Perhaps he would not have seen them even if they had been in front of him, but Robert knew he had to try.

"We have something in common, you and I," Captain April began.

"What does a Stah-fleet Captain have in common with a—" Roy protested.

"I also lost my father when I was near your age," Captain April went on quietly. "My father was very different from your father, Roy. You see, even though we disagreed on a good many things, I know now and I knew then that he loved me. I have never known what it is not to live loved, Roy, and I know you have not had the chance to know love like I have. I want you to have that chance."

"Love?!" Roy came back with some ribaldry, but Captain April didn't turn a hair. Nothing I haven't heard before, he telegraphed to George, with a shrug.

"Love means to have the very best interests of another person at heart," he went on quietly. "Love is being willing to go on living for someone… even when it would be easier to give up and die. But love is also being willing to lay down your own life for someone. Love is… "falling back on his own childhood… "Love is always patient and kind. It is never jealous. Love is never boastful or conceited. It is never rude or selfish. It does not take offense and is not resentful. Love takes no pleasure in other people's shortcomings, but delights in the truth. It is always ready to excuse, to trust, to hope, and to endure whatever

comes.[1]" The soft English cadences of his voice made the immortal words almost unbearably poignant as they echoed in the holding cell.

Roy shrugged. "That's not the way my father loved me."

"I realize that, my boy." He gestured helplessly, at a complete loss to get through to Roy. Struggling on, "I want to offer to be a friend to you. A mentor if you like, a father figure if you find you need one. I have learned so much from the heroes and mentors and father figures in my own life and I am only too glad to pass on down what they have given me. I can't lighten your sentence; but I can be there for you as you serve it. I can use my influence to help you get some education and find honest work. I can't help you make friends, that's up to you, but I can introduce you to some good people your own age. I can in short try and show you that there is so much more to life than what you've experienced so far."

"I don't need your Federation do-gooder bullshit. I've got something that's far better. Something that you can never have for all your fancy stah-ships and holier than thou codes of honor."

Sarah's medications were wearing off, and he was beginning to struggle to get his breath. His physical weakness made him realize that the emotionally draining interview, on top of the devastating news about Veronica's condition, had taken everything he had. *Sarah's going to have a word with me,* he thought. Rising and nodding to George and Drake, he closed the interview. "Roy, I am very easy to find if you should change your mind. You may rest assured I won't change mine. I am ten ten on the side. Farewell, Roy. And… I'm sorry."

[1] 1 Corinthians 13 NKJV

Perhaps it was the memory of the monks who had taught him that "love is always patient and kind," both by word and by example. Perhaps it was his weary eyes playing tricks on him. Perhaps it was simply that he was still quite sick and should not even have been out of bed, but Robert thought he saw, as he walked away from the detention area with George, two monks in the traditional Franciscan brown robes and cowled hoods, and he thought he heard their voices, soft and low, "now abides faith, hope, and love, and the greatest of these is love…" but they were gone in a twinkling of an eye, and somehow he didn't like to mention it to George. George was more hyper vigilant than he was and if George had seen nothing, surely it was his eyes.

"Robert, it's probably for the best." George was the first to break the heavy silence. His captain and friend was thoughtful and sad and George was at a loss to comfort him. "You tried. You reached out. You led the horse to water. Let's see what rehabilitations can do for him. And who knows…" seeing that Robert wasn't really hearing him, knowing him to be a man with the souls of young people on his heart, he tried another approach.

"Why didn't you tell him? About Daniel, I mean?"

"Beg pardon? Oh. Why didn't I— truly, what good would it have done? Would he have cared tuppence? I thought, if I could just reach his heart, his better nature—" he sighed regretfully. "I couldn't do that. Sarah would say that once the formative years are up, they're up, and a child who wasn't nurtured and loved in those critical years might not be able to receive or express love in the years that follow."

George cast about for comforting words. “You’re so lucky with your daughter. You never had to worry she would turn to a life of crime.”

His words had the right effect. Robert brightened at the mention of his daughter, and then immediately turned sad and thoughtful again.

“Oh, there were some anxious years, I assure you, but she’s my joy and crown. If I could just get a message through to her!”

“Still no word? When I get back to my Starbase I’ll see what I can do, security-wise.”

“Thank you, George. You see that the worry for one’s children doesn’t end when they are grown and flown… but my Lark has found her way thus far and will continue to do so. And Jimmy will too.”

“*Bridge to Captain April.”*

The two men had just arrived back in sickbay when the paging whistle sounded. Robert moved to the wall panel and tapped it. “Go ahead.”

“*Captain*,” the unfamiliar voice was the beta shift communications officer who was filling in for Veronica, *“there’s an incoming transmission for you from the freighter* Alice S., *audio only.”* (Merchant Marine freighter captains tended to keep to the time-honored tradition of naming their vessels after their wives or daughters).

“Could you pipe it down here, please, Ensign? I’m in Sickbay. Much obliged.”

No sooner said than done, “Breaker 1-9, breaker 1-9, Snowman to Wise Thrush, how about ya, Bobby McGee, got your ears on?”

A smile like a beam of sunshine broke through the grey clouds of sorrow and worry at the sound of his friend’s voice speaking the Old

Earth style Citizens Band Radio code. The civilian freighter captains and their crews had adopted the 10-codes of the old Earth style long haul truck drivers. Each CB speaker had chosen a handle for identification purposes, a practice that had begun in the dangerous years of interstellar shipping during the Earth Romulan wars, and had continued to the present relative peace. Robert's Grandfather April, veteran of those wars, had been a freighter captain for years and had taught him the work ethic and the language. He had helped him choose the handle Wise Thrush, from the poem *Home Thoughts from Abroad* by Robert Browning. The line "There's the wise thrush— he sings each song twice over" characterized Robert perfectly, because he was a singer, a poet, and an Englishman to his core.

"Why, bless my soul, it's Cletus Snow. Ay up, and have I got the one Snowman? How'd ye do? Working hard, come on back?"

"Oh, you know, same old shit. I'm fair to middlin'. How the hell be ye? How's thy lass, come on back?"

"I'm better'n nothing. Our lass Sarah is the same old sixpence. Bonnie as ever."

"'Ow do, Dee-dar," Sarah called from the far side of sickbay.

She was torn between laughter at how quickly her husband slipped into broad Yorkshire himself when talking to a countryman, right down to the Yorkshireman's habit of referring to his wife as "our lass," and worry over how utterly ill he looked. *A little chat with his mate will be good for his morale, which badly needs a boost,* she thought.

"Eh up, Sarah! What's the good word, come on back?"

Grinning from ear to ear, Sarah gave him the good word. "'Ear all, see all, say nowt. Sup all, drink all, pay nowt. But if tha' ever does owt for nowt—"

The two finished the Yorkshire proverb together. "*Do it allus only for thissen!"*

After the shared laughter had subsided, Cletus went on, "*Good to talk to a fellow Tyke. Bobby, ya jammy nephew of a tugboat captain, when's the next country dance, come back?"*

A painful coughing spell caught him before he could respond. Sarah moved, but George moved faster and offered his shoulder for his captain to lean on.

"*Bobby? You reet?"* Cletus's merry voice turned concerned.

"I'm nobbit middlin'," Robert confessed. "I've got galloping consumption and not long for this world, as Aunt Mabel used to say. What's your twenty, come back?"

"We're eastbound, passing Andor now, coming down. [Galactic east by southeast]. *Destination, Mile Marker One* [freighter code for the loading docks at Starbase One]. *Oh, to be in England now that the Aprils are there! You two been wandering around any more red light districts, come on back?"*

"Negatory, negatory. One was more than enough for our combined lifetimes. Know it?"

"10-4, Bobby. I got a deckhand here who wants to speak to you awful bad. Keep on doing what we're doing, Bobby, keep fighting the good fight. Snowman is down'n gone— here's your daughter—"

"Wandering Minstrel to Wise Thrush, how about ya, come back?!"

“Lark Rise!” Sarah exclaimed in delight, “I’ll go to the foot of the *stairs*!”

The joy, relief, and love that suffused Robert’s gentle face at the sound of his daughter’s voice might have melted down even Roy’s heart and made him change his mind about relationship with this man. He gazed at the wall panel with a sweet glow, not seeing it but the precious face of his daughter, and his good hand involuntarily reached for hers as though she were next to him. He thought perhaps if he had been alone, he might have burst into tears of sheer joy.

“My heart’s dearest! ‘Hail to thee, blithe spirit, bird thou never wert!’ Upon my soul! Thy old father is chuffed to bits to hear thy voice—Just wait until I get my arms around thee—”

“*Not if I get mine around thee first! I have been trying to reach thee for weeks, Tad. Cletus says there’s some shocking tinfoil in the radar and not for love or money could he get through it. So, I tried to surprise thee by showing up on Faramond, Tad, only thee didn’t show up, come back?”*

“My darling, I am sorry. We were… detained, as it were.” *The fact that we came within the width of a gnat’s eyebrow of dying is one I will keep from thee as long as I can, my daughter, as is the fact that I have been terrified for thy safety. “*What are thee doing serving as deckhand with an old space dog like Cletus, come back?”

“*So, I signed on with Cletus for my passage and I’ve been singing for my supper. He was just running back from a supply run to Faramond himself and we’re a day’s journey out of Mile Marker One. We’ve had a good chance in, Tad, all’s quiet along the Potomac.”*

“Ten-four, Heart’s Dearest, we will rendezvous with thee at Mile Marker One. I love thee, dear. I love thee. Thy Mam wants thee to know

she loves thee too. We hold thee in the Light. Thy old father Wise Thrush is signing off. I'm ten ten on the side."

"*I love thee, Tad. Godspeed. Wandering Minstrel is down'n gone."*

Laughter and tears contending in his eyes, Robert supported himself against the bulkhead. Sarah was at his side in a moment, slipping a supportive arm around him and guiding him to a free diagnostic bed.

"Just so good to hear her voice. I've been nearly beside myself trying to reach her. Imagine trying to show up and surprise us. I love the bones of that child, but she'll be the death of me— Sarah, all of a sudden, my legs don't seem to want to hold me up—"

"Quit your chelpin' and sit ye down, Rob."

"What I want to know," George commented, watching Sarah administer another round of medications and feeling oddly loathe to leave his friend until he could be sure he was alright, "is who the hell gets off calling you 'Bobby—'"

Robert laughed, then pressed his hand to his chest where laughing hurt. "Cletus is Captain Eri Snow's kid brother. He can call me anything but Late for Tea, I tell him."

"Ohhh… trust me to say just the wrong thing at the wrong time. I'm sorry, I wasn't as close to Captain Snow as you were—"

Robert April had served under Captain Snow as Comm Officer aboard the Diplomatic Corps frigate *Heart of Oak.* Captain Snow's last mission had gone horribly wrong, and he had died in Robert's arms. The highest-ranking officer left alive, Robert had taken over the mission, brought the rest of the crew home safely, and as a result had been promoted to captain at thirty-one-years-old, given the *Heart of Oak* to

command, and decorated for valor. He always said he'd trade it all in to have Captain Snow back again.

Robert had leaned against the pillow and closed his eyes. "It's alright, George, it was a long time ago now. Nearly twenty years and where does the time go… yes, Eri was a good man. Good captain."

"His brother seems to be, as well," George commented, "but what he ever did to deserve being called a dee-dar—"

"'E's from Sheffield," Sarah affirmed, as though that explained everything.

"Well, that's not his fault, Sarah," Robert protested mildly.

"It's a Yorkshire thing. Derived from the proverb 'Don't thee tha' me, thee 'tha' thissen an' see 'ow tha' likes it!' It's meant to be a phrase for keeping bairns in line."

"Speaking of bairns…" George remembered the real reason he had walked his captain back to sickbay… "how's Veronica?"

"I… am anxious to commit her to the medical facilities of Starbase One," Sarah said cautiously. She was reluctant to discuss Veronica's condition with anyone but Robert until the Starbase physicians could examine her.

"Right then. Robert, look, about Roy. Try not to take this so much to heart. There are some people you can reach, and some…"

"George, stop chelpin' and get a'gate." Sarah gestured to George to move along. "I need to 'ave a look at 'is shoulder—"

"Sarah, I'm fine, I don't want to take you away from Veronica—George, in a bit—"

"Kept you awake half the night, didn't it?" Sarah's hands were firm but gentle as she slipped off the immobilizer and began to probe the

injured arm. "'Appen the inflammation has gone down enough that I can 'ave a look at what's wrong—"

He would not have let on to his wife, but he felt he was only too glad to rest for a few moments and let her fuss over him.

"I don't suppose," he began tentatively, trying to turn so he could see her face, "that last night did it any favors, wonderful as it was—"

"Flippin' 'eck, 'ow did you manage *that!"* Sarah was intent on her medical screens and didn't even blush at his words.

"What? Having my way with my wife? We've found ways to love each other around injuries in the past—"

"Eh! If brains were currants tha'd be a plain tea cake— how did tha' manage to tear tha' rotator cuff— see thee?"

Sarah turned the screen toward him so he could see from where he was lying on the diagnostic bed. "Does tha' know what that means?"

"Well… it means I'm having a bit of a bother?"

Sarah stood on her professional dignity. "It means that you are off duty until this heals. I'm going to have to go in and repair it and I can't do that until you shake off this lung infection. And then when it heals a bit you will need some physical therapy to get it working properly again. I'm sorry, I know this isn't what you wanted to hear—"

"I haven't got the time for surgery and medical leave. I need to get back. I can't find my desk. I need to help arrange—" catching the look on her face— "alright, a leave sounds like just what the doctor ordered—"

"That's so. I'll 'ave a word with the daft ha'porths at Headquarters and we'll be on medical leave as soon as we get back. Now. Are you starting to feel those medications take effect?"

Smiling at her, "'For this relief, much thanks. It is bitter cold and I am sick at heart.'"

"Well," she grumbled, "if you feel well enough to quote the Bard I think it's safe to say you're feeling the effects of the medication…"

CHAPTER 12: HOW CAN I KEEP FROM SINGING?

Sir? You shouldn't be working."

Robert lifted his head from the communications console where he had rested it until a wave of lightheadedness and shortness of breath passed. Sarah's medications were working, but he knew it would be a long time before he felt strong again.

Yeoman Grace Fletcher stood before him, holding a PADD in her hand, but instead of handing it to him for his approval, she gently called him out.

"You're ill, you should let some of these reports wait until you feel better. Let me get you a cup of tea."

Robert looked more closely at the yeoman. Saw her eyes red-rimmed. Heard the huskiness of her voice. She was looking sideways hoping he would not notice and trying to conceal her state in concern for his.

He took the PADD from her hands. "Go get yourself a cup too. Then come talk to me for a bit."

"What's wrong, Prevenient Grace?"

Yeoman Fletcher looked up from her tea and finally met her captain's eyes. "Sir, I'm just so worried about Veronica. Dr. April wouldn't tell me anything. She's my roomie— sir, do you know—"

“I don’t know any more than you do,” the captain said quickly, “and Dr. April couldn’t tell you anything because she doesn’t know herself. She’s one of the best doctors I know, and she’s good enough to know when she has reached her limit and needs the opinions of her colleagues. That’s one of the many things I love about her.”

“But— can’t she *do* anything— sir, Veronica has gone through so much—”

“I know, Grace. I know. We have to trust that she is in the very best care possible. Sarah’s working with the Starbase medical team on her case right now. She wouldn’t want you to be so worried. She’d want to know you are happy and working hard.”

The two sat sipping calming cups of tea in companionable silence. Finally, Grace spoke up.

“Sir, I’ve been thinking of something for a long time… I was wondering if I could talk it over with you.”

“You can talk anything over with me. That’s what captains are for.”

“My four years of enlistment are up next year,” Grace rushed on, “and I finally decided. I want to go to the Academy.”

“Grace, I am so proud of you. I would be honored to sponsor you.”

Grace looked up. “Sir— *would* you? I felt shy to ask—”

“I know your hard work and dedication, and it would be my joy. What discipline would you like to pursue? I’ve thought you have extraordinary leadership capabilities—”

Grace shook her head. “I want to be a stellar cartographer. I came out here to see the stars, and now that I’ve seen them… I see them every time I close my eyes. I dream about them. I want to learn to map them.”

Grace's eyes were full of starlight. Robert had a sudden poignant memory of his own daughter coming to him and telling him that instead of following him into Starfleet, she wanted to dedicate her life to music. The same dedication shone in Grace's eyes as she talked about stellar cartography.

"I'll see to it that you get an entrance interview with Admiral Komack. The rest is up to you. I am very proud of you."

"I won't let you down, sir. If Veronica can meet the requirements with one hand, I can meet them with two."

"I know you can. I know your abilities. Now, I must excuse myself… I've been putting off this communication long enough."

He had just finished a heart-wrenching conversation with Engineer Bill Thorvaldsen's wife and six-month-old son when his first officer bustled onto the bridge. The grizzled old veteran of space travel had seen enough death and loss in her day, and she pretended not to notice as he raised his head, wiped his eyes on his sleeve, and managed a pallid smile of greeting for her.

"Permission to disembark, sir? Command just contacted me. All hell's breaking loose on Rigel—"

"So, what else is new—"

"— and they want me to go this time. They say you're too soft on them. Too nice. I've been accused of many things over the years, but 'too nice' isn't one of them." Her eyes twinkled mischievously at him.

Robert's eyes twinkled back at her. "Yes, you're the right officer for the job, m'dear. You'll have them knocked into shape with a two-by-four in no time."

“Yes, sir, you bet your boots I will!”

“Lorna,” he said gently, “you can drop the ‘sir.’ It’s just you and me on the bridge and you’re old enough to be my mother.”

“Eh, don’t remind me. Alrighty then. I am glad you came back safe and sound. Sir.”

“Thank you for taking a chance and getting us out of there, Lorna. I’ll remember you in my will.”

Over the five years they had served together, Lorna Simon, First Officer, official ship’s grandmother, and all around badass, had become much closer to Sarah than to himself. Sarah had learned to rely upon the crotchety older woman’s judgement, turn to her for comfort, and trust her to call her out when she needed that. They had spent hours in Lorna’s cabin, watching cricket, (Lorna refused to watch polo), arguing and agonizing over the decisions regarding the Prime Directive required of them by their missions, discussing crew morale and plans to boost it, and sometimes, over a glass of wine or two, dissolving into giggling fits like a couple school girls. Robert often thought as he watched them together and enthusiastically encouraged their friendship that Lorna filled the aching emptiness left by the loss of Sarah’s mother many years ago. He also knew that, unlike her own mother, Lorna was never too busy and too tired to mother her. Although he and Lorna had built a trusting working relationship, she had chosen to remain formal with her captain out of protocol, and he had respected that.

So, he was surprised, as she held out her hand for a farewell handclasp, to find himself drawn to her and an affectionate kiss planted firmly on his cheek.

“That’s not protocol, Lorna,” he teased her gently. Lord knows, she had pointed the same out to him enough times.

“Protocol, my ass,” she responded with her customary tartness. Her voice softened and she tilted her chin to meet his eyes. “It’s going to be alright,” she said gently. Her words felt like balm on his aching heart.

After seeing his first officer safely on her way back to Starbase to say her farewells and board the diplomatic transport to Rigel, Robert found that the quiet of the deserted bridge was oppressive. The last several conversations were still echoing in that silent space, weaving themselves into the very fabric of the bridge, a reminder for anyone who could hear the echoes to never, ever forget the cost in human lives. Duty and sacrifice were all very well in speeches. But when confronted with the reality of a woman’s stricken eyes and a baby who would grow up never knowing his father…

With an anguished sigh, he logged off the bridge, picked up his own and his wife’s kit bags, and left for the Starbase.

Starbase One orbital facility was nearly deserted. It was the weekend and all the staff but the round-the-clock medical teams and the commandant were planetside. Loathe to meet anyone with his husky voice and red-rimmed eyes, he took refuge in the quiet meditation area just outside the main hospital deck doors, finding in the recorded sounds of running water and bird song comforting reminders of home.

The sound of the doors opening and swiftly closing, the light scuffing of boots on the deck, and a soft sob hastily stifled made him lift his head,

quickly look away to give the newcomer their privacy, and then quickly look back as he recognized something about that muffled little cry—

He was at his wife's side in a heartbeat, gently taking her hands away from her face so that he could hold them and look into her eyes.

"What is it, Dearest? Can you do anything—"

His wife shook her head. "Please, just hold me—"

He drew her head down on his shoulder and gathered her close, peppering her forehead and the top of her head with kisses. She rested against him for a long time, drawing strength from him, before finally looking up to meet his eyes.

"Have you heard from Veronica's family? Do you know when we expect them?"

"Her parents will be here in about twelve hours. Do you think—will they be in time?"

"She's on full life support. The machines are keeping her alive until her family can get here. Has she got an advance directive? Too many times I've seen it, young people don't think of these things until too late."

"She has, every one of my cadets has. I insist upon it. Like you I've seen one too many sad things. Oh Sarah—isn't there anything, anything at all, that can be done for her?"

"I… think you'd better come see for yourself."

One look at Robert's face as he looked up from the monitors and charts told Sarah he understood only too well.

"She isn't in pain," Sarah tried to comfort him, "hold onto that—"

Quietly, compartmentalizing his grief so he could focus on doing the next right thing, he said, "I've already dismissed the crew, and I believe

they're all either on leave or on to their next assignments. Lorna got called away to a hot spot on Rigel—for once it's not me going. She wanted me to tell you she says goodbye and next time the Knights are going to win—"

"That'll be the day—"

"I know that George and Jim are still on the base, they're settling Roy and the other prisoners into custody until the trials. I need to go brief George and Jim. When I get back, I'll stay with her until her family arrives. I'm her commanding officer and the only chaplain in the sector, my place is beside her—"

"You need to rest, you're ill—"

A note of steel crept into his gentle voice. He would never use that inner steel to hurt anyone, but that steel was what kept him, a sensitive man of deep and tender feeling, from breaking under the harsh realities of a dangerous profession. "A member of my crew is dying in the line of duty. I must stay by her side if I have to get up off my deathbed to do it. You know that."

"I know. But I worry about you. You're always giving of yourself until I worry you'll have nothing left," Sarah whispered.

"And that's why I count on you, to keep me on an even keel. Courage, dear heart. I shall return."

George and Jim were just emerging from the officer's lounge, salient emotion showing on their faces, as Robert approached them. Obviously, it had been an important and long overdue conversation. He knew the looks on their faces and did not like to disturb the moment but—

"Could I have a word?"

“Sir, what’s wrong?”

“Robert—”

“It is with a heavy heart,” Robert began, struggling to keep his own grief under control so that it did not overwhelm theirs and they knew they could confide in him, “that I have to tell you that although Veronica has been transferred safely, she is… not expected to recover.”

“But sir—sir—she was—” utter shock cut off Jim’s exclamation. How could it be that they had kept her alive until rescue, gotten her safely home, only to—

“But—but—” ruddy-cheeked George had gone grey as ashes— “she was doing so well last night—”

Robert steadied his voice for his friends but could not hide the pain in his eyes. As Sarah was want to do, he hid his despair behind medical terminology. “Coolant toxicity set in during the night. It’s so cruel, so slow and so insidious. By the time we got her to sickbay, too much damage had already been done to her internal organs. They called Sarah in very early this morning. She… just stopped responding. Once the Starbase medical personnel examined her, they and Sarah made the decision to switch to comfort measures, to take her off all the machines but the respirator. They’ve taken her off the medications and are focusing on pain management—” Robert rubbed the bridge of his nose as if something stinging had lodged there— “Sarah assures me that she is in no pain or distress. When her family arrives very late tonight, they will have to make the final decision to honor her living will. My friends, I wish with all my heart I didn’t have to be the one to tell you this—”

“Did—” George’s voice was a croak— “did we do the right thing? I mean—what would Sarah have done? If we had known—”

“Sarah says we did everything she would have done and that morally we could have done nothing differently.”

“You know…” George cleared his throat a couple times and he still spoke hoarsely, “I’m really glad we had that time with her, last night…”

“So am I, my friend. I need to get back to her. I…just can’t bear for her to be alone. On whatever level of consciousness she is, I don’t want her to be frightened. Come and sit with Sarah and me when you can. We are staying with her until her family can be here.” He slipped his good arm around Jim and gave him a gentle squeeze and then patted George’s shoulder. “We are all in this together.”

The tubes, tapes, and bags had all been removed from Veronica’s body, which was now draped in white linens. The focus had gone from recovery to comfort measures and death with dignity.

Huskily, Robert asked his wife, as the two of them took their places at Veronica’s side, “Would it be alright if I held her hand? Would that hurt her?”

“I think it would be a good thing to do. And I think perhaps you should sing to her.”

“Perhaps, someone with a steadier voice than mine at this moment—”

“She needs to hear your voice. We know that hearing is the last sense to go and I want her to be comforted. You were her primary caregiver during the crisis; she’s attuned to your voice—”

“You’re right, I know, dear. It’s just… there are times when speech is… difficult.”

Propping his bad arm on the side of her bed for support, he took her small, cool, limp hand in both of his big warm ones, as he had been longing to do since she had first regained consciousness back in the cutter. Drawing several deep breaths and finding that Sarah's ministrations had made that much easier and less painful, he cleared his throat and began, very softly, the first song that came to mind. The first song he had sung to his baby daughter. His was a tenor voice, and perfectly true and sweet and mellow, slightly husky with emotion and illness.

The October winds lament around
The castle of Dromore…

Sarah's own soft, clear voice joined his and took on his very note and air, strengthening the faint and fragile notes, lending her voice to the higher notes he couldn't quite reach because of the illness. The last verse was nearly his undoing. He took one hand from Veronica's and reached for his wife's, lacing her fingers with his and tucking their clasped hands discreetly into his sweater pocket.

Take heed, young eaglet, till thy wings
Are feathered fit to soar.

"That song is Lark's babyhood encapsulated," Robert whispered, "it just brings it all back. I miss her so much my heart hurts."

"I miss her just the same. We'll be with her soon, hold on to that…"

“I believe she’ll be with us later today. I don’t see how I could get through another day without her. Do you know ‘All Through the Night’? My Welsh Nan sang that to me all the time when I was a child…”

“You start; I’ll jump in.”

Lullaby after lullaby echoed through the intensive care unit. The staff took it in turns to come and stand by the door and listen. They had seen some terrible deaths in space and wrenching as the death of a young person was, they knew this was a peaceful, gentle way to go out.

Robert and Sarah eventually exhausted their store of lullabies and began upon the rich repertoire of traditional music their daughter had made so popular and so well loved across the Federation.

Will ye no’ come back again?
Better loved ye canna be…

“I drove my staff crazy singing that all over the place when I thought you were lost,” Sarah whispered, and Robert squeezed her hand extra tightly. He might have known that his wife would be singing them home.

“We should sing Lark’s signature song,” he whispered back. “It’s been the theme song of my own life for so long.”

“I need to take a ten one hundred first—.”

“Well, don’t sit there and talk about it, off you go.”

“Are you daft, I need my hand back… “

The silence punctuated only by the hiss of the respirator and the bump, bump of the heart monitor was as oppressive as the realization, slowly coming home to him, that all their efforts to save Veronica’s life, the

rescue, all the work Sarah had done, had not availed. She was so dedicated to the service, and had the makings of a fine officer. She was so young and had her whole life before her. She was well liked by her shipmates, and dear to him and Sarah who thought of her as one of "their kids." And here she was dying without remedy while the pirates who remained lived on to cause misery for others.

The grief and rage rose in his chest like bread dough in a warm kitchen. He felt the dreadful ache of unshed tears in his throat—

It won't do. Won't do at all. Keep calm and carry on, that's the British thing to do. He had a word with himself and then, in a clear and strong voice, began to sing the great Quaker hymn he had been singing since childhood. The words that had a thousand and one tender associations for him, the song that was the key to his very soul, the calm with which he faced the dangers of space travel and the inevitable losses, had faced pain and death and long term suffering, could face anything but the death of the young that was so rending him.

In prison cell, and dungeon vile,
I hear the music ringing,
It sounds an echo in my soul,
How can I keep from singing?

The words were particularly poignant in view of the morning's interview.

He was too focused on the monitors, too lost in his own thoughts, to realize immediately that the hospital deck doors had just hissed open and that the sweet feminine voice that joined his own was… not Sarah's.

No storm can shake my inmost calm,
While to this rock I'm clinging,
If love is lord of all the earth
How can I—"

"*Lark Rise April*!" Sudden realization dawned. He sprang up and held out his arms for the young woman singing in the doorway.

Robert had passed on his own dauntless, adventurous spirit, sweetness of disposition, and endearing eccentricity to his daughter, and that sweet spirit glowed from her face like a flickering flame within an alabaster lamp. He was the rock from whence she was hewn, the source of her own inner light. Like him, she wore a cable knit woolen cardigan, crafted by her Aunt Mary Anne's skilled hands, only hers was worn over a blue silk tunic the color of the evening sky and a flowing skirt of some shimmering material of the same color. Her eyes, like his, were warm wood brown, and she had the same lighted candles in her eyes that he had in his. Her hair, the same maple sugar color as her father's, was plaited over one shoulder but escaped in small wisps around her ears and her forehead. She carried herself with the quiet dignity and sophistication of a well-loved singer, but her popularity had not spoiled her countryish straightforward simplicity and freshness.

Although she had her father's own gentleness and neighborliness, there was also something in her manner that suggested formidable inner strength.

She was running to his side as fast as her flying feet could carry her.

"Oh Tad! Why, Tad!?"

"Hullo, my duck! Hullo, my duck! As I live and breathe, your old father could not have endured another day without you!" She gathered his hands in hers and stood on tiptoe so they could kiss. They held one another for a long time.

"Now, then. Let me look at you." Gently holding her off so he could cup her face in his tender hand, he looked deep into her eyes. "Is it well with the child?"

How it was that the tiny squeaking snuffling white bundle he had held in his arms only yesterday had grown into this paragon of beauty and accomplishment, he was at a loss to understand. The thought eased his aching heart somewhat. He wished, as he had since the first moment that he had held her in his arms, that his love could fence out death and pain, knowing it could not, but knowing too that it would give her the strength to meet these things head on.

"All's well. I'm so happy to be with you again but I'm crying, I can't think why— are you alright, Tad? You're crying, yourself."

"Merely a trifle, my own, I'm just so happy to be with you once again."

"Oh no, your poor shoulder, Commander Kirk met me at the airlock and he told me what happened—oh Tad—"

“I’m alright, Heart’s Dearest. As your Uncle Duncan is always saying, ‘Dinna fash. Dinna fash.’ He was about to gather her close again when Sarah was there beside them.

“Robert, George and Jim need a minute with you, and I need a minute with my daughter.”

“My darling.” Touching her cheek with one finger, he turned to meet George and Jim just outside the hospital deck.

“Report for you, Captain,” George said formally, as the base had begun to bustle with activity from the returning crew. “Our detainees are securely in custody preparing to stand trial.”

“Good, very good. Thank you, George.”

Jim was staring open-mouthed through the hospital doors, where he had caught a glimpse of Lark. George and Robert exchanged laughing glances. This wasn’t the first time Robert had seen the male of the species struck crackers by his daughter.

“That’s my Lark Rise, whom we talked about last night. She is indeed the face that launched a thousand ships,” Robert said, smiling at Jim, “at least she launched *Enterprise*, but she can’t take credit for burning the topless towers of Iliam—”

“Jim, that’s Captain April’s *daughter.* You watch your ass,” George hissed.

“Jim, wait until you hear her sing. It’s alright, George, Lark Rise is most capable of taking care of herself. I raised her that way, eh? Now, Sarah says you needed to have a word?”

“Yes sir. Jim, do your stuff.”

Jim came to attention. “Sir, respectfully request permission to remain with you and Veronica until she.. until she… for as long as she needs us. Just as I promised you I would. Sir.”

“Stand at ease, Jim,” Robert said gently. “You’ll find I’m not much for standing upon ceremony… I am touched by your fealty, if I could have just one moment with your father?”

Holding out his good arm to direct George to walk with him, Robert said quietly, “I don’t want to discourage the boy from doing what he feels is the right thing, but my concern is, grieving parents are going to arrive in a few hours, and this is no place for a child when they do.”

“He’s not a child any longer, Robert. You were right about that. He would like to talk to them. Says he has something for them. I thought it would give him a sense of closure. For my part, I’m just as much her commanding officer as you are. If your place is beside her, so is mine.”

“I have always said, I have the best crew in the Fleet. You two are proving me right.”

“And Carlos says to tell you, he’s on his way, he got as far as the moon when he got the word, and he turned right around.”

“Oh dear, bread and beer,” the captain sighed, “he’s disobeying direct orders. I told him to go on leave and visit his mother. That close call he had shook him up badly, and Sarah wants him to stay off that game leg for a while—”

“Please don’t be hard on him, Robert. He just felt the need we all feel, to say goodbye—”

“No, no, I’m moved. Carlos is a good man. Good officer. Jim, permission granted and welcome aboard. I think it’s important for us to all be together at this time and sustain each other.”

Leading them back into the hospital deck, Robert gathered his crew and family around himself in a single wide gesture.

"Huddle, everyone. This is what we have got to do. We have got to set aside our own grief for the time being and focus on comforting Veronica and sustaining one another. I don't know what she can hear or sense in the state she is in now. Even Sarah isn't sure. But during her last hours here with us, I want her to be surrounded by stories and songs and even laughter. She loved those things in life. There will be time to grieve when she is no longer with us. We haven't often the chance we have got today, for more than a few seconds with those who go on before, and I want us to send her on her way with the very best we have in our hearts."

Earnest brown eyes made contact with each one in turn, making sure they all understood what he was saying. Their equally earnest eyes looking back into his told him that they did, but that it wasn't going to be easy.

As the somber group settled in a circle around Veronica's bedside, there was a sense of rightness, of familiarity, a sense that if they could keep the watch together, everything would somehow be alright. Lark Rise pushed a chair as close to her father's as she could, so she could rest her head on his shoulder and hold his hand and stretched out her other hand for Sarah's. Jimmy looked a little disappointed that both sides of

her were appropriated by her parents but placed himself where he could watch her.

Sensing how emotionally drained her father was, in spite of his earnest admonition to keep their spirits up, seeing the haunted look in Sarah's eyes and knowing how hard she took losing a patient, seeing the pain in George Kirk's eyes as he took in Veronica's state, and recognizing the shock in Jim's as he struggled to comprehend that he was losing a comrade, Lark Rise rose to the occasion.

"Jolly good of you to let me onto the starbase this time, Commander Kirk. Remember last time you saw me you didn't even recognize me, and you wouldn't let me onto the base?"

"Lark," George protested, finding himself able to summon a small chuckle at the memory, "Did you look in the mirror before you disembarked from that cattle freighter? If you had, you would understand why I was reluctant to have you wandering around my starbase."

"What fresh hell has my daughter been raising with you?" Robert too found himself laughing softly.

"Well, she'd worked her passage across the sector on an equine freighter. She had this cap pulled down over her eyes, and she looked like a farmhand in mucky overalls. As soon as she took off her cap and spoke to me, I realized who she was."

"But he wouldn't let me onto the base until I changed out of those mingeing dungarees!" Lark's laugh was as musical as her speaking voice.

"Asked what Captain April's daughter was doing working her passage on a freighter when she could be riding shotgun on a starship

and she just said, ‘where there’s muck, there’s brass,’ whatever that means—”

“And the horses were a nice change from the sheep back home!” Lark finished triumphantly.

“That’s my lass, she’ll stick at nothing, that one.” Robert squeezed her hand. “Darling daughter o’ mine, did you bring your voice with you?”

“I did, Tad, do you think it would be alright?” Lark had been avoiding looking at the pale mutilated form on the diagnostic bed. She had seen some terrible things in her travels; she had joined her parents as they led the relief effort on Tarsus IV few years back to lend her voice to the healing process on that colony; she had seen her father seriously injured; she had held concerts at Fleet hospitals as part of a morale effort, had become a first responder herself for safety in space reasons, but her tender heart, so like her parents, broke at the sight of human suffering.

“Lark,” George began, “what was that song you sang, last time you were on the base, about remembering all the friends fallen like leaves in wintry weather—”

“‘*Oft in the Stilly Night*,’ Commander, my father taught me, it helped him get through some dark times. He says everyone who’s served for any length of time understands that song.”

“Well, I’m convinced it’s going to haunt me to my dying day.”

“That song will,” Robert agreed. “Yes, my darling. It was your Mam’s suggestion that we sing to Veronica, for her comfort.”

He watched as his daughter visibly steeled herself and softly stepped to Veronica’s side.

"I'm Lark, Veronica. I never knew you but I'm your captain's daughter. He spoke very highly of you. What would you like me to sing for you? Perhaps we could begin 'How can I keep from singing' again, Tad? You and me, from the top?" Reaching out her hand for her father's, they began to sing.

The two voices, one slightly husky with illness but rich and mellow, the other as clear and sweet as a thrush's evening vespers, blended like cream in tea. The bond between the singers was nearly palpable. Their listeners sensed that the two who had been singing together for Lark's lifetime were singing from the very depths of their hearts and pouring those depths out for their comfort.

"Let's finish up with *God Save the King*," Lark finally suggested. "At least that's what we English folk are doing. The rest of you rebel Americans can sing whatever drinking song you like for that melody."

Laughter broke out at her words, and the resulting song was indeed a mishmash of the British and American lyrics, but the singers were well warmed up now and their voices soared together in what was surely the first song any of them ever sung.

"That's all the voice your father has got left, Heart's Dearest, but it is doing my heart good to sing with you face to face once again." Life was visibly soaking back into Robert as he drank in his daughter's presence. He was watching her closely but discreetly, trying to gauge her emotional state, knowing what he had to tell her about Daniel would bring her peace in the long run but would devastate her first. He knew that as long as she didn't know the truth about his fate, he was still in a

sense alive to her. There was hope that he could come back to her. It was the finality and the aftermath of having to learn to go on imagining how he had died that was ahead of her. Her father felt he would happily bear any sorrow if it meant he could spare her this.

"You see, Jim," Lark in her touching straightforward way wanted to include everyone, "my father and I have always communicated through music. I've so many times envied you and Sam that your Dad worked close enough to Earth that he could get handwritten letters through to you both. My Tad has always worked all over the galaxy, and it could be weeks or months before his vessels could rendezvous with the mail boat, so correspondence by post wasn't possible for us. And so many times, he couldn't even tell me where he was and what he was working on… you know, only too well, the kind of missions our fathers both take… so we would sing to each other over subspace. It became a kind of a code to us. Oh Tad, that makes me think. Remember that piece by Sir Peter Maxwell Davies you used to play on piano and you wanted me to learn? That piece you always play when you get homesick?"

"'*Farewell to Stromness*?" her father queried.

"I finally got that piece transcribed for my harp. Would you like to hear it?"

"Nothing would give me greater pleasure, dear one. Got your harp along, have you?"

"Yes, on the antigravs." With an air of frank comradeship, she held out a hand to Jim. "Want to give me a hand with my instruments?"

"Happy to." Jim jumped up with alacrity and followed Lark Rise through the hospital doors.

“So… how come you didn’t follow your father into Starfleet?” He ventured as the two walked down the corridor to the cargo bay where Lark had stowed her instruments after signing off the freighter.

“Well, I’m named for a piece of music. *The Lark Ascending* by Ralph Vaughn Williams; Tad’s most favorite composer. So, of course a woman named after a piece of music had to pursue a career in music!” Lark’s laughter was as musical as her singing voice. “That’s the short answer. The long answer? Starfleet is so much who my father is… he wanted me to find my own path. And I think he always wondered how his own life would have been different had he pursued a career in music instead of Starfleet. And…” her voice became quieter, more thoughtful… “I’m all Tad has. His only living child, I mean. He’s got all the friends there are, but he was very lonely for a proper family before he and Mam found each other again. If I joined Starfleet and something happened to me, I think he would just lay down and die. I love my father so much, Jim. I’d not do that to him. He never stood in my way, he never told me that he wouldn’t support me to attend the Academy, but… I guess I heard another call, you know?”

Jim nodded. His brother Sam had also heard another call; he wasn’t following their father into Starfleet, either.

Lark went on pensively, “And he was that relieved when I came and told him that I wanted to go to Magdalen College and study music, instead of following him into the Academy. That was when he was first working on the starship program and for the first time he was working on Earth and we could be together every day. I’ve looked back on the time we had together ever since.”

Jim took that in, and then asked, “Why do you call him ‘Tad’?”

“It’s Welsh for Father. You see, Jim, I’m one quarter Welsh, one quarter Shetland Isle, one quarter English Midlands, and one quarter Yorkshire. When I get all in a ferment, Tad says it’s my English side disagreeing with my Welsh side and my Scot side disapproving of everything else!” She laughed aloud.

“Was it…” utterly enchanted by her, Jim had to clear his throat before he could speak. “Was it hard, growing up with your dad away all the time?”

“Was it hard for you?” Lark turned the question back at him. “Then you know how hard it is. I remember worrying so much about his safety. How sometimes he’d be on a dangerous mission and we wouldn’t hear from him, and my Aunt Mary Anne and I would be waiting up all night long thinking nothing but the worst news was coming. We would sing the old Royal Navy song ‘Hear us when we cry to thee for those in peril of the sea.’ And how we felt when the transmission came in and it was Tad to tell us he was alright and he loved us.” Lark’s eyes were sparkling with tears. “And then there was the time he didn’t come back safely. After the *Heart of Oak* was destroyed and we didn’t know for days if he was dead or alive… and when he did come back, he was in hospital and in such awful pain at first he couldn’t have me with him for more than a few moments at a time. And then he was in physical therapy for months learning to walk again. And he was so, so sad about the people he lost. He went through this horrid dark time when he would wake up shaking and crying every night and he didn’t want anyone to know it… he wouldn’t even talk to Mam Sarah about it and they were close… I’m sure, being your dad is in security, you know exactly what I’m talking about…”

“But… what I mean is. You guys are *close*. Like, really close. How could you become that close if he was never around for you?”

“He was, Jim. He was always there. He’d always say, he was the summer breeze blowing through my hair. He was the bloom on the bog rosemary. He was the song of the skylark. He was the sound of distant water. He was the snowflakes falling on my face. He was the leaf blown across my path. Everything that he loved evoked him. He was always there in the marked passages of books we read together, in the music scores with his handwritten notes, in the songs he taught me. And when he could get leave… and you know a Starfleet Officer’s time isn’t his own… he spent every second with me. We did walking tours all over England. We went to the seaside in Cornwall. We went fishing in the Cotswolds. We climbed hills in the Peak District. We sang together in the Coventry Cathedral choir. We played duets on the piano. We helped Aunt Mary Anne through lambing season. My Tad isn’t keen on London, but he took me anyway, for the plays and art galleries and concerts. He filled the time we had together so that we could live on what we had had when we had to say goodbye. Didn’t your dad do all this stuff with you boys?”

“Yeah… I’m just now realizing how much… I didn’t appreciate it the way I should have…”

“It’s been hard to share my father with the galaxy,” Lark said slowly, “but it’s good, too. He’s always been my father first and Captain April second, if you know what I mean. When I was born, he came within the width of a gnat’s eyebrow of resigning his commission and taking the vows to become a monk, so he could have me with him. Mam wanted him to give up space and settle on Earth, but Jonathan… that’s Admiral

Archer, he and Tad were like father and son… wouldn't let him give up on his dream of space travel. So, then he was going to serve aboard the freighters so he could have me with him, but Aunty Mary Anne wouldn't hear of it. She said space was no place for a child and that I'd be better off planet side until I could make a choice."

Jim nodded; his father had had to make the same wrenching choice. Work in space and be separated from family, or work on Earth and give up space? Bring family out to space with him and expose them to the terrible risks? He was only now realizing how difficult those choices had been for his father and Captain April.

Lark's musical voice continued. "He's always been there when I need him, but he's always known that when he can't be there, I'm surrounded by loving family. Both my mother's people and my father's and of course, Mam… Dr. April to *you.* . I'm… " she laughed… "I'm jammy! Here we are. Here's my Celtic harp. Are you musical, Jim? Want me to teach you a few chords?"

"Tad, know what I just realized? Jim's by way of being my godbrother! He's your godson— Tad?!"

Sarah was sitting alone beside Veronica as Lark and Jim carefully guided the Celtic harp into the room. Her head was bowed with weariness but her hand-held Veronica's steadfastly.

"Ambassador Sarek had just arrived on Starbase and wanted a word with your father."

Sarah repressed a shiver. She had watched in astonishment as all the animation, loving warmth, and gentle forbearance had dropped from her husband's face at the very mention of Ambassador Sarek's name. She had no idea what had transpired between the two on their last mission together, but she knew she needed to find out.

Quickly, to cover her shiver, "Commander Kirk went along to make sure everything was alright. He's been especially protective of your father since they got back, Lark, I'm not sure if he's worried about something, or it's just a bit of post-traumatic stress—"

"It's probably because he works on a Starbase and knows what can happen and Tad's not his best right now, he's hurt and sick—"

"And he should be in bed with a good book, resting, instead of ramming around all over this base trying to fulfill what he feels is his bounden duty—" Sarah's voice was sharp with worry and she bit her lip. More softly, "Robert is a good man. He's so good. I only wish just once he'd think of— talk of the devil."

"Someone taking my name in vain?" Singing with his daughter had reduced his voice to a harsh whisper, and the hoarfrost that had fallen over his gentle face melted only when his eyes rested on his family. "I mashed us some tea—" setting a carafe on a nearby table— "and scored us some lentil soup. We must keep up our strength. Lark, lentil Mulligatawny still your favorite? It's your Mam's and mine."

"Oh, thank you, Tad, Heaven."

Robert prepared tea for his family with calm deliberation, ignoring the sideways looks from his wife and daughter, until finally Sarah, cup in hand, exploded, "Well?"

“Very deep subject, dear.” Despite his solemnity, Robert had a streak of mischief in him.

“Well, what is *at* you two? You’ve worked together for years, always had such a mutual admiration society going on, always seemed in such harmony with each other—”

“The Ambassador and I have had a bit of a row,” Robert said simply. “It— it is neither the time nor the place to discuss this. Lark Rise, we never made it to Faramond. Could you describe it so we can imagine we were there, too?”

CHAPTER 13: WHAT TO DO WITH THE TIME GIVEN TO US

Veronica's parents wired in to let them know that their journey was delayed by solar flares. Captain April ordered anyone who needed to rest to go do so, and that anyone needing one on one time with him need only ask.

Jimmy swallowed a couple times before saying, "Captain— got a minute?"

"Of course I have, Jim. Come over here next to me. Dear ones, Carlos should be arriving any moment. Go and meet him, eh? Now Jim, I've got my ears on."

"Well…" clearly avoiding what was really on his mind, he began, "I keep meaning to ask you, how's that little kid Kevin doing? Kevin Riley, I mean? From Tarsus IV? Dad said you and Dr. April stay in close touch with him?"

The captain's gentle face melted into a warm smile. "I am so glad you asked. Sarah's Irish cousins in Cork opened their home to the boy. Sarah and I dearly wanted to make a home for him ourselves, but her Irish cousins have children Kevin's age, and they felt that ready-made siblings might aid in his healing process. It's been, what— three years? It's one of those events that will always feel like yesterday… you know, Sarah and I and the *Enterprise* were there for seventy-nine days. To this day I feel sometimes that we should never have left. So many little hands I should still be holding." The captain looked down at his own hands, Veronica's clasped warmly in them, as if he could see the tiny hands of

those bereaved children tucked safely in them. There was an ache in his voice.

"Sir…" Jim's voice was husky, realizing that his godfather was speaking to him as an equal instead of a snotty kid. "Sir, respectfully suggest you're holding the hand that needs you the most right now."

"You are right, my boy. Even a starship captain can only be in one place at a time. So, Kevin, he's getting high and lofty in his old age." The captain chuckled softly, "Yes, he's all of six and he's forgotten more than I ever knew! He was telling his adopted cousins, when they were teasing him a bit about being adopted… you know how children will… Sean and Aoifa don't let it go too far… 'your parents had to take you, but they *chose* me!' So, he knows he's wanted and loved, which is what a child needs to heal and thrive. Sarah— Dr. April— believes that if he can begin his healing process at this young age, we may not see quite the extent of psychological trauma we saw in some of the older kids. Speaking of which. You know if you ever need to talk to someone about that day, I was there the day after it happened, and I'm here to listen. For you, always, I'm ten ten on the side." At Jim's puzzled look, he explained, "That's freighter crew talk meaning 'hailing frequencies open.'"

"Thank you, sir. At least you and Dr. April got to make a difference by being there. Actually…"

His godfather paused for a moment, listening, waiting. Jim was struggling to find words. Robert let him struggle for a bit before saying gently,

"It hurts, doesn't it?"

“Yeah.” Jim felt a sudden rush of tears in his eyes. The captain’s eyes were compassionate as he watched him and waited for the next question.

“Does it get any easier? When you get older? I mean… do you get used to losing people? You’ve been through a lot… your daughter and I were talking …”

“No, Jim, it doesn’t get any easier. I dare say it gets harder. You wouldn’t want to get used to losing people, would you? What would that say about you? What would it say about the sanctity of life? What would it say about what these people mean to you?”

“I… I guess not. But… how do we…”

“How do we get through it? Jim, the only way out is through, my boy. I’m sorry. I haven’t got any words that will take the pain away. I wish I had. What I can tell you, from the perspective of a man who has lost a good many people who were close to him, is, Find something to hold onto. Something to cross to safety with.”

“Sir—?”

Robert’s free hand reached up to touch the Coventry cross of nails he always wore under his uniform tunic. Tonight, off duty as captain and on duty as chaplain, he wore it openly. Softly he recited,

I could give all to Time, except—Except what I myself have held.

But why declare

Those things forbidden that while the Customs slept

I have crossed to Safety with?

For I am There,

And what I would not part with I have kept.

"In English, please, sir, I mean, American English?"

"That is American English, Jim. It's your New England poet, Robert Frost." Robert's warm, amused smile faded as he went on, "He wrote those lines about the death of his wife and child. I myself have crossed to safety, after the death of my own wife and child, with this cross of nails. It was fashioned from the nails of the old Coventry Cathedral which, you will no doubt remember from history class, was destroyed by German bombers in WW2. I grew up in the shadow of the ruins. I sing in the choir of the 'new' cathedral of reconciliation every time I go Home. My Grandfather gave this cross to me when I first went into the service, to remind me of what my life's work should be, that of peace and reconciliation, and as a reminder of the waste and futility of warfare."

The look in Jim's eyes told the captain that his words were hitting home. Careful not to overwhelm the boy, he went on, in a lighter tone,

"To give you another example of something I myself have crossed to safety with, this old woolen friend of mine. My Nan made this for me out of wool from her own sheep. She sheared and spun the wool herself. She knit this with her own hands. When I look at it, I see my Nan's face, explaining, 'this is an hourglass cable stitch, and this is how to knit it. This is a rope cable stitch, this is an antler cable stitch…' I can still smell the scent of heather and woodsmoke in the wool, can feel the warmth of a baby lamb in my arms. In short, this cardigan is a bit of home to me. It evokes the places I love most. I can touch it and remember the hands that fashioned it and feel a connection to my Nan once again."

“That’s… kind of like my dad and his letters…”

“That’s exactly right, Jim. You can cross to safety with your dad’s letters. It’s not too late, Jim, to catch up on your reading of them.”

Jim looked up in sudden hope. “Sir— isn’t it? I mean— quitting reading them was—”

“It’s never too late to correct a mistake, Jim. Think of the insights into your father’s journey you will glean as you prepare to enter into the Academy.”

“Sir—” Jim’s voice was nearly a whisper— “I— how can I go to the Academy now? Without her?”

Robert looked thoughtful. “A bit like being lost in a blizzard, eh?”

Jim blinked. “What does—”

“In grief, it can be nearly impossible to see our way forward. Have you ever been lost in a blizzard?”

“Not lost exactly but I’ve been out in a good Iowa blizzard. When were you ever in a blizzard, sir? I thought it never snowed in England, just rained all the time?”

Robert chuckled, “You’ll have to ask Sarah about the time I got lost in a Yorkshire snowstorm and she had to come find me. This was thirty years ago but the things she said to me make my ears tingle to this day. We get a good deal of snow in the North. Not so much in the Midlands where I grew up. But yes, I know what it is to be in a snowstorm, blinded, deafened by the roar of the wind, barely able to stand up against the storm… that’s what grief feels like at first. It feels physically impossible to go on living without the one lost. Then… gradually… and there’s no timeline for this… the snow begins to let up. The wind blows more softly. You can make out the distant shapes of houses and the glow of lights in

windows. At intervals the snow picks up again and slashes your face and takes your breath, but you have hope, you've caught a glimpse of the home lights, and you keep walking toward them. And gradually the snow slows… and slows… and finally stops. And the wind ceases to be a foe and becomes a friend. And the sun comes out and makes rainbow sparkles on the snow. And the moonlight makes the snow a marble palace. And so incomparable beauty has come from a life-threatening storm. Life's storms are like that too."

"Captain, my dad is right. You are a poet."

Robert chuckled, "Ah, behold a mute, inglorious Milton in your captain."

Jim smiled back and then tried to speak and stumbled over the words.

"I'm still listening, Jim."

"It's just that…" Jim took a moment, floundered, then finally blurted, "I didn't think it would end this way for her, you know? We were going to go see the *Victory* together… you know, Admiral Nelson's ship in England…"

The captain nodded; he knew it well. His own forebears were shipbuilders and British Royal Navy, and he took quiet pride in that.

Jim went on, his voice not quite as steady as he could wish, "Starfleet was going to fix her… they can fix anything…"

"Not *quite* everything," the captain whispered, but so softly that Jim did not hear.

"We were going to study together; she was going to help me with my entrance exams… sir… I can't believe it's ending like this for her—"

"End? Oh no, my boy. This isn't the end for her."

Jim looked up with sudden hope. “Is she going to get better, then? Can Dr. April do something for her, after all?”

“No, Jim. Without resorting to medical terminology, her body can’t support life without the aid of the machines. Sarah says we were very lucky to have what time we did with her. Later tomorrow when her parents arrive, we are going to take her off the life support and let her questing, valiant, beautiful spirit go free to explore the universe, unfettered by a broken body.”

“But— isn’t that like… killing her?”

“Jim,” Robert said gently, “look at her. Do you think this is living? What she is experiencing right now? Is this what she would have wanted?”

Jim choked out, “As old people say, it’s better than the alternative.”

“And what alternative is that? Oh Jimmy…” Robert sighed, passed his hand over his eyes. “I don’t speak of this lightly. But I have stood at the gates of death, more than once. I don’t mean a close scrape. I mean right up against it. And I saw something Beyond so beautiful that ever since I have been longing to go back.”

“What did you see, sir?” Jim didn’t want to look at his captain, but he felt him next to him as an anchor to windward.

“Words are failing me. I’ll have to read it to you. Let me find my kit bag.” A brief rummage and he came up triumphantly with his reading spectacles, which he settled on his nose, and held out an antique gilt bound copy of *The Fellowship of the Ring* by J. R. R. Tolkien. “I know you had a birthday last month and I brought you something. Sarah and I were off on assignment, and I didn’t get to see you, but I thought of you. Books are lifelong friends of mine and it is my hope they will be to you

also. Ah, here we are. '*A pale light behind a grey rain curtain, and growing stronger to turn the veil all to glass and silver, until at last it was rolled back, and a far green country opened before him under a swift sunrise.'*"

There was a long silence as Jim digested the words. "That's not so bad."

"No," Robert said softly, lighted candles glowing in his eyes as he looked at his godson, "no. It isn't. It's a sweet thought that there's something so beautiful on the other side of suffering like this. Let me read you another passage… to whet your appetite a bit, so to speak."

Straightening his spectacles, he turned pages with a hand that cherished books.

"These are the words I have lived by: *'Many that live deserve death*.'" Looking up at Jim, he commented, "We know a few of those, eh?"

"Yes sir, we do."

More slowly, the captain read, "*'And there are some that die that deserve life.'* We know a few of them, too."

Jim couldn't speak. They were both looking at Veronica.

"'*Can you give it to them?*'" Captain April looked up from the book and his eyes seemed to look straight through Jim. "*'Then do not be hasty to deal out death in judgement.*' Take that with you, Jim. Don't let the dirt in your soul and the bit of the gangster quite crowd out pity. For—" looking back at the book— "*'My heart tells me that Gollum has a part to play in it, for good or for evil, before this is over. It was pity that stayed Bilbo's hand… and the pity of Bilbo may rule the fate of many.'*"

Many years later, Robert April's wise words would come back to save Jim's life, more than once. But "*even the very wise cannot see all ends."*

The captain drew a deep breath and opened to another page. "The encounter with the pirates brought this to mind:

"'*'After a defeat and a respite, the Shadow takes another shape and grows again.'*

'I wish it need not have happened in my time.'

'So do all who live to see such times. But that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given to us.'"

Feeling that he had said enough, Robert proffered the book to Jimmy, and then held out his good arm. Jim moved closer so that the captain could place his arm around his shoulders and took the book. Opening to the frontispiece, he saw the simple inscription… "*For Jim, from your affectionate godfather, Robert April. May it be a light in dark places, when all other lights go out."*

"Thank you sir. I can hardly wait to read this."

Robert felt the tension slowly leave the young shoulders as Jim relaxed under his arm. Long quiet moments passed as they sat together in companionable silence, letting everything they had talked about settle. After a bit, Robert looked up from his own musings to realize that Jim was leaning against him, the boy's tousled head resting on his fatherly shoulder. His arm tightened and his gentle hand cupped more closely around his godson's shoulder as he realized the boy had fallen asleep, worn out from emotion. It was a sign of profound trust, that this boy who did not readily trust others would feel so utterly comfortable

around him. The warmth filled his chest, eased the smothering ache there. He realized that he too was very tired, and he bowed his head over his godson's.

He was startled awake by a tentative touch on his shoulder. It was George.

"Shhhh!" He whispered, nodding at Jim, still asleep on his shoulder.

"I'm sorry to wake you, but Carlos wanted to see you. I think Jim here has been too worried about Veronica to get any sleep—"

"I wasn't asleep, I was resting my eyes. And I love this. It's been a long time since I had a child fall asleep in my arms. Lark Rise wouldn't sleep anywhere else when she was little. Please, George, tell Carlos to come see me."

"Sir— can I talk to you? I don't want to disturb young Jimmy—"

Robert read the distress in his helmsman's dark eyes. He gently set Veronica's cool, pale hand down on the sheet and stretched his hand out to grip Carlos's.

"You may always come to me, my boy. Just keep your voice down to a dull roar so we don't disturb Jim. He very badly needs this." Keeping his own voice to a husky whisper, Robert looked with fatherly tenderness at the youthful head resting against him.

"Sir—" the Spanish man's round face was shadowed. "Sir, you know how loyal I am to you—

He did know. The helm officer had been with him since the very first mission of the *Enterprise*.

"I recommended you," he said gently.

"Sir, you— you *recommended* me?"

"My boy, pull up a chair and talk to me in comfort. Yes, Carlos, your Captain is a very selfish man."

"No, you aren't sir, I've served with you long enough to state that categorically—"

"But I am when it comes to sharing my officers. Annie-Laurie approached me about a month ago, asking if I knew of a helm officer with a lot of experience in combat and deep space, and I almost forgot your name. Quite deliberately, you see."

"But sir, I didn't get the communique from Captain Maguire until I was on my way home just a few hours ago—"

"It took me that long to make up my mind. I…. just at present the future of my time as Captain of the *Enterprise* is uncertain. And I don't want to hold you back. You are one of the best officers I have ever had the honor of serving with. I have put you in for special commendations and promotion, my boy."

"Sir, you didn't have to do that—"

"Your transfer to the *Vimy Ridge* as she prepares to return to patrol is my vote of confidence in you. Accept this assignment with no hesitation if it is what you want. I believe you'll be happy on the 'Auld Vimy.' Annie-Laurie's a good captain. A good woman. Tougher than tripe Maritime Canadian, but fair all day long. 'Annie-get-your-gun' we used to call her. Go in peace, and may God go with you."

“And also with you, sir. And sir… it’s been an honor, serving with you.”

“Likewise, Carlos. Best of British luck, dear fellow.”

CHAPTER 14: WILL THE CIRCLE BE UNBROKEN?

It was time to say Goodbye to Veronica, and every one of the small "fellowship of Liaison Cutter 4," as they called themselves, felt that the last long quiet hours spent around her bed in what Captain April called "Quaker Meeting" were not nearly enough time with her. The songs had faded into silence, the stories had been told, and no one felt they could muster a smile, let alone a laugh. When the word came that Veronica's parents ship had arrived and was now docking, Captain April instructed his crew,

"Let us all join hands in a circle around her and sing one last song for her. And then each one of us will say Goodbye to her in turn. We must leave her parents to spend time with her in privacy, and we must not rush their process. Everyone know 'Will the Circle Be Unbroken'?"

"Near as makes n' matter," Sarah murmured.

"I do, sir."

"I can't carry a tune in a bucket but I'll fake it till I make it, Robert."

"I'll play it on my harp," Lark whispered, taking her place at her instrument.

Taking a last earnest look at each one, Robert began, leading the singing:

Will the circle be unbroken,

By and by, Lord, by and by?

There's a better home a-waiting,
In the sky, Lord, in the sky.

As the last plaintive chords of the harp trembled into silence, Robert April slowly moved to Veronica's side. He took her hand in his one last time and bent close to speak softly to her.

"Go ahead of us and be the gracious star that guides our moving, Veronica, shine upon us with fair aspect. Go in peace. You are greatly beloved." Stooping close, he gravely kissed her on her white forehead. One last gentle touch on her cheek and he stepped away to let Sarah take his place. The tears were running down his cheeks.

He reached up to wipe them away, but Sarah was faster. She gripped his wrist and whispered,

"No. Don't wipe them away, Robert. Don't hide them. You are a leader. You must lead your crew in grief as you do in everything else. Show them how to weep unabashedly."

"It's *shameful*—"

"Shameful? To weep for a dying comrade? I'd be ashamed not to. If you Englishmen were as ashamed of your failings as you are of your tears you'd all be a much wiser lot."

She turned away to whisper her own goodbyes.

Robert turned to face his friends. He stood sword straight, chin lifted, the tears on his face glittering like stars, eloquent hands held out at his sides instead of tucked in his pockets as usual. He said quietly, quoting Gandalf, *"'I will not say, Do not weep: for not all tears are an evil.'"*

Jimmy had very seldom seen a man, especially a great man like Captain April, openly in tears like this. He felt the same unpleasant sensation he had once felt when he had seen his father break down at his grandfather's funeral. But George reached for his captain. The two men gripped each other's arms in shared sorrow.

Holding out his hands to his wife and daughter, Robert gave one last glance toward Veronica's bedside before achingly turned away to let the others have their own goodbyes. Together, the little fellowship walked out of the hospital deck to meet Veronica's parents.

"Mr. and Mrs. Hall… could I have a word?"

Jimmy Kirk had been standing at a respectful distance and now moved forward. He had watched his captain hold out both hands to the grieving parents, speak to them in solemn and gentle tones of their daughter's courage and service and sacrifice, convey his heartfelt sorrow for them. The vulnerable side of him that wept at the bedside of a dying crew member and sang for their comfort had retreated behind the front of the steadfast, professional, but wholly compassionate commanding officer.

"Sir, Starfleet Forensics retrieved this from the pirate ship and Dr. April helped me clean it up… I thought you might like to have it. It's something you can cross to safety with."

Jimmy held out a small white package to Veronica's parents. Inside was Veronica's prosthetic hand.

Hearing a soft sob from Mrs. Hall and a choked cry from Mr. Hall, Robert turned away to give them their privacy. Locking eyes with Sarah, his eyes asking her, "Why didn't you *tell* me—"

Too moved to speak, Sarah only shrugged.

"We'd like to see her," Mrs. Hall finally managed to say, "and Captain— Dr. April— thank you for staying with her. Thank you for everything."

The parents put their arms around each other, and disappeared behind the hospital doors.

Robert visibly slumped and allowed himself a long, anguished sigh. "Dear God in Heaven, that gets harder every time."

Watching him, Jimmy had a sudden realization of how many, many times his captain must have performed this painful duty. *So, this is command,* he thought. *Not just making the big decisions. It's informing families that their child is dying.* He thought uncomfortably of his own mother and suddenly, he couldn't wait to see her again.

Gathering his composure, knowing himself to be the rock of refuge of his small fellowship, Robert once again held out his hands for his family.

"Shall we hold them in the Light together?"

"Sir, we're not Quakers, we don't know how—"

Lark stepped in. "Jim, when I, as a Friend, say that I hold someone in the Light, I mean I envision them bathed in healing light. I visualize the Light reaching all the hurting, broken, and dark places, warming and comforting them. That doesn't mean everything gets fixed and is all better, that doesn't always happen—"

"In this life," a voice intoned. The voice belonged to no one in the fellowship, no one visible. But no one seemed startled by it. Robert thought he saw a flash of brown robe and cowled hood of the dearly

familiar Franciscan monks, but when he turned to look, the glimpse was gone.

"— but that there's light, strength, and comfort for the journey," Lark finished.

"Well, that's not so hard," George muttered. As a security man, a man of action, the hospital vigil had been an uncomfortable anomaly in his life. What good was a security commander in times of medical crisis? This wasn't his battle and he knew it. But now, the long vigil finally over, standing shoulder to shoulder with his friend Carlos and his captain, noting that Jimmy had finally managed to slip into the circle next to Lark, he realized that although he wasn't sure about this "holding in the Light" business, he felt oddly peaceful.

Oddly peaceful and… all at once… oddly overwhelmed with sadness and foreboding as he looked at his captain and friend. He had the completely unreasonable conviction that he was never going to see him again. *A ghost just walked over my grave,* he told himself dismissively, but his savage Celtic blood had given him the gift or the curse of premonitions, and they had never yet been wrong.

"May it be so." The captain raised his head. "Now. I think after all this a nice cup of tea would do us all good."

"Rob, I hate to say it, but I've got to get back to the Starbase, and I need to get Jim home and have a word with Wynn before I do that—"

"And my own Mum is looking for me," Carlos added.

"Very well. We have come to the parting of our fellowship. Carlos, my boy, safe travels. My warm regards to your mother. I… am so thankful you are going back to her. George—"

A long, solemn handshake joined the two men. Something in George's gaze prompted Robert to gesture him to one side and ask quietly, "All well?"

"After a scene like this, you can ask me if all's well?" George sighed. "Yeah. For you and me it is. For them…" he nodded at the hospital room doors.

"There is no greater pain than losing a child. I *know.* My heart goes out to them."

"Yeah, mine too. Well. Thank you for everything. I… I got my son back. I'm indebted to you. And… I've got to know you better in the last few days than I have in the past few years and I just want to say, it's been an honor, serving with you."

"Don't talk like that, eh? Will I see you at the service?"

George shook his head. "I can't make it. My commander is recalling me, and I need to report as soon as I get Jim safely home. I… I don't think I can attend one more…"

"I understand. Listen, I just talked to my sister, and our family is going to be reunited for Christmas for the first time in twenty years. Would you and your family like to spend the holiday with us?"

"I— we'd like that. Until then— you take care of yourself, okay? Do everything Sarah tells you—"

"I will. And I'm proud to have served with you too, George. A stalwart officer and steadfast friend."

George nodded awkwardly, then turned to say Goodbye to Sarah. He surprised her by offering a fierce hug and muttered in her ear while he had her close, "Take good care of him, Sarah, you read me?"

“I’ll try, George. It’s like juggling soot some days. The man sets his face as flint when he sees his bounden duty before him—”

Robert didn’t catch his wife’s sideways glance. He was saying Goodbye to Jim.

“Jim, what we talked about. I’ll arrange it for you. Passing the entrance exams, that’s entirely up to you.”

“Yes, sir. Maybe I’ll have you for one of my classes.”

“Communications 101. Be there or be square. Jim… one last thing…”

“Sir?”

Robert had to clear his throat before he could speak. “When you get home… hug your Mum real tight, see?”

“I sure will, sir.”

“Good man.” Robert offered Jim a warm handshake, and patted his hand once he got hold of it. “Go with God, my friends.”

Veronica’s parents had asked him to speak at her memorial. As her former teacher and commanding officer, they felt he would have words to honor their daughter. He had pleaded lower respiratory illness and inability to trust his voice, but had asked if he might play piano.

He looked out over the faces of the mourners before him in the shuttlebay of Starbase One. So many mourners. So many young people in broken grief clinging to each other. Veronica’s parents were so surrounded by support people that he couldn’t even see them. One minute each face was clear to his sight, the next they had strangely all blurred together. At his side, Sarah was weeping softly. He put his arm around her and drew her head down on his shoulder.

This is the reality of space exploration, he thought. *All those young people… those hundreds of young people who came through my classes, served their requisite training cruises on my ship, and went proudly off to their assignments. How many of their lives ended in space, just as Veronica's did.*

And the conviction, so deep inside that it did not yet have words, solidified. He was no longer the captain for the Starship Program. Someone who had seen less death and destruction was needed to carry on from here. Someone less battle-scarred. The lingering wheeze in his chest and the ache in his long-ago injured leg reminded him that his years of service had left their scars. *But I get to continue*, he thought, *and this bright young life does not. And I don't understand why.*

"It has been my experience," he began huskily, when it was his turn to speak, "that the living need comfort more than the dead need honor. That is… certainly true for me today. And as I have always found my best comfort in music, I wanted to share some with you." He moved to the piano placed specifically for him. "Many years ago, Maurice Ravel wrote a suite of music called *'Les Tombeau de Couperin.'* It is a suite divided into six movements, and the composer dedicated each movement to the memory of a friend who had fallen in the Great War. Deep breath. "The music has been criticized down the years for not being sad. Instead, it is reflective, joyous, lively in spots, and almost unbearably poignant, but it is not sad. The composer wanted to honor and remember who his friends were in life, not in death. In response to that criticism, he said, 'The dead are sad enough in their eternal silence.'" Another deep breath. "This is *Minuet*, from *Le Tombeau de Couperin*. This is the piece

I felt represented our dear sister Veronica in life. As I play, let us remember her together. We will never forget her."

As he played, he heard muffled sobs throughout the room. He was grateful he knew the piece by heart and by muscle memory and only needed an occasional glance at the music; his own eyes were stinging. His wife had covered her face with her hands.

He could only hope that his music, the last gift he could give Veronica, gave some comfort to those who remembered her and had to go on without her.

INTERMEZZO: DEBRIEFING AND MEDICAL LEAVE

"My darling…"

Several days later, settled in between her parents in the shuttle craft for the long journey Home, Lark Rise felt her heart full to overflowing as she drank in the dear nearness of those she loved best in the galaxy. Leaning her head on her father's shoulder and holding her mother's hand, she felt as suffused in content as it was possible to be under the circumstances.

Her father's voice startled her to alertness. He had been on duty as chaplain for Veronica's parents for days, and had spoken at Veronica's memorial. They had all seen them off on their heartbroken way home. Perhaps that was why he sounded so sorrowful…

"What is it, Tad?"

He saw the look of heightened alarm in her eyes and would have given anything to spare his daughter what he now had to tell her. His hand squeezed hers a bit more closely.

"My darling, my heart is breaking to have to tell you this…" very quietly, he told her the news about Daniel. "You knew him better than anyone in the galaxy, Lark Rise. You know how valiant he was. He would have died most bravely, trying to defend his crew mates."

All the light and joy went out of her face in a moment, like a candle that had been quenched by a high wind. Her eyes were wide and

stricken, but no sound slipped past her white lips. Robert held out his arms for her, but she shook her head, left her seat, and ran aft.

"My little child, come to me," Robert cried out to her, speaking in the tender Welsh he had learned as a child, the loving words she had learned from his lips in babyhood. Without looking back, she gestured that she needed to be alone right now.

"Dear God, why won't she let me comfort her!" he mourned, turning achingly away from the door that had closed behind his daughter.

In no less pain than her husband, but trying to be what she had always been, a buffer between the father and daughter to explain each to the other, Sarah said softly, "When she's really hurting she just needs to try and come to terms with it in private. She will let you in when she's ready. You're like that too, always have been."

"Sarah, does she know her parents are weeping for her?"

Sarah put her head down on his shoulder to hide her own tears.

"She knows, Robert. She knows. But we can't cry her tears for her."

Some time later, Lark Rise emerged from the cargo bay. Her cheeks were flushed, her lashes stuck together with tears, but she wore her chastened, subdued composure and bravery like a cloak. She settled herself on her father's knee like the little girl she had once been and rested against him. Sarah put her arms around them both and the three of them sat in silence for a long time.

"I should be grateful for the time I had with him instead of sorrowful for losing him, I know that," Lark finally whispered, "Daniel would have known a Yiddish proverb for it—"

“My darling, no one knows better than the Jewish people the importance of mourning rituals. How many times have I told you about the time your Mam and I prayed with Daniel at the Wailing Wall after Tarsus IV?”

Lark sniffed, and inelegantly wiped her nose on her sweater sleeve. Her father silently passed her a clean handkerchief from his own pocket.

“The thing I hate about blubbing is that it makes your *nose* run… why isn’t there any poetry about mucous when there is loads about tears—”

“You’re asking a question that’s never been answered, my darling,” Sarah said huskily.

“Now then, my heart, we need to make plans. Your Mam and I need to debrief at Headquarters—”

“And I need to go up to Boston and be with Daniel’s family for a bit. It’s best if they hear this from me, face to face.”

Starfleet Admiralty, San Francisco

“Robert, thank God. You’re home, safe and sound. How’s Sarah?”

The stern but benevolent face of Admiral Komack shone like a beacon of home. Robert felt his hand nearly crushed between both of the admiral’s, and returned the pressure as warmly as possible.

“She’s well. Sends her regards.”

Sarah had actually described the Admiralty as “a job lot of witless gormless daft ha’ports of neither use nor ornament, who couldn’t

organize a piss-up in a brewery." Robert had laughed and told Sarah he was meeting with Admiral Komack.

"Eh up!" she had warned, "'e'd peel an orange in his pocket, that one." Sarah had a poor opinion of the Admiralty. She said she'd had to clean up after them one too many times.

"Give her my compliments on her latest paper for the *Lancet,* would you? Brilliant. I couldn't understand a word of it."

"I can't either, but I am so proud of her. Everyone who works with me has taken it in turns to inform me that my boasting about my wife is getting to be all a bit much…"

"You've got the right. She's brilliant and crazy."

"She married me, didn't she?"

"That she did. Oh, I'm sorry, you're hurt— sit, sit. Coffee?"

"If it isn't any trouble, coffee doesn't agree with me— cup of tea?"

Admiral Komack spoke the word to the hovering aide, and then took his place across the desk from his old friend. "You look absolutely exhausted," he said without preface.

"I'm fine, James, truly. I've been ill—"

"I've got Sarah's request for medical leave for you here on my desk— ah, Jessica, thank you."

The aide was back with steaming cups of jasmine tea for them both. She smiled and stole a surreptitious glance at Captain April as she slipped away. Captain April had the reputation in Starfleet of approachability, affability, and kindness toward the lower ranking officers, and was said to have an especial soft spot for enlisted crew. More than the achievements and accolades he had gathered over the

years, this had made him popular amongst the young people of Starfleet.

"But before I get into all that. I read your report regarding the *Shark* and the Moss family," Admiral Komack went on when they were alone, "and I want to say, on behalf of all of Starfleet, thank you."

"I didn't do so very much," Robert protested. He thought of the grey pallor of Carlos Florida's rosy face, the anguish of George Kirk, the final gesture of Jim Kirk, and with an ache that he felt would never entirely subside, of Veronica's final sacrifice. What had he contributed besides holding the crew together? He had not even been able to save Veronica's life…

"A lot of troubling questions have been answered about that area. A good many merchantmen are sleeping more peacefully on their cargo runs, and a good many families are finally finding closure in knowing what happened to their loved ones."

Robert thought of his daughter, who was sitting *shiva* with Daniel's parents in Boston. *Now the grieving process begins,* he thought. *For so many.* Veronica's face as he had last seen it in life superimposed itself over his daughter's and for a moment, their faces were one. *Yes, mysteries had been cleared up. But at what cost?*

"And now," James went on, "have you had a chance to think on what we talked about…"

"Sarah and I have spoken briefly," Robert said quietly, "she has asked me to consider a ground-based assignment. I have promised her I would do so."

Komack nodded; he knew what life as a starship commander was apt to be like. "So, here's the situation. Quarlo's getting kicked upstairs

to take charge of the Exploration Branch, and she is asking for you specifically to fill her chair. She's not the one to take no for an answer." Robert's mouth quirked in a private smile. Admiral Kabreigny was a force to be reckoned with. "You know where the Admiralty stands, and this latest adventure has driven home our point for us. You're too important to Starfleet to keep risking you on these missions. Starfleet has invested too much in you, and you too much in Starfleet, to keep you in active duty on the front lines. You've done your time and you've got the war wounds to prove it. Have you given any more thought to your successor?"

"My first choice was Annie-Laurie Maguire, but when I approached her last month, she made it clear that she doesn't want to leave the Border Patrol. She appreciates being out for a few months at a time and being able to come home for leaves and be with her family. I understand with all my heart… so I've been over and over my short list, and my heart tells me, Chris is the one."

"Chris Pike? He's a good man. A bit cautious, a bit by the book, but he knows when to step out of line to save the day when he needs to. A wise choice."

"I have every confidence in Chris, but I need to be sure that he is ready. I'd like to take one last mission, with him as my Number One. A farewell mission, so to speak. A swan song. A chance to say Goodbye to the *Enterprise,* to my crew, to the stars…"

"Robert," Komack said with slight impatience, "you're talking as though you'll never see space duty again after your promotion."

"I know I will, James. It… just won't be the same."

“Joining us here at Admiralty means you’ll be commanding fleets, not just individual ships. Besides, you’ll have a desk right next to mine. Hell of a view, isn’t it?”

Robert looked out at the view of San Francisco and Starfleet Headquarters and thought about the view of the Rosette Nebula and the neutron star. In spite of all he had suffered in his life, he had never lost his sense of childlike wonder and amazement at the glory and mystery of the universe. To give up the prospect of exploration just as the Starship Program was finally finding its feet, even though he had always known in his heart that he would not be leading those missions of exploration, was not an easy thing. But there was the promise he had made to Sarah when they first got married…

Seeing that his friend was troubled, Komack tried another tack. He knew better than to try to tempt Robert with power, influence, and prestige; they meant nothing to the man. “I’ve approved medical leave for you. Use that time to consider and talk to Sarah. There are worse fates than a ground-based assignment, Robert. You could go back to teaching half time. You’ve been longing to do that.”

Jonathan, Robert thought, looking over Komack’s head at a picture of his esteemed predecessor. *Jonathan, you joined the Admiralty because you felt you could serve the greater good here. Yet it is because of your influence and encouragement that I took the long road to the stars. What would you advise me to do now? I miss you so dearly…*

Unconscious of his friend’s sorrowful turn of thought, Admiral Komack stood up to end the interview. “I trust you’ll make the right decision, Robert. Your life and wellbeing are essential to the morale of Starfleet. In a way, you *are* Starfleet. You represent the very best of the

Fleet. You're a hero to a whole generation of up-and-coming cadets. We just want to keep you safe, that's all."

"I realize that, James. When I come back from medical leave, I will have an answer for you. And then we can discuss the nature of my final mission."

"We'll talk. Take care of yourself, Robert. The Fleet needs you."

Robert reached out to shake his old friend's hand, then walked out to where Sarah was waiting to escort him to Starfleet Medical for surgery on his shoulder.

"Ready?" was all she said. Knowing she was chary of showing affection in public, he simply nodded and held back from reaching for her hand.

"Everything go alright with James?" she asked absently, smiling and nodding to her many colleagues as they crossed the MedArts complex.

"He offered me a position in the Admiralty," Robert admitted. "I… have asked for some time to consider. I thought, taking a place in Admiralty means I could teach half-time. I've been longing to do that…"

He expected Sarah to urge him to accept the position. Wouldn't she jump at the chance to settle on Earth? Starfleet Medical Design Division would welcome her with open arms…

But instead, a shadow crossed her face. "Robert, is that what you really want? Because I don't think you would be happy in the Admiralty."

"My darling," he said with some asperity, "you asked me to consider a ground-based assignment. I am doing so. I have taken your words to heart and I'm trying to think what's best for us. Not just me."

"I know, and I appreciate that. I just don't think it would be good for us if either one of us takes an assignment where we would be miserably

unhappy. As I think you would be in the Admiralty. You don't *fit,* Robert."

"Sarah, I feel like Admiral Croft. I'm content anywhere, on land or sea, as long as I can be with you." The look in Sarah's eyes in response was a kiss.

Starfleet Medical

"Sarah, how soon can I get out of gaol and go Home?"

Sarah looked with fond exasperation at her husband, who had always been her worst patient. Surgery to repair the tear had been successful, and a course of physical therapy had given him some limited range of motion, but his sensitivity to a number of medications had made pain management "like plaitin' fog'' as Sarah expressed it. Resting, necessary as it was, was making him quite cross.

She leaned forward to rub his shoulder gently, both to comfort him and to check the inflammation. "Depends. How's your pain?"

Robert smiled softly at her, savoring her touch. "Oh, it's pretty good, as far as pain goes."

"Do you *need* anything for your pain? Before I describe to you, in clinical detail, exactly where you are causing me pain—"

"It's just a bit of a bother— why isn't it healing faster? Between the shoulder and the pneumonia I'm set back forty fathom with all my canvas flapping."

"Keep mithering about how long it's taking to heal, and I'll contact Dr. Phlox and get him to send me some of his medicinal menagerie."

“You do and I’ll use them as bait,” he teased her. “I trust you to the ends of the galaxy and back, but I do draw the line at leeches.”

“Oh, you. No sense of adventure. However, if you can refrain from straining your shoulder, I can get your discharge papers and deliver you to the custody of your Sister…”

“What about you? I don’t want to go Home without you—”

“I’ll be along in a bit. I have meetings at the Design Division regarding a project I’m working on, and then a medical conference in Leeds. I’ll catch up with you.”

On the Moors

Many hours later, his Starfleet uniform exchanged for shapeless worn corduroy trousers, the equally shapeless worn tweed jacket that had been his father’s, and hiking boots, Robert sank down in the heather of the moor. In the solitude, the grief for Daniel, for Veronica, for Lark Rise, had come in like a flood. Worn out from walking, an old injury in his leg beginning to ache fiercely, as it always did when he was rundown, he wrapped his arms around his knees and bowed his head on them.

Was space exploration worth the terrible price these young people had paid? Was it worth the price he himself had paid? He had seen wonders in the galaxy and experienced diversity he never would have dreamt of if he had remained a Terra bound musician. He had met beings he would never have met on Earth. Had been part of so many worthwhile endeavors, had so many adventures. He’d found what for

years he had been sure was not possible for him, a woman who was willing to share his life in space. He had suffered, beyond words and past all endurance, and yet he had done so surrounded by love that had saved his life and his reason. *Why? Why am I alive, and Veronica and Daniel are dead, and the lives of those I cherish are forever altered?*

Perhaps Sarah was right, and it was time to come Home to stay. But could he ever again live content on a planet? The lines of a beloved poem drifted across his consciousness with the delicacy of a butterfly wing:

I must go down to the sea again, for the call of the running tide
Is a wild call and a clear call and may not be denied.

He knew that call. He had answered. But he wasn't sixteen years old anymore and perhaps that wanderlust of his youth had been slaked, now that he had seen what it cost to answer that call.

And all I ask is a merry yarn from a laughing fellow-rover,
And quiet sleep and a sweet dream when the long trick's over.

Yet those whom he cherished would never come back to tell their merry yarns. They were sleeping the sleep that knows no earthly waking. And to one of them, he had not even been given the chance to say Goodbye.

He crouched over his pain and wept for youth, for Veronica and Daniel, for Jim, for all those whose lives had been torn apart forever by the space pirates, and for Roy, who had never known love and so was capable of such things.

Two sets of gentle hands rested on his shoulders. Through swollen eyes, he could just make out the brown habits and cowled hoods of two of the brothers from the monastery. One handed him a cloth handkerchief, and he scrubbed at his wet face. He was mortified to be caught in such an abandonment of despair, but he knew there was no need. Each monk was like a brother to him. He finally relaxed under their hands, knowing himself to be absolutely safe. Hyper vigilance was such a way of life to space farers that one of his favorite things about coming home was being able to relax that watchfulness for a bit and let his tired mind and spirit rest.

Their touch felt like no touch had ever felt to him before, not even Sarah's. He could feel the ache in his shoulder and game leg melt away as though it had never been. He took a long breath and found that the lingering tightness of lower respiratory distress had completely cleared up. The grief in his heart transformed from bitter pain to soft, sweet, gentle sorrow. He was well enough acquainted with grief to know that when those moments of hearts' ease came, it was vital to rest and regroup and receive what comfort it was possible to take before the next wave came crashing in. It was good to have that moment of respite without the distraction of physical pain.

"You are a man greatly beloved," one of the brothers spoke. His familiar gravelly voice felt like healing balm on Robert's heart. "Don't be afraid. Be at peace."

"Be strong and of good courage," the other brother rejoined.

He sighed deeply and felt peace settle over him like a warm cloak. He lifted his head to thank the brothers for sitting with him, but as

quickly as they had appeared beside him, they disappeared into the mist.

Their comfort gave him the strength he needed to rise from the peat, shoulder his knapsack, and walk the short distance to his sister's.

Dulce Domum

Before he knew it, Robert had reached the old gravel drive and the barn looming in the darkness. The lighted windows of the old Herb of Grace parsonage, the home had once been their Grandparents' and was now Mary Anne's, welcomed him home. A thousand tender associations of early childhood wrapped him like the ghosts of Christmas past. Pausing on the threshold to breathe deeply cool night air, he was overwhelmed with the sudden sense that his dear dead were waiting for him on the other side of that old oak door. All the great moments of his life, the beauty and joy and pain that had made him who he was, swirled around him in one of those transcendent moments when time ceases to have meaning. Such moments came rarely— left swiftly, even for someone who lived and worked in view of Eternity, but their awe and wonder lingered for days.

With a sigh and a shiver, he came back to the present moment, realizing that he was very tired and very cold. Knocking on the old oak door, he called out, "Sister! S'mee! Old Badger here!"

"Stand and give the countersign!" His sister's voice called from within. Her voice brought back memories of a thousand childhood games, and many more joyous homecomings of his adulthood.

"'Watchman, what of the night? Watchman, what of the night?'"

"'The day cometh, and also the night!'"

The door was flung open and Mary Anne's old sheep dog, Second Peter, leapt up upon his chest to slather his face with ecstatic welcome, his hind end wagging as though it would twist off. Loki the Maine coon cat, too old to die and too cantankerous to live, as Mary Anne always said, but beloved because she was a gift from Sarah, deigned to bestow one disdainful look at him before haughtily turning her back on him. Humans whom she loved must be taught that they could not be permitted to simply walk away from *her* and not return for months at a time. He must be properly disciplined before she would condescend to grace him with her purrs and bestow her attention upon him. Second Peter had no dignity, no sense of his own worth, she implied.

His sister's voice, as musical as it had ever been, now overlaid with the broad vowels of the North, rang out. "Down, ye daft ha'porth. Brother, let that dog out and put the wood in th' hole, were thee brought up in a barn?"

The welcoming scent of freshly baked bread and vegetarian oxtail soup simmering on the stove mingled with the scent of peat smoke. The kettle was whistling upon the hob. Mary Anne's kitchen was the same warm and welcoming place it had always been. He was out of the cold and the rain, with the door shut and the firelight gleaming on the ancient, paneled walls. He was in his sister's arms, her warm cheek pressed against his chilly one, the softness of her own woolen sweater under his hands, it was warm and safe inside, and he was Home.

Sarah, however, was not, though she had begun to wish most earnestly that she was. Her sister Emily, whom she had been longing to see, had

at the last minute hopped on a starliner bound for Alpha Centauri. She was to dance the lead in an upcoming Andorian/Terran ballet and wanted to do some sightseeing before rehearsals began, and thinking that her sister was going to be out in space for a few more months, had not bothered to let Sarah know she was traveling off world. It was typical flaky Emily being her endearing and artistic self, and Sarah could not find it in her heart to begrudge her younger sister her dancing day.

To add insult to injury, her predecessor and beloved mentor Dr. Phlox had become embroiled in family difficulties… drama with one of his wives… and had been unable to leave Denobula to attend the long-anticipated conference. She had been counting on a heart to heart with her mentor, who had taken her under his wing when she had first accepted her post as CMO of the *Enterprise.* They had corresponded faithfully over the years, but nothing could replace face to face. Sarah was longing to share the heartbreak of losing Veronica as only another medical professional could understand, eager to show him her latest progress on her designs, and excited to feel his pride in her over her latest successes. She missed his impossibly wide grin, his zany humor, and his depth of wisdom and tenderness, sometimes well hidden under Denobulan eccentricity, but well known to her. The conference she had so been looking forward to seemed flat, stale, and unprofitable without it.

She didn't have the heart for the more superficial friendships she had developed over the years. She wanted someone who knew her as well as Emily and Phlox and Charles did, who could get to the very core of her, draw her out, call her out when she needed it, and cry with her.

Someone she could lean on so she could be strong for Robert. Someone like—

There was a time when a woman needed her closest friend. Sarah discreetly slipped away from the conference room and opened her communicator.

"Mary Anne?"

"Brother?"

Robert's heart leapt for joy when he saw his brother William's taciturn face on the view screen. Clad in his usual tweed jacket, he looked the quiet academic he was, and so like their father that Robert felt his heart twist painfully. He spoke slowly, deliberately. "So, I talked to Sarah."

A long pause. Relations between the brothers had been strained for years, ever since Robert had made the decision to go back out to space, and they had forgotten how to talk to one another. William did not approve of his space faring siblings. Although his love for them was silent, steadfast, and unmovable, as was theirs for him, the space faring siblings felt more or less estranged from their little brother. The loss of their parents at such a young age had devastated them all, but had wounded William the most deeply, and had embittered him toward space travel forever.

"Close shave, was it, Brother?"

"I thought I would never see you again, Brother," Robert said quietly. In an instant, he was standing hand in hand with another brother,

moments from a fiery death on board a derelict space cutter, thinking of all the faces he was leaving behind.

William swallowed hard. “Come see the boys and go to choir practice with me?”

It was the warmest invitation his brother had given him for years. It brought radiant light to Robert’s eyes and a tremulous smile.

“Right you are, Brother.”

The chilly freshness of a Yorkshire spring night wrapped Sarah’s shoulders in a lover’s embrace as she stepped out of the small transport that had brought her Home. She could feel the life of her North Country home through her boots as she took her first rapturous steps of homecoming. Mary Anne’s farm was only a few miles from her old home. Past that gravel driveway was the moor where she had grown up, and where she had first met Robert. He had come to live here when she was fourteen, and he had come into her life to stay.

Ghosts of him met her everywhere— smoking his pipe placidly in the herb garden and singing absently to himself as he worked in the beds, holding out his arms in welcome to the first snow of winter, cradling a lamb tenderly in his arms and offering it a bottle, exclaiming in delight “hail to thee, blithe spirit!” over the song of a skylark, walking up into the moors with a book in his hands for some much longed for solitude, always hoping that she would come find him when solitude became just a bit too lonely. Somehow, she always did. They had made so much sweet love here, in a corner of the barn loft on soft hay, on the moor, in

their own room where starlight shone through the windows and wind wuthered around the eaves.

Sarah smiled softly as her memories stirred the old, familiar responses in her body. Surely, there was no grief so great that they could not share it together. What better place to comfort one another than in bed?

It was not her husband, but his older sister, her face an older and more weatherbeaten version of his gentle one, who welcomed her home, standing in the door with the light of the fireplace streaming out over the drive, her arms stretched out for her sister.

“He’s alright. He’s gone to visit with William and Helen and the boys for a bit,” she hastily reassured her sister.

Sarah couldn’t speak. She fell into her sister’s open arms and burst into tears.

“Now then.” While Sarah, seated at the scrubbed kitchen table and shivering in her thin blue medical scrubs, had drawn close to the fire to warm her bare arms, Mary Anne had been bustling about pouring English breakfast tea, slicing and buttering bread, and dishing up vegetarian oxtail soup. “There now lass, get that down thee and there won’t be much wrong with thee. Thee are starved. Forgotten how chilly these spring nights can be, have thee? I have a little something to warm thee up. Knit it myself, I did. Intended it for Christmas but I think thee need it now.” Mary Anne brought a package from beside her rocking

chair by the wood stove and set it on Sarah's lap. "That'll warm thee up, lass."

It was a cable knit sweater in natural cream color, like her husband's, but the perfect size for Sarah's smaller frame. Sarah wrapped herself up in it, burying her face in the soft wool and smelling the scents of lambs and heather, woodsmoke and fresh earth.

"Now drink thy tea and tell me what's on thy heart, lassie," Mary Anne said gently, cutting across Sarah's cries of thanks.

Mary Anne listened calmly as Sarah poured out her heart, punctuating Sarah's words with an occasional "well upon my soul" or "for heaven's sake" just as Robert would have done. Even her voice sounded like his. She had lived in the North Country for many years but like him, she had never lost the musical lilt of her Coventry birthplace. Mary Anne had the same deep inner calm that Robert did, and she felt it soothe her own turmoil, just as his did so often.

Robert's childhood home, now his brother William's home, Coventry

"Uncle Robert! Uncle Robert! Did you knock those space pirates on their *arses?"*

Eight-year-old Nephew Timmy threw his arms around his uncle and hugged him with all the hard young strength in his wiry body. Eleven-year-old Nephew Jack was too grown up for bear hugs, but he head-butted his uncle with shy affection and then unceremoniously yelled out,

"Gotta go, Uncle Robert, got a Scouts meeting tonight!"

"Off you go, Jack be nimble!"

“Come on, Uncle Robert. You can talk to my dad later. Right now, I want to show you *my* starship.”

Timmy’s starship was a playhouse in a corner of the garden. It had been constructed from bits of scrap metal Robert had brought home from the shipyards over the years and given his nephews. Johnny had outgrown the playhouse, and Timmy had taken sole possession.

A chilly spring dusk was falling over the garden, and the first stars were piercing the velvet sky. Nephew and uncle settled into the playhouse with their backs to the stony garden wall. Timmy leaned comfortably against his uncle, resting his rough little boy head on his shoulder. Robert had to blink back a fresh surge of emotion at the preciousness of the warm wiry body nestled under his arm.

“Get aboard the Starship *Dawn Treader.* And if you can’t get a board, get a plank!” Timmy snorted with giggles. “Uncle Robert, how come you didn’t name your starship the *Dawn Treader?”*

Robert pretended to think that over. “Perhaps because we’ve not met a sea serpent?”

Timmy considered. “You *couldn’t* meet a sea serpent. Guess why? Because you don’t go to *sea,* you go to *space!* So, you’d have to meet a space serpent!”

“What do you think your uncle would do if we ever did meet a space serpent?”

Little boy giggles had to be one of the sweetest sounds in the universe. “I bet you’d scream blue murder and hightail it out of there!”

Robert chuckled with him. “I’d *want* to do that, not being as brave about serpents as your Auntie Sarah is, but you know what would be

better? Talking to that creature. Do you think I could learn to talk to a space serpent?"

"You can talk to anybody," Timmy said confidently. "You know all the languages there are." He twisted around, rather painfully elbowing his uncle in the ribs, in order to lean back against him and look at the stars. "Do you suppose we'll find fighting mice, like Reepicheep, when the starship goes exploring strange new worlds? And centaurs and minotaurs and hobbits and dwarfs?"

Robert rested his chin on the top of his nephew's head. "Well, I've often thought that the Vulcans put me in mind of the Elves. And the Klingons remind me of the Orcs. And an officer who has hooves instead of feet serves with our friend Captain Georgiou. His name is Saru, and he is a Kelpian. The only one of his kind in Starfleet."

"Uncle Robert, when I grow up, can I be your Number One and we can go find all these new kinds of people? When I get bigger, those stars won't be so far—"

"Timmy! Come in and brush your teeth and get ready for bed! It's a school night!" The sound of Helen's voice shattered the quiet, contemplative mood of the evening.

"Helen, could we have just five more minutes? Please? I'll have him in in no time—"

"Alright. Just five minutes through, William's looking for you—"

"Aww, Mum, no fair! I want to stay up all night talking to you, Uncle Robert!" Timmy went from brave and adventurous First Officer to a small boy in the blink of an eye, and his uncle's arms tightened around him.

“It’s alright, old fellow. Even able seamen like yourself have to get some sleep in order to grow up and serve with your old uncle.” He knew that his brother and sister-in-law did not approve of him encouraging his nephew’s dream of stars, but he remembered what it had felt like to carry that dream in his heart and have no one to hear him. Timmy would grow up with his uncle’s ears and heart open to him.

Emotion began to swell in his heart again and he felt tears of sheer tenderness pricking behind his eyelids.

“You know something, old fellow?” he began huskily. “Your old Uncle loves you very, very much.”

“I know, Uncle Robert,” Timmy said patiently. He didn’t see what it was about being a grownup that made people mushy and sentimental, but as far as he could tell, it didn’t seem like one of the more fun aspects of adulthood. “Can you read me a chapter in my Narnia book before I go to sleep?”

He read aloud to his nephew until the little boy slowly and reluctantly let his tired eyes close. He pressed an avuncular kiss to Timmy’s cheek, rested a tender hand on the sweaty head, and slowly and pensively, went downstairs to keep tryst with the ghosts of his parents.

William had kept everything in their father’s library exactly as their father had left it so many years ago. Settled at the desk, Robert could stretch out his hand and touch his father’s handwritten class notes and a hard copy of the last syllabus he had ever put together. In another pigeonhole was a piano sonata his mother had been composing for his father. His mother’s elegant spidery script was in amusing contrast to

his father's illegible scrawl. And still open upon the desk was the last book his father had been reading. Robert picked it up with reverent hands. *A Grief Observed* by C. S. Lewis.

His daughter's sweet shrill voice broke into his reverie.

"Tad? Tad, I'm home!"

Robert lifted his head from *A Grief Observed*, took off his reading glasses, and beamed at his daughter. "My heart's Dearest! Come kiss your old father then."

Lark Rise was at his side in a moment, kissing him soundly, settling herself on the floor at his feet and resting her head against his knee, just as she had been sitting since she was a little girl. Her father's gentle hand rested on her head as if in blessing. It was only then that he realized she was still wearing her *yarmulke.*

"My darling. How was your time with Daniel's family?"

Lark Rise paused thoughtfully. "It was… it was healing, Tad. We sat *shiva* for seven days. It was so comforting. But…" she hesitated, then the words came out in a rush. "Tad, if I wanted to convert to Judaism, to honor Daniel, would you support that?"

Her father picked up his pipe, inherited from his father. "My darling," he said earnestly, "I will support whatever decision you make, with whomever you choose to make that decision. But… I would encourage you to be sure, Dearest. Our many beliefs are some of the deepest and most personal parts of our being, and I would not want to see my daughter change that foundation for any reason but that she had found a home in the faith she wished to adopt."

Lark nodded thoughtfully, taking in his words. "As Mum would say… 'if tha' ever does owt for nowt—'"

"'Do it allus only for thyself!'" they said together, and then laughed.

"More soul searching in my future, I reckon," she said thoughtfully.

"Yes, dear. And your father is right there with you. Not a process that can be hurried… What else is troubling you, my heart?"

Lark looked up at him. Her eyes no longer reflected the joy and laughter of life, but the shadow side of pain and grief, as his did. "Tad, I don't want to trouble you—"

"No no, my own." He lay a gentle hand on her cheek as he spoke. "I'm always here for you. Never too wrapped up in my own concerns to hear you. Especially after the long separation we have endured… I feel as though I need to get to know my daughter all over again."

"Well… I've been thinking." She got up and began pacing restlessly around the library. Her father focused on getting his pipe going and waited patiently for her to open up to him. "I wish now I'd joined Starfleet."

"My darling, you are doing the essential work of a bard. A traveling minstrel. A troubadour. You know even better than I do how great a cloud of witnesses you have behind you as you continue in your work."

Lark gestured impatiently. "I know, Tad, but I don't think my work makes a difference the way yours does. You played a part in apprehending the space pirates who killed Daniel." Her voice faltered. "You're part of big things. Galactic peace keeping. An exploration program Captain Archer could have only dreamed about. He was so proud of you, Tad."

Robert smiled and sighed at the mention of his childhood hero turned mentor, whose death he was still mourning. "And he was proud of you too, Lark. Your life work is as essential as mine. You may not be a

diplomat at the bargaining table, but you are one on the stage. Your music may originate from a tiny corner of our world, but the themes of which you sing are universal. And those bind people together more than any law or regulation or treaty ever could. My heart tells me your music is going to be essential to the peace of this galaxy, some day."

"But my music couldn't save Daniel," she whispered. The tears began then, and this time, instead of hiding like a wounded animal, she burrowed for safety into her father's outstretched arms. He stroked her hair and cradled her and softly sang to her until, exhausted from grieving, she fell asleep.

Warmly tucking a homemade Afghan around his sleeping daughter, Robert stood up, softly knocked the ashes out of his pipe through the open window into the garden, and slowly, thoughtfully, left his childhood home to walk down the quiet dusky street to the ruins of the old cathedral. It was a pilgrimage he made every time he came home to Coventry, and he must make it quite alone.

He had carried the ashes of his dead baby daughter for more than ten years, in a vial tucked in an inner pocket of his sweater, before he finally felt able to scatter those ashes and lay her tiny body to rest. It had been a late spring twilight much like this one, stainless and sweet, when he had stood with his face uplifted to the sharp outlines of the ruins, sung one last lullaby to the vial of ashes, and then uncorked the vial and scattered Candle's ashes before the Statue of Reconciliation. He had thought that letting go of those ashes would make him feel further away in time than ever from her; instead, it had made him feel closer to her spirit.

Tonight, he stood for a long time at the Statue of Reconciliation. The pain of Candle's passing had ebbed and flowed like the tides over the years, sometimes fading like a gibbous moon in the light of sunrise, sometimes as blinding as the moonlit night on which the cathedral had been destroyed so many years ago, but always an integral part of who he was. He reached out a hand and gently touched the statue, as he always did, closing his eyes and dreaming that he held his daughter in his arms once again.

Who would you be today, Little One? he thought. *Would you be a shepherd, like your Aunt, or a singer like your sister, or a valiant Starfleet Officer like your mother, or a healer like Sarah… whatever path your life took, you would have been a best friend to your sister, and I'd give my life to bring you back for her.*

"I thought I'd find you here."

The soft voice of his wife, the warm touch of her hands, nearly made him jump out of his skin.

"Sarah! I was just thinking about you and here you are. Brought me up standing, you did—"

"Well, if you need to be *alone…"*

"No no, I was just startled. I don't know why. I have been hearing echoes of the two of us sitting here and talking, all down the years. So many memories of us, my love."

They kissed lingeringly, and then settled in the grass against the ruined wall, as they had so many countless times. He put his arm around her, and she nestled her head on his shoulder, her hand gently resting on his knee.

“All well with our daughter?” Sarah whispered. “She was fast asleep in the library when I checked on her—”

“I think so. We had a heart to heart. She cried herself to sleep but she did so in her father’s arms.”

“Good. That’s what she needed.” Sarah sniffed appreciatively. “Vanilla pipe tobacco. Heaven.”

“Yes, Lark Rise needed her father tonight, and I needed a reminder of mine.”

“Hmmm.”

They sat in silence for a long time, the soft blue English twilight wrapping them like a shawl, their faces uplifted to see the first stars of the evening.

The chirp of the communicator startled him from his sorrowful reverie. He had become so unaccustomed to the summons, had been so absorbed in his wife, that the small sound had not registered at first.

Robert slipped his communicator out of his pocket and flipped it open. “April here.”

“Robert, this is Komack. About that final mission we were discussing. We’ve lost contact with *Exeter…”*

CHAPTER 16: OF FIDDLEHEADS AND SMELTS

With a sigh and a shiver, Robert roused himself from the sessions of sweet silent thought. He was so glad that his daughter had made the last-minute decision to come out with them. He and Sarah believed that being with her family for a bit was the most healing thing she could do.

"Computer, resume recording." Deep breath, one hand reaching underneath his uniform tunic to clasp his Coventry cross of nails. "*It is with a heavy heart that I record the death in the line of duty of Ensign Veronica Hall. She died giving her life for another and she has been awarded the posthumous* Veronica Hall Medal of Sacrifice, *so named in her honor. Greater love has no one than this, that they lay down their life for their friends."*

There. The log entry was done. But somehow no amount of blinking could clear his vision enough to permit him to begin work on the reports. With an impatient gesture, he removed his spectacles, rose from his desk, and repaired to the Observation Deck. He needed to watch the stars for a while.

“Sir? I’m sorry to interrupt, but I need your signature for the duty roster. And I’ve brought you a cup of tea.”

Robert had no idea how long his yeoman had been standing over his shoulder at the piano, quietly listening to him play. She had waited until he paused before the next movement before she spoke.

“Oh, Prevenient Grace! Never hesitate to interrupt me if you need something. That’s what Captains are for. And you didn’t need to bring me tea, but I am very much obliged to you.”

Grace took the signed pad back, and hesitated. “That was beautiful, sir. What were you playing?”

Seeing that Grace was in a talkative mood, Robert turned on the piano bench to face her, and rested his hands on his knees, palms up. “A bit of Grieg. *The Last Spring.* It… somehow suited my mood tonight.”

Grace took that in for a moment, and then said quietly, “You were thinking about Veronica, weren’t you, sir?”

“I was,” her captain said quietly.

“What do you remember the most, sir?”

“How much *fun* she had with her prosthetic hand,” Robert said slowly. “How she used to laugh at her crew mates’ expressions in the country dances, when they would ‘turn their partner by the hand’ and she’d end up lifting them to the overhead with that hand. And in the Grand Right and Left, I used to tease her that her prosthetic hand was a bulldog, because it never let go. Her attitude about her disability puts me to shame when I get cross about old injuries aching me.”

“I remember how much she *loved* space,” Grace said thoughtfully. “How she spent all her off-duty hours watching the stars. How excited she was that she got to see the Rosette nebula.”

“She was enthralled by the neutron star. It gives me so much comfort that she got to see that beauty before she…”

“She loved the opportunities Starfleet gave her. She was so proud to be an officer. She thought Starfleet was just the ticket. Sir, it isn’t *fair.”*

“No, dear heart, it isn’t. But remember that she died giving her life for another, and greater love has no woman than this.”

Grace had turned her face away from her captain and was studying the stars. “I’m just dreading going back to quarters tonight and not seeing her— I’d give anything to hear her call me out one more time for being a slob—”

“It’s hard, Grace. I wish I had words that would make it easier. But I simply haven’t.” He got up to stand beside his yeoman and placed a comforting hand on her shoulder.

They stood in silence for a few moments, watching the stars together. Grace finally stirred.

“Sir—”

“I’m listening.”

“Sir, I just wanted to say… that when I go to Starfleet Academy— if I get in, that is—”

“You’ll get on just fine, now you put that down in your log—”

“That I’ll— I’ll really miss you, sir. You’re— kind of like my space Dad—” Grace’s cheeks flushed and she bit her lip.

“Grace, if my daughter Candle had lived, she would be about your age. And I’d like to think she would be as brave and curious and adventurous as you are. It would be my honor to call you my space daughter.”

“Thank you sir— thank you— permission to return to my post—”

She took his offhand nod as permission to leave the deck. Finally, with a sigh, he turned away from the stars. Perhaps now he could return to the paperwork. But first, he'd just run down to the mess hall and see how his crew was settling in.

"Jo! Got your fiddleheads and your mess of smelts, have you?"

Spearing a forkful of steamed and buttered baby ostrich fern known in her corner of the world as 'fiddleheads,' a springtime delicacy, Jo Meier looked up at her captain and smiled. "I sure do, sir, and the Maine potatoes to go with. Too early for new potatoes, but these russets will do—"

"The potatoes aren't even in blossom, are they?"

"No sir, that's next month. Thank you so much for making sure this dinner got brought on board fresh from Earth for me. Will you have some with me? It's fresh rhubarb pie for dessert. I guess you'd call it a 'tart' and it *is* tart!" She laughed.

"You're so welcome, Jo. This is your 'welcome back' dinner. I will pass on sharing with you, as I'm looking for my better half. Have you happened to see her?"

"I stopped into Sick Bay for some of Dr. April's fresh herbs to make some tea about an hour ago. I haven't got my space legs back yet, you see, and my insides were feeling upside down. And she was right out straight. I'm guessing she's still on duty, sir—"

"Ah. Thank you, Jo. I'll find her."

"Sir—"

The captain had been about to pat her shoulder and turn away, but her voice drew him back. “Yes, Jo. What is it?”

“Sir…” Jo put her fork down and gestured for him to take the chair across from her. “Sir… was it hard for you? Coming back to active duty after…”

“Yes,” her captain said quietly. “Every time, it was hard. Even this voyage, I had to have a word with myself before I could take the mission. But do you know what I’ve learned?”

Jo shook her head; her eyes fixed on his.

“I’ve learned that I’ve always been glad I did. Every time… I’ve seen things I never would have seen otherwise. Made friends I would never have made. Learned things about myself I’d never have known.”

Jo was listening intently. She burst out, “But were you scared? You’re the bravest person I know—”

“Of course I was,” he said gently. “You’ve told me about your many times great grandmother Jessica, who was the first woman astronaut from your corner of the world to go to space, and while she was there, she made history by being part of the first all-female spacewalk. Your great Nan Jessica was old enough to remember the *Challenger* disaster. Do you think she was scared?”

“I don’t think she was scared of anything. Any more than you are, sir.”

“I think you would find if you could go back and ask her, she might tell you differently. Just as I am telling you tonight. It’s normal to come back out to space scared, and grieving, and in pain. But you come anyway because you hear ‘a wild call and a clear call that may not be denied.’ And that call is the stars. And those stars… they’re not so far.”

He saw her taking in his words before finally lifting her face to his, radiant. “Thank you, sir— thank you—”

“You look just like your great Nan, and you have heart, Jo. Just as she did. I have every confidence in your abilities. Now. You get back to your dinner. Enjoy every bit.”

“I will, sir. Thank you again.” Her Captain knew she was referring to much more than just fiddleheads and smelts for dinner.

Carrying his cup of tea, Robert moved slowly around the mess hall, listening to the scraps of conversations. A cutthroat contract bridge session was in progress in a corner. Knowing how competitive those games tended to be, he hesitated just within earshot to make sure his crew was playing as befit Starfleet Officers.

“Partner, we are going down.”

“Down two doubled, partner, we missed the boat on that bid. Shouldn’t have bid no trump, but since we weren’t vulnerable, I thought we could take a chance… I thought I could run the heart suit, but that finesse failed—”

“Ah, but we kept our worthy opponents out of Game in spades—”

“We’d have made four spades all day long, partner—”

All was well. Bridge players loved to spend half the night discussing how they had won or how they had lost. The captain smiled, and moved on.

Warmth filled his heart as he realized how warmly he was greeted by each crew member who saw him. He was invited to join several groups but declined, explaining that he was just making the rounds to see how everyone was settling in.

"*Bridge to Captain April."*

Robert turned from watching a group of his crew practicing the square dance step "Sides face, grand square," and tapped the comm panel. "Go ahead."

"*Sir, Commander Kirk is on subspace, for you—"*

"In my Ready Room, Lyra, please."

"Robert? Jim wanted to talk to you."

"Jim! Did you get my message?"

The boy looks terrible, Robert thought, with fatherly concern. *He has got no color in his face, and his eyes look as though he hasn't slept in days. If only he were still onboard and Sarah could have a look at him—*

"Yes, sir, I did." The boy's voice was sullen, but Robert heard a disguised pleading in the undertones.

"George?" Robert sought his friend's eyes on the view screen and discreetly nodded. George nodded back and withdrew.

"Jim, you look like the wreck of the *Hesperus.* Are you alright, my boy?"

"Sir, did you ever kill anybody?"

Taken aback, his godfather hesitated. Where was this leading?

"How do you mean, Jim?"

Jimmy leaned forward. "*Not* in a space battle. In defense, I mean. With your bare hands."

Robert took a deep breath. *Vulnerability,* he reminded himself. *I must be to Jim what Jonathan was to me.* "Yes, Jimmy, I did," he said quietly. "It was a very long time ago, but I can still remember how I felt."

“And how did you feel?”

“That I had blood on my hands. Like Macbeth. ‘Out, out, damned spot!’ I… for some time, I felt that since I had taken a life, I did not deserve to live any longer. I contemplated doing away with myself.”

“Wait. *You* were suicidal?” Jim had considered suicide; he had friends who had committed it. Suicide and this man he had chosen as a role model did not seem to belong in the same discussion; but there was no mistaking the quiet intensity of his captain’s eyes.

“Yes, I was. Your father talked me down from the ledge.” Softly he added, “That’s one of the reasons we’re so close.”

“I killed a Klingon.” The words spurted out like blood from a severed artery. “Oh God sir, I didn’t know that when you killed someone, there was so much— so much—”

Robert’s fatherly heart yearned to gather the boy into his arms.

“And their blood doesn’t look like ours—”

“I know, my boy. I know.”

“And I used Veronica’s *hand…* her hand that I had cleaned up and gave to her parents— I didn’t tell them—”

“Jim, listen to me.” Robert’s voice was stern. “I want you to go to your father and tell him *exactly* what you have just told me. He’ll know what to say. I’m not going to be in range for much longer, but your dad is there for you, Jim. Just like he was for me.”

“OK—” the boy shifted restlessly. “I just don’t want to disappoint him— I want him to think I’m a real man—”

“Jim, do you think I’m a ‘real man’?”

“Of course, sir—”

“A real man is gutted when he has to take a life. He weeps until he has no tears left for the loss of life. He goes to therapy when he needs it. He finds trusted confidantes to talk to. He knows when to lean on others. I… have done all of these things and I confess that I am still learning that last bit. But I’ll try if you will, Jim.”

“I will, sir.”

“Good. Now go talk to your father. Peace, Jim.”

He was just sitting down to tea with his family when the ship wide intercom broke in.

“Bridge to Captain. We have detected a signal from a probe with Exeter’s *comm code.”*

III

Part Three: Threnody

Enterprise 1701

no bloody A, B, C, or D

CHAPTER 17: COALS OF FIRE

"Alright, children, what have we got? Lyra, report."

The captain glanced around at the faces of his senior staff around the conference room table, and addressed them with his characteristic informality. The *Enterprise* had tractored *Exeter's* damaged probe into the shuttle bay, and his communications specialists had worked shifts around the clock extracting information from it.

Lyra pressed a few buttons on the display panel. "Sir, we cleaned it up the best we could. Here's what we were able to retrieve."

The face of the Alpha Centaurian captain came on the screen. Her face was flushed with the characteristic red squares that appeared when Alpha Centaurans were upset about something.

"*We have identified the source of the communications failure…* static… *signals of an unknown origin just beyond sens*— static… *apparently emanating from the region of the galactic barrier. We have…* static… *unknown language… we cannot interpret*— static— *a signal of such strength that it has overloaded the communications relays—"*

"And the rest of the message is too garbled to understand, sir. There's a tape with a sample of the unknown language, just here—"

The captain was shaking his head. "The *Exeter* has got Spirit Claw Sanaway as comm officer. If Claw can't translate that language—"

Lyra's antennae pointed toward their captain. "I couldn't get anywhere with the language either, sir. It doesn't match anything in Starfleet files. Perhaps you could have a go?"

“Let’s hear it, Lyra.”

At the first sounds of the alien language, Robert April sat as if he had been turned to stone.

He was fourteen years old again, standing in the principal’s office watching the screens in horror as the Federation frontier colony world his parents were visiting was destroyed by unknown and unidentifiable hostiles. Over the screams of the dying and the shrieks of twisting metal structures and whines of unknown weaponry, a single sentence in this same language was broadcast over and over and over again.

He remembered his teachers huddled in the hallway crying. His grandmother Evans using the transporter for the first time in her life to get to her grandson the fastest way possible. The strong arms of his Grandfather April holding him together when he felt himself falling apart. His sister’s heart and door locked against him as he knocked and pleaded with her to let him grieve with her. The terrified screams of his baby brother, who didn’t understand why his mother wouldn’t come when he called for her…

“Sir? Sir? Gandalf!”

Chris’s concerned voice broke through the awful echoes.

“Sir. Are you okay?”

Robert pressed his palms flat on the tabletop to ground himself. “I’m quite fine, Number One. I must contact Starfleet Command for orders. Good work, children. Dismissed.”

He couldn’t face either Nogura or Komack until he had composed himself, and composure seemed further away from him than Command

itself. He needed to be absolutely alone. Not even Sarah could walk through this narrow passage of pain with him.

His father would have called the internal struggle "wrestling wild beasts at Ephesus." In his father's eyes had been a wealth and richness of wisdom gleaned from wrestling those beasts into submission himself and choosing Love above all else. Those eyes had been closed in death for over thirty years, and yet they were alive before him now.

He hesitated before locking the door to their quarters. But he couldn't even tell Sarah about this until he had conquered those wild beasts.

At the bookshelf, he ran his finger over the brittle cloth spines of the antique books that he had inherited from his father. The King James Bible, with its majestic and poetic language. *The Chronicles of Narnia. The Lord of the Rings.* Jane Austen's Complete Works. The poets: Longfellow, Frost, Wordsworth, Keats, the Brownings. Shakespeare… the Complete Works, and the Sonnets. Some slim volumes by obscure and forgotten poets who nevertheless had the secret of touching the heart. Anthologies from his teaching years.

There were several lifetimes of wisdom in these books, but none of this wisdom could help him in the crisis he now faced. Perhaps he could simply draw strength from…

He could hear his father's voice in his heart. A gentle, lyrical voice, like his own, but deeper in timbre, speaking Quaker plain speech.

"Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you."

"Father, I can't*. I don't know how—"*

"Love in this sense doesn't mean the way thee loves thy brother, thy sister, and thy parents. That's brotherly love. The love we are to have for our enemies is agape love. It is goodwill. To will, *not just to* wish, *the very best for those who hurt us. And the very best for them would be for them to stop hurting other people, for in hurting other people we hurt ourselves."*

Twelve-year-old Robert, a quiet, dreamy, bookish lad who was always either swimming, practicing his music, or, during long Yorkshire summers, walking the moors with a book in his hand, had just experienced the cruelty of bigger boys who thought he was silly. He was nursing bruised feelings and had come to his father for comfort, as his mother had been away on a concert tour. This was *not* the comfort he had expected.

"But I don't *want* the very best for them!" he cried. *Mother* would have understood…

"Let me tell thee a little secret." His father's eyes held a subtle twinkle. "*'If thine enemy be hungry, feed him; if he be thirsty, give him drink; for in doing thee will heap coals of fire on his head.'"*

Robert's eyes began to shine. He liked the coals of fire bit.

"But we don't heap those coals for the fun of it," his father amended sternly. He had been a young man himself not so long ago. "We heap them because no matter what anyone else is doing, *we* must do the right thing. And the right thing is Love."

"Yes, Father," Robert replied dutifully. He tried to repress a sigh and did not quite succeed.

His father understood a good deal that his son would only understand when he became a father himself. He took his son's

rebellious young face between gentle, ink-stained hands, hands of a scholar and gardener and loving father, and kissed him gravely on his forehead. Affection was freely exchanged in the April household, British reserve be… blessed.

Thirty years later, Robert could feel again his father's kiss. "I understand now, Father," he whispered. "And would you have forgiven these beings who took your life? And would you have me do good to them as far as in me lies?"

He knew the answer. He knew that his mother and father, although they had had their struggles and disagreements, just as he and Sarah had, had been one, as he and Sarah were today. He felt closest to her at the piano, and he would keep tryst with her sweet spirit there later, in the music she had so loved. Right now, he needed to contact Command.

"Robert, I want you out of there. Finish your repairs to the communications relays and report straight back to Command."

"James, you don't understand. We aren't *sure* these are the same beings who killed my and Sarah's parents—"

"*I can't take the risk. You're the best captain I've got, but can you sit there and tell me you could deal objectively with these beings if you did make first contact?"*

*"*These beings are *why* I chose to become a linguist and a communications officer. Because if my parents, or anyone on that

doomed colony, had been able to communicate with these beings, ascertain what they wanted, tell them who we are—"

"How do you expect to communicate with beings who only understand force?"

"We don't *know* they only understand force. James, I am pleading with you. Let me have a team of linguists who can help me interpret and translate this language. If these beings represent a threat to the Federation, we're going to need to understand their language and make sure they understand ours if we are to open diplomatic relations."

Komack rubbed his forehead and sighed. "Damned if you can't talk me into anything, you silver tongued devil. Very well. Who do you want?"

"Hoshi *Sato?* Robert, I don't think that's a good idea. She's been retired for years. She just lost her husband, and I don't think her health has been robust since you rescued her from Tarsus IV…"

"Hoshi taught me everything I know about linguistics, communication, and code," Robert said quietly. "She's my mentor, second mum, best teacher— she is the one who started me on this journey. I'd like her at my side."

"Alright. I'll contact her. I believe she's been on Vulcan with Ambassador T'Pol since Tarsus. Damn you, anyway. And I want Ambassador Sarek along. You two are the diplomatic Dream Team. If anyone can open diplomatic relations with these beings, you two can. And I'll feel better about you with that Vulcan logic at your side—"

Long training and professionalism kept Robert from permitting his reaction to show on his face. *James doesn't know about the fraught*

relations between Sarek and me, he thought, *and I'm not going to change that.* Aloud, "The Lady Amanda is also a skilled linguist."

"And you've got your sister and Lyra. I don't know who else I could possibly get for you, considering the time frame. Robert… are you sure you're going to be able to be objective here?"

"'For such a time as this,'" Robert whispered to himself. Out loud, "James, as a Quaker, and as an acolyte to the Franciscans, I have sworn such oaths of peace as I do not lightly invoke. My parents were people of peace. *How* could I act in any way that would dishonor their dear memories?"

"Good. Keep us out of war and come back safely. Godspeed, my friend. Rendezvous with Ambassador Sarek aboard *Shenzhou."*

"Hoshi! Oh my days. *Hoshi*!"

After a joyous reunion with Captain Georgiou ("talked them into promoting you since Tarsus, have you? More fool you!" "No, Robert, they talked *me* into accepting command of this old ship! We can run circles around *Enterprise,* so more fool *you*!") Mary Anne and Robert faced a reunion of another kind with the officer who had been teacher, mentor, and mother to them both when they entered the service following the loss of their own parents. Only Mary Anne was close enough to hear the catch in her brother's voice as he gathered the older woman into his arms.

"Mother Hoshi," he whispered.

Hoshi Sato's once coal black hair was white as water lilies. Her face was as mapped and marked with one hundred twenty years of

experience, but her eyes were just as bright and vital as they had ever been. He had the sense when he was with Hoshi Sato, retired linguist, Starfleet commander, and his best teacher, that here was someone who had been refined like gold through all she had gone through. An inner light of strength and courage glowed in her eyes, a courage won of fears faced and overcome. For the one thousandth time, he tried to imagine what his life would have been like if hers had ended on Tarsus IV that awful day. Quickly, and he knew quite selfishly, he did not think of it. It was enough that she had crossed to safety on his ship after the tragedy and the loss of her husband. He had tears in his eyes as he reluctantly let her go.

Mary Anne stepped in to gently guide the older woman. “Brother’s got diplomatic things to talk over with Sarek. You come with me, Hoshi. I’ll show you the ship and then we can get busy in the galley before we need to settle down to linguistics. I still need you to teach me how to make that soup of yours—”

“Sarek. Amanda. I grieve with thee in the loss of thy sister’s son.”

Robert April spoke in slow and careful Vulcan as the other two passengers of the diplomatic shuttle emerged. They had been holding back out of respect for the old one, and now walked toward him. His pliant face could never be completely wiped of emotion (“If The Good Lord had intended me to play poker, He wouldn’t have given me *this* face,” he had explained to Hoshi, who had tried and failed miserably to instruct him in the nuances of the game,) but he used his natural English reserve to his advantage when dealing with Vulcans. He held up his hand

in the ta'al, the gesture of blessing shared by the Vulcans and the Jews alike.

"We grieve together," Amanda responded, her gentle face lighting up as she looked into the captain's. She reached up and carefully folded back her fascinator, leaving her black headdress to frame her classic face and perfectly coiffed hair.

"Daniel was a good man," Robert said softly, and then caught himself. Their last painful conversation lay between him and Sarek. There was no trace of it in that impassive, dignified face, but Robert could still hear Sarek's words, ringing in his ears:

Your reaction is emotional and illogical. Let us speak of this no further.

He met his erstwhile colleague's eyes and said formally, in Vulcan,

"Vulcan honors us with your presence. I am here to serve."

"Your service honors us, Captain." Sarek's voice was formal and frosty. "We come to serve. The Federation has asked she who is my wife to lend her knowledge of linguistics to the mission. I am here in a diplomatic capacity."

"Won't you come and have dinner with us?" Robert asked graciously.

"Our gratitude for your offer of sustenance—" Sarek began, but Lady Amanda interrupted.

"We'd be delighted, Captain."

“Hosh has asked to be excused from dinner, as she is worn out from the journey,” Mary Anne apologized, “but the rest of us are here. Brother, would you say Father’s blessing?”

Robert reached out for his wife’s hand and bowed his head. “‘For what we are about to receive, we are truly thankful. God bless us, every one.’”

Recent events had made the precious memories evoked by the cherished family grace even more bittersweet than usual, and he lingered a bit over the words. Finally raising his head and looking warmly around at his family and first officer gathered around him, he could see reflections of their own nostalgia in their eyes.

“No doubt our custom of saying a blessing before a meal seems illogical to you,” he began, meeting the look of long-suffering tolerance from Ambassador Sarek.

“On the contrary,” Sarek said calmly, a glimmer of understanding on his austere face. “Vulcans have a similar ritual to thank the plants for serving us. Captain, shall we discuss—”

“Begging the Ambassador’s pardon,” Robert said smoothly, “but the first rule of the captain’s table is, no shop talk until after everyone has had enough to eat. We must keep up our strength.”

He was the only one who had any inkling of the identity of the mysterious aliens, and until he was sure, he did not want to inform his family. And besides, he knew them; if he hadn’t spoken, his sister would have pushed aside the dinner plates just now being served to them, and covered the table with charts and star maps, Sarah would have recounted some stories from her day perhaps not appropriate for table talk, and Duncan would launch into extolling the glories of the new warp

seven engines whilst opening technical manuals up all over Mary Anne's charts.

He looked up to address the yeoman, who was helping to serve plates of Dover sole, Brussels sprouts, and mash, for the human family, and steaming bowls of Mary Anne's lentil vegetable soup and homemade bread, for the Vulcan family.

"Oh, thank you, Prevenient Grace, won't you pull up a chair and have some with us?"

"No thank you, sir, I'm meeting Jessie after I get off shift! They're going to help me study for the Academy Entrance!"

"Go study, Grace. We'll clean up here. You need to take every second you can with the books."

"Thank you, sir!" Yeoman Fletcher set a pitcher of lemon water on the table and turned to smile her gratitude at her captain.

"Our space daughter," Sarah explained, nodding toward the door the way the yeoman had left, "she opened up to me when I had to give her the news about Veronica, and Robert and I kind of adopted her. Her Dad wasn't around much when she was growing up, and Robert fills that void for her."

"I'm that proud of her. She's the hardest working young person on the ship," Robert added, "she asked me if I could sponsor her at the Academy, so this is her last voyage as a yeoman. She studies for the Entrance every spare moment she has. She wants to be a stellar cartographer."

"What a job, mapping the stars," Lark Rise said wistfully. Although time with Daniel's family had comforted her and the unveiling had brought closure for her, she was still very much in mourning. She had

moments when she was her old joyous self, but more often she was thoughtful and subdued, with purple smudges under her eyes. Her parents felt that the voyage with her family was the best thing for her.

"Speaking of space daughters, it was good to see Michael again. How is she settling in on the *Shenzou?* She couldn't have a better mentor than Philippa." Robert addressed Amanda but glanced at Sarek as he spoke.

The mention of Sarek's adopted child ratcheted up the tension between the two. The subject of children was obviously a sore one for them.

"She is performing her duties adequately," Sarek stated austerely.

"But is she *happy?"* Sarah pressed.

Sarek picked up his soup spoon with air of finality. "She was raised Vulcan. She finds satisfaction in her work and her studies."

Sarah shook her head, turned to Chris, and the two fell fathoms deep into talk of horses. Beginning by recounting Tango's wellbeing and history in detail, they went on to discuss Sarah's favorite sport, polo.

"Eh! 'E'd been rode hard and put away wet!"

Sarah had never been able to get Robert to try horseback riding with her, owing, he explained, to a fall off a horse when he was a child. Nothing she could say would induce him to try again.

"Bound and determined to wander off, that old ewe was…"

Mary Anne was recounting the latest from Cousin Ellen on the state of the sheep farm to Lady Amanda, who had expressed an interest in learning the fiber arts Mary Anne was so expert in. Although she was engrossed in a discussion of *ka'a'thyra* craftsmanship and the latest symphony from Salet of Vulcan with Ambassador Sarek, Lark Rise half-listened to their conversation with growing wistfulness and eagerness

for news of Yorkshire. She had been away from Home too long and, like her parents, she drew her strength from her deep roots in her homeland.

Robert turned to Duncan to ask him about the latest cricket scores. He was completely indifferent to organized sports himself and always had been, but he would memorize the scores and stats for Sarah, who was an avid cricket fan.

Once the important numbers had been committed to memory, he could listen with one ear to Duncan and silently reflect a bit as he looked around the table at each beloved face. He knew that each one was carrying a quiet, hidden heartache, and he only hoped that theirs, like his own, was eased by the closeness of family.

His moment of heart's ease was short lived. Duncan's voice broke in on his thoughts. Swallowing a sip of Mary Anne's elderberry wine, he began,

"Brother, when are you and Sarah planning to be telling us your good news? No need to be shy with family, ye ken."

"Good news, Duncan?" Robert turned back to face his brother-in-law, puzzlement written on his face. Mary Anne was silently trying to communicate to Duncan, who was oblivious to her.

"Brother! Dinnae be coy! You are stepping down from the starship program in six months, aye? Are ye and Sarah no' in the family way, then?"

All the color and light drained from Robert's face. Sarah's eyes were lasers set to maximum, but Mary Anne found her voice first. "Duncan, ye daft ha'porth, as a midwife with thirty years of experience, I am

telling you, it is never *ever* acceptable to ask a woman if she is pregnant!"

"But— but Robert was telling me—"

"No," Robert whispered. "No, Brother, we aren't."

"Dinna fash. Ye twa are under loads of stress. Keep trying, you'll—"

Robert looked over at his brother with mingled rebuke and forgiveness in his eyes. "We'll talk later. In private."

Sarek, who had been silently watching the scene unfold, raised an eyebrow. "Am I to understand that you and Dr. April wish to procreate, and are having difficulty? Perhaps, a Vulcan physician who worked with Amanda and myself—"

"Sarah and I haven't talked—" Robert began, his cheeks growing warm.

Chris felt it was incumbent upon him, as first officer, to have his captain's back in an uncomfortable situation, and to prevent Dr. April from instigating a Diplomatic Incident.

"Gandalf's just as wild about horses as he ever was, I see," he teased.

Robert smiled his gratitude at Chris over his own glass of elderflower cordial. "You know it, Chris."

"'E's the city mouse, 'e is." Sarah's eyes were still dangerously bright, and her cheeks still flushed, but she was following Robert's lead to preserve the peace. She would put a tin ear on Duncan later. Over the years, he had become the big brother she never had. The two fought like a proper brother and sister but remained ferociously loyal one to another.

"And she, the country mouse."

“My wife,” Sarek murmured, cutting himself another slice of homemade bread, “I fail to understand why two humans would classify themselves as genus *Mus…”*

Amanda set down her soup spoon and shook her head in fond exasperation. “A children’s story, my husband,” she replied under her breath.

Robert went on. “Sarah grew up in horse country, and I grew up in the city. Coventry, you understand. Not *the* City. She was riding before she could walk. For me, it was always music, languages, and swimming.”

“Did you not promise to instruct me in the sport of swimming?” Only Vulcan austerity could make the simple request sound like an accusation.

Robert responded diplomatically. “I did, and I’m happy to. We can use the pool.”

“Brother was always the one for sheep.” Mary Anne was listening in. She glanced tenderly over at the little basket beside her chair. The lamb had worn her small self out gamboling in the shuttlebay Robert had had converted for her use, and was now fast asleep. “He’s a good shepherd, Brother is. A shepherd of souls as well as sheep, that’s ‘is life work.”

Lark Rise stood up to place a serving dish in the middle of the table. “If anyone would like pudding, I made a lovely spotted dick. And some vanilla custard sauce to go with it.”

Perhaps the underlying tension he sensed around the table was getting to him. Perhaps he had taken a drop too much of Mary Anne’s excellent, but potent, homemade wine. Perhaps it was the release of that tension as a result of the wine, but Chris Pike could not help himself.

He exploded. “Spotted *dick?* Sarah, you might want to have a look at that!” he managed to choke out between spasms of wild mirth.

Lark Rise was utterly taken aback. “It’s a traditional English suet steamed pud. My parents are pescatarian so I used a vegetarian sub for the suet. It’s got currants in. My Auntie Mary Anne brought some from her own garden.”

Robert felt his own laughter verging on tears. At his side, Sarah was helplessly convulsed by mirth, her face buried in his sleeve.

“Oh Chris, your *face—”*

“It means something a bit different to our American brethren and sistern, my darling,” Robert finally managed, wiping his eyes, “though how someone who studied at Juilliard, as you did—”

“I’ll explain it to you in private, my darling,” Mary Anne promised.

Exercising great restraint, Sarek leaned over and murmured, “My wife, what is the significance—”

Amanda had buried her face in her napkin and her shoulders were shaking. “My husband, it’s an example of the language barrier between the island Captain April is from and the continent Chris is from.” She mentioned the equivalent word in Vulcan. Sarek turned even greener than usual and refrained from further inquiry.

Mary Anne took the situation in hand. “Chris, do try it. It’s simply scrummy. It’s my favorite pud. Lark, have you got lemon zest in?”

“Who taught me to make spotted dick, Auntie dear?”

“That looks like *no* pudding I have ever seen, Lark—”

“It’s English pudding, not American pudding, and it’s proof is said to be in the eating thereof.”

Sarek was looking around the table in resigned bemusement. “This is *not* how we do things on Vulcan,” his eyes said. Amanda would not do anything so gauche as to laugh out loud, but her eyes made merry.

Duncan decided it was up to him to redeem himself by saving the dinner. “I reckon we ought to ‘tak a cup o’ kindness yet for auld lang syne.’” His deep, rich Scottish voice resonated. “What shall we drink to?” Duncan looked around at all of them. “To being together once again.”

“Absent friends,” Robert added.

There was a chorus of “‘Absent friends.’”

“*L’Chaim*,” Lark Rise said suddenly. The color drained from her cheeks in an instant. Her eyes flooded with tears. “I’m sorry— I’m so sorry, everyone—”

Blindly getting to her feet, she made for the door. Her father was instantly on his feet, intending to run after her, when his wife’s gentle hand on his stopped him.

“I think this is a job for her Mum.”

Ambassador Sarek stood with the air of a Vulcan who had endured all the human display of emotion he was capable of withstanding for one day. “My wife and I must retire. It has been a long journey.” He held out two fingers for his wife. “My wife, attend me.”

“Of course,” Pike said quickly. “Let me show you to your quarters.”

“Brother, what did I say amiss? Do you two no’ want to start over?”

Concerned, Duncan took the departure of most of the dinner party to take his brother aside.

“Would that we could,” Robert said, simply.

“Damn. Damn damn. Is it too late for tha’ lass?” Duncan asked sympathetically.

“No. It’s too late for me.” The turbo lift that was bringing them back to crew quarters was granting the two men privacy hard to find on a starship.

The truth finally began to dawn upon Duncan as he caught the look, quickly masked, of utter anguish on his friend’s face. Memories of one of the darkest times in their shared life together swept over them, like the shadow of a great hawk flying over their heads. Out of that time had come lifelong friendships; but those friendships had been forged in a terrible crucible, and he could feel the melting heat of it in his heart.

“Brother— it wasn’t the Klingons, was it? The torture—”

“Yes,” Robert said painfully. “I— the last doctor I saw told me that I should not set my heart on having children, but of course, medicine is always advancing…”

Duncan was wincing in empathy. “Have you talked to Sarah about all this, then?”

Robert hesitated. “No. I don’t want to open up old wounds—”

“But ‘appen she can *do* something for you. Sarah’s a skilled physician. I’d go to her with anything. Brother, just talk to her.”

The light rekindled in Robert’s eyes. “I will. You’ve given me new hope, Brother. Thank you.”

CHAPTER 18: IF YOU WERE THE ONLY GIRL IN THE WORLD

"When I was a wee lass, I thought my Tad was the 'eternal Father, strong to save' in the old song. Now that I'm grown, he's still my hero. Not very many people can say that."

Lark Rise's voice was subdued and slightly husky but was regaining its musical quality once again. She and Chris had walked and talked for hours, exploring every deck on the great ship, with special attention to Lt. Corbett's hydroponics bay and the Observation Deck, which the musicians had promptly claimed as their rehearsal area. Chris had not heard the discordant cacophony of an orchestra tuning up and a choir singing scales since high school, and he found himself wondering how the same group of people who had created such transcendent music for lift off could possibly make such an infernal racket. Lark, with a lifetime of intimate acquaintance with musicians in her back pocket, had only laughed and promised to add her harp and voice to the musical tapestry soon.

"I can't replace your father as captain of this ship, Lark," Chris blurted out. "I still have no idea what he was thinking when he asked me."

Chris wasn't sure what it was about this young woman that made it so easy to open up. Perhaps because she was grieving for her fiancé, and thus the consideration that she might become more than a friend was completely off the table. Perhaps it was the warmth and inner strength she had inherited from her father. Or perhaps it was just that he felt he

had known her for all the years he had worked with Captain April and heard everything there was to know about “my daughter Lark.”

“Chris, do you know how my father conceived the concept of the Starship program and the five-year missions in the first place?” Lark asked quietly.

Chris was taken aback. “Well, no, I don’t believe I do— I thought it was something Admiral Archer had been working on when he passed away, and your father picked up the torch—”

“After his first command was destroyed, my father spent six months in a Starfleet hospital not knowing if he would ever walk again,” Lark began. “It was finally an experimental treatment at the Vulcan science academy that gave him his mobility back. He hasn’t taken it for granted one single moment since. It was a horrid dark time for him. He’d lost so many people, and his captain, whom he loved like a father, and he wasn’t sure how to go on.”

“But your father—”

“It’s often the happiest people who have suffered the most,” Lark said sagely.

“Can’t argue with that—”

“My Mam never left his side,” Lark went on. “She was in her last year of veterinary school, and she used to study at his bedside. This was long before they fell in love and got married but they were so close for so long, I think everyone who knew them knew it was a matter of time. But anyway, my Mam had left Starfleet by that time, resigned her commission and gone back to Earth, but she had a lot of friends who were still in Starfleet. He didn’t want to see anyone but her during that time… he didn’t want anyone to see him like that… but she used to run

messages back and forth. And as soon as his pain began to ease a bit so he could think clearly again, he felt he wanted to serve somehow. Advances with the UT meant that there wasn't the demand for linguists that there had been when he first joined up, so he needed to find another direction. He needed something to focus on. He got to thinking about what Jonathan Archer was always saying, about missing the early innocent days of exploration, before they had to become soldiers and military. And my Tad got thinking that there had to be a way to recapture that sense of wonder and amazement and sheer joy of exploration again. And he knew he might never be part of it himself, but it would be enough for him to know that he had had a part in sending others to the stars." Lark Rise paused to gesture ahead. "We're on the way to the Rec room, right?"

"If you're planning to keep your promise and play me a game of Badminton, we are. So… your father…"

"So, he got to thinking, that kind of exploration would unite the fractious and troubled Federation. Infuse new hope in a new era," Lark went on. "But he didn't know of a single ship that was in service at the time that would be up to such a voyage of discovery. He's served on a few different classes… the old Border Patrol cutters and the Diplomatic Corps frigates, and of course you know he came out to space on his grandfather's freighter, Gramp served in the Merchant Marine for years… and he knew the innate weaknesses of every vessel. So, he got in touch with some friends of his back at Command and asked them to help him design a new class of space vessel. He was like a kid again, working on models and drawings and plans… I grew up with them all. And this… this vessel… is the result. Whilst my father was in physical

therapy, learning to walk again, he was also learning to fly again in his hopes and dreams for this ship. And that's why I love this ship so much. It gave me my father back."

Profoundly moved, Chris had to clear his throat a couple times before he could speak. "This isn't making me feel any more confident about my worthiness to take over your father's legacy…"

"My father," Lark replied slowly, "is a True Believer. He gets grief for it, but he is who he is. He is a True Believer in Starfleet. In the Federation. In humanity, and the goodness to be found in each person. And he believes in you, Chris. Believe in him back, eh? He sees in you the exact type of person he had in mind when he designed the Starship Program. He didn't choose you lightly, Chris. And now let's play some badminton."

"Lark Rise, uh— the Rec room is, uh, occupied—"

"Occupied? The musicians must be having an orgy, to hear you talk of it—" Lark stood on tiptoe to look over his shoulder. In the Rec room, the lights had been subdued to allow for shadows, and there was the flickering light of candles. There were only two people in the room, and Lark could not understand why Chris was uncomfortable.

"It's just my parents, Chris. They don't mind if we—"

"Lark, we shouldn't be watching them, we should give them some privacy—"

Lark was genuinely puzzled. "Why? They're not snogging. They're just dancing. They wouldn't care if we did catch them snogging anyway, they'd just laugh—"

"Because it's disrespectful—"

“Some of my earliest memories are watching my parents dance the eightsome reel and ‘Strip the Willow.’ Watch them. My Tad says the waltz is the perfect metaphor for marriage onboard a starship. He leads her, and she follows his lead, but she guides and directs him, too. And they balance each other— the tension between them is what keeps them balanced. Never a step out of time. They move together like one person—”

Chris felt as though he had caught the captain and his wife in a much more intimate act than mere dance. Perhaps it was the oneness Lark had described. Perhaps it was the way the two were looking at each other when they felt themselves absolutely alone. Perhaps it was the song they were dancing to. Lark sang the words under her breath as she watched.

Nothing else would matter in the world today,

We could go on loving in the same old way…

*“*Oh, may Love and Light grant that they may go on loving in the same old way for many years.” She didn’t realize she had been praying out loud until Chris responded,

“This is also our prayer.”

“And, my Mam’s made a misstep. Listen to them laugh about it. They sound like a couple of teenagers…”

“They’re so lucky to have each other,” he finally said, turning away with a sigh. The little stumble on Sarah’s part had led to snogging. Lark watched them for a second longer and likewise turned away.

“They’re alright. My Tad has been going through hell, and I’ve been worried about them. Now I know they’re going to be fine. You can see it, in the way they dance, can’t you? How aware they are of their own and each other’s mortality, and how close they have come to losing one another? Having something that precious means having something that precious to lose, and out here in space, they know they could lose each other at any moment. So, they have to make the most of every single moment they have together.”

“I don’t know too many long haulers,” Chris said quietly, as they walked away. “I’ve seen the strain space travel takes on long term relationships. I don’t know too many officers who have risked it.”

“My Tad doesn’t see their love as a vulnerability, a distraction, or a weakness. He sees it as a source of strength, courage, and wisdom,” Lark responded. Her pensiveness was trembling on the brink of tears. Seeing her parents so happy together reminded her sharply of her own loss. “They affirm one another’s strengths and reinforce one another’s weaknesses. They bolster and support one another. They would make an ideal command team if my mother had any interest in command, which she doesn’t…”

Chris thought back to Charlie and Hobelia. *I won’t settle for anything less than what they have, or what Captain and Dr. April have,* he thought, *now that I know it exists. I’ll always be looking for it.*

“My darling?” Sarah found Lark Rise huddled in her quarters, trying to compose herself. “I’ve got some hot chocolate bombs in emergency storage in our quarters. Come have some with me?”

“I just don’t feel up to seeing but you anyone just now—”

“Leave that to me. We’ll sneak in.”

Curled up next to her mother on the antique sofa, with a woolen afghan wrapped around her shivering shoulders and her long harpists’ fingers wrapped around her cup of chocolate, Lark slowly began to relax.

“I’m not sleeping very well,” she said hesitantly, “I didn’t want to mither you, but—”

“Mither me, it’s why I make the brass around here. That sensitive you are to medications, my darling, just like your father. I’d like to avoid those if we can. ‘Appen some mothering will do?”

“The thing is, Mam, I’m having the most shocking nightmares,” she blurted out. “Every night, since Tad told me, I’ve dreamt about the way he died—”

“Oh, my darling. I *know*. I know all about nightmares and so does your father. Do you want to talk about yours?”

“*No.* I want to forget about them and never think of them again. When did *you* have nightmares?”

“When we lost your mother and your sister and we nearly lost your father, after his imprisonment… I had nightmares for months.”

“Is that when you quit practicing medicine?” Lark knew the story but felt she needed to hear it again. The story had meaning to her that it hadn’t before, as her mother had faced crossroads in her life that Lark was facing now.

“Yes. Your father asked your Aunt Mary Anne and me to serve with him on that last mission, to extract your mother. And that mission, during which your father was taken, opened my eyes. I always thought I’d be a doctor because your grandparents were. I didn’t know that it would turn me inside out to see people suffer. I thought being a doctor meant I could heal all suffering. I didn’t know that medicine isn’t magic. That I’d lose patients to preventable conditions because we were in an emergency situation and I didn’t have the medical supplies I needed. That even with all the drugs and technology at my fingertips I’d still have to watch a patient, someone I knew, someone I cared about, lying on my table with the tears running down because the pain was just so awful—”

“That was Tad, wasn’t it?” Lark whispered.

“That it was, my darling. Your mother, God rest her soul, was far beyond the reach of all pain by the time the MACO’s got her and your father out. I couldn’t face seeing anything like that ever again. So, I went to veterinary school. I grew up in horse country, so it seemed natural. When your father asked me to sign onboard the *Enterprise*, he told me he couldn’t bear to see me throwing away everything I’d worked so hard for. He said he wanted to see me take another opportunity to alleviate suffering. That I was the most compassionate doctor he knew, and goodness knew with one disaster and another he’d known his fair share of them. You know your father, he gets round a person… I told him I’d be damned to bloody ‘ell fire if I ever had to watch him go through anything like that again. Sure enough, what did he do on that mission but go sodding off—”

“Like he does. But Mam, you’re a *good* doctor. All those years you were a veterinarian… did you ever regret not practicing medicine?”

Sarah knew that Lark was asking about her own life. “My darling,” she said earnestly. “What I’m trying to say… is that your old Mam’s been where you are now. Feeling like the work you chose to dedicate your life to is no bloody good because it couldn’t save a life you would have died to save. I don’t regret a single moment of those years working as a veterinarian. But when I came back to practicing medicine… I had so much catch up to do. I was lucky. Phlox took me under his wing and became the wisest, funniest, most frustrating mentor a doctor ever had. The thing about being a parent is, you want to spare your children from making the mistakes you made.”

“You’re talking about my music, aren’t you?” Lark whispered.

“Lark, your father and I have seen how much hard work and dedication it has taken you to get where you are now. I don’t want to see you do what I did and quit something you love because of the pain of loss.”

Lark was quiet for a long time, digesting the conversation, sipping her chocolate. Finally, she looked up. “Right you are, Mam. I’ll think about it. It helps that you went through some of the same things.” She smiled suddenly, delightedly. “Being a veterinarian wasn’t all bad… Do you remember when I was little and scared in the darkness, and you brought home a tank of bioluminescent fish from the vets’ office to put beside my bed?”

“All those nights you climbed into bed with me, and we’d snuggle all night long and listen to the wind wuthering around the House of the Perfect Eaves?”

“Or the nights I’d wake up with nightmares, and you’d read me *The Secret Garden* and *The Little Princess* until I fell asleep?”

“And the dogs I used to bring home from the vets because I just couldn’t resist a good dog— remember the time we had seventeen dogs and your Aunt Mary Anne *put her foot down?”*

They laughed together. “Tad would have *loved* that. He misses Pilot so much. Do you think he’ll ever have the heart to have another dog?”

“Your father and I are considering a ground-based assignment,” Sarah explained, “but he hasn’t got inner light about it yet, and I’m not going to rush him. If we do go back to Earth to settle, I’m going to encourage him to have a dog.”

“I hope you do.”

“And now, my darling.” Chocolate finished, the two had been snuggled up together, remembering Daniel, the funny things he used to say and the loving things he used to do. “Hang onto those memories. The good memories will drive out the bad ones, and his fiery joyous Jewish spirit is *always* with you. Choir and orchestra rehearsals start in earnest tomorrow, and you are going to be busier than a three-legged cat with fleas. Do you feel that you could sleep now that your mother has talked you from hell to breakfast?”

Her face went from relaxed to tight and frightened again. “I— I’m afraid—”

“Why don’t you stay with your father and me? Take the sofa. That way if you need attention in the night, we are right in the next room.”

“That would be *perfect.* Mam?”

“Yes, my love?”

“What was so funny about the spotted dick?”

There was nothing, Sarah April had decided long ago, half so comforting and secure as lying in bed watching your husband get ready to join you. Always the same routine, of emptying his pockets of communicator and communication tapes he had accumulated during the day. Laying his Coventry cross of nails and his Candle medallion tenderly on top of the bureau. Draping his sweater over the back of the sofa. Sitting down to slip out of his boots, with a sigh of relief, and then slipping out of his uniform so that no fabric should come between his skin and hers. He always knelt by the bed for a few moments before he joined her, asking Love and Light for strength and guidance as he commanded the souls of two hundred crew members into the unknown. She bowed her own head and prayed with him.

…those who work, or watch, or weep this night… Defend us against all adversities that may hurt the body, and from all evil thoughts which may assault and hurt the soul…

Then, he would settle in next to her and take her in his arms, and for a few blessed hours they would shut out the world of the starship and retreat into a world of their own.

But tonight, Sarah was uneasy. She sat up at his behest to let him gently but firmly massage her aching shoulders. Wincing as his thumbs worked a particularly painful knot, she began, “Now see here. Why the bloody ‘ell fire would Duncan ask me such a question?”

He could not see her face but sensed that her eyes were flashing. “I’m not certain, my darling, perhaps wishful thinking on his part? Sarah…” his hands paused in their ministrations, and he tenderly smoothed a stray lock of hair away from her neck. “Sarah… would you be willing to consider—”

She turned to face him, catching the caressing hand in both of hers. “Rob, I’m not capable of having this conversation tonight. Please understand?”

Robert felt the same sensation in his middle that he felt upon entering low G. “Right you are, Dearest. You are so tired from your day—”

“You and the Ambassador,” she broke in. “You could cut the tension between you two with a knife at tea. What is *at* you two?”

“Nothing that will affect our efficiency in working together on this mission,” Robert tried to reassure her, but Sarah would not be shrugged off.

“That’s not good enough. If you asked me, I’d have said you and Sarek got on like a house on fire. But— when you first heard his name, you were *cold.* I’ve never seen you look like that before.”

Robert sighed. “I’m bloody knackered. Could we discuss this—”

“I’m not going to sleep until I hear what is upsetting you.”

“Right then. Did you know that Ambassador Sarek disowned his own son when he joined Starfleet?” Robert’s eyes flashed lightening and his voice presaged the coming storm.

“Ee, by gum!” Sarah was taken aback. “No wonder you were upset. Right then. Sarek is *Vulcan.* We can’t judge another race by our own moral code, you know that… they have a completely different culture,

different outlook, and different family dynamic. We can't expect them to be human. They're not human."

Robert stirred impatiently. "I realize that, dear. I'm talking about Spock. I had him in one of my classes a couple years back…"

"We've talked about this. We disagree with some of the methods Sarek and Amanda have used in raising him and Michael, but we don't judge other parents, it's not who we are, especially after some of the things we went through bringing up Lark Rise…"

"It isn't *about* judgement. It's about the look of pain and desolation and lostness I saw in Spock's eyes in an unguarded moment. Just one moment, and then I never saw it again. I tried so hard to reach him. I wanted to offer to be a friend to him. Failing that, I wanted to get to know him well enough to find someone who might be able to form a bond with him. I… I failed. I think because he knew of my close work association with his father, and felt…"

"That you might choose sides?"

"Perhaps. As a father, I simply cannot comprehend how a father could disown his own flesh and blood. I look at my Lark Rise, whom I love more than life itself, whom I would live and die for, and I try to imagine any circumstances under which I would disown her, and I can't come up with one. Not one. The thought fills me with such pain—"

"Vulcan cultural mores are so different from ours. We can't *judge* what's right for another species—"

"I'd give *anything* for one last heart to heart with my father. And to see a father throwing away that opportunity—"

“So that’s what has embittered you toward Sarek,” Sarah said quietly. “But are you not doing the same thing yourself? Throwing away a promising friendship because of a difference—”

“Of opinion? This isn’t a difference of opinion; it’s a difference of an entire value system. I look at my daughter and have regrets about some of the things I wished I had done differently, God knows I do, but—”

“How do you know that Sarek hasn’t done just that? Done something he regretted and then couldn’t take back?” Sarah saw that her words were hitting home. “The two of you had so much in common. So many shared beliefs and values. He learned to see past your uniform to the mind, the soul, inside it. We know how he feels about Starfleet, but he felt you were a kindred spirit. Perhaps…”

“Perhaps working together once again will help mend those fences,” Robert said thoughtfully. Then, with a little chuckle, “‘Something there is that doesn’t love a wall,’ and I’m married to that ‘something’…”

“No, but if you come a little closer to me, I can show you what I do love… unless you’re too *knackered,* of course…”

Much later, wrapped up in one another, finally relaxed enough to begin to drift off together, Sarah murmured, “Just keep your heart open to Sarek, right? Think of you and George. After all those years of controversy and struggle you two finally had your moment of understanding and reconciliation.”

“Mmmm,” her husband murmured against her hair, “but George and I are welded together through shared hardship and trial, not so much through shared commonalities. Sarek and I… I felt a kinship

between us… as though we were brothers in spirit, and now that seems irreparably broken…"

"Just give it some time. And who knows, perhaps this voyage will be the crucible that tries your friendship in the fire, purges away the dross and leaves only the gold."

"Perhaps. I love thee, my Sarah."

"I love thee, Rob. Now go to sleep."

There was far more to Robert's instinctive shrinking away from Sarek than he had confided in Sarah. He wasn't sure he could explain in such a way to make her understand. Sarek had used the mind meld to save his *life,* dammit, and in doing so, had secured Sarah's lifelong loyalty. He had been critically injured on his last mission with Sarek. Without his consent… he was in no condition to give his consent to anything… Sarek had joined their two minds in order to pour his own health and strength into his valued colleague.

It was a well-intentioned and skillfully carried out mind meld comparable to a lifesaving medical procedure. But Robert knew what it was to be violated, and he could not help but feel the mind meld to be a deep and painful violation.

Yet through the meld, he had gained a knowledge of Sarek so intimate that he felt like a voyeur. He had come to understand that Sarek's impeccable logic sprang from blazing compassion and love. His English reserve understood Sarek's need to hide that fire under a granite crust. But what he could not understand was how such a being could act so coldly toward those he loved most.

At his side, Sarah stirred restlessly and swore. “I *knew* I shouldn’t have had that third cup of tea—”

When she came back to bed, she snapped, “How come you aren’t sleeping? *You* know enough not to drink tea an hour before bedtime—”

He sat up, and told her everything.

CHAPTER 19: WITHIN OUR DARKEST NIGHT

"Where's Captain April? I need to speak to Captain April!"

A frantic voice broke through the rapt attention of the auditorium. Amongst the audience, one could have heard a pin drop. Up front, the choir was singing Samuel Barber's *Adagio,* the chorale version, and every one of them was singing their hearts out.

"The *Adagio* expresses world sorrow," Robert would explain, "the universal experience of grief, the 'no worst, there is none' Hopkins writes of, and in hearing and singing the *Adagio* we become linked with all who grieve and mourn."

Sarah April was sitting in the back row of the auditorium where she could slip away if she were needed. She had taken advantage of a few quiet restful moments during the memorial service to sit quietly with her eyes closed, and let the music wash over her tired mind and heart.

Over the past several months in space, she had been pulling double shifts in sickbay caring for the musicians as well as her own crew. The usual wear and tear that the musicians' life had upon elbows and wrists and vocal cords had been complicated by a nasty lower respiratory flu that went through the entire ship. Ignoring his protests, she had placed her vulnerable husband in quarantine until she had traced the virus back to a larger outbreak on one of the Star bases and worked with their doctors on an antiviral. Although it had been a relief to return to the

routine of crew checkups and care, the extra workload had made it all but impossible for her to continue her own research.

On those nights when by some miracle she found herself able to settle at her desk and catch up on paperwork, she found herself completely losing track of time as, the days concerns put behind her, she had a few moments to return to a pet project. On those nights she worked late, she would invariably look up to find that someone had left her a plate of her favorite marmite, Swiss, and cucumber sandwiches on her sister in law's homemade sourdough bread, with a cup of tea beside it. She would remember, rubbing her neck, that she had vaguely registered warm hands on her shoulders and a thistledown kiss brushed to her cheek, but that her husband had slipped away before she could look up and acknowledge him. Still, sometimes she would find a simple note next to her tea.

I love thee. Don't work too late.

She had seen Lark Rise settled in with one of her staff grief and trauma counselors whom she trusted most deeply, but the healing process was a long and arduous one, and sometimes her daughter felt she was getting worse instead of better. But she had found comfort in connecting through her music with those who had likewise lost friends and loved ones to the pirates, and they and she formed a close-knit community whose password was grief.

Now, sitting with busy hands finally folded in her lap, Sarah felt nothing but cold dismay spread through her exhausted body at the shrill voice demanding Robert.

No. Oh please, no. Not another crisis. Not another catastrophe that only Robert can solve. He is just beginning to be himself again. Singing in the choir for these memorial services has been so good for him. He's been able to give expression to his pain through the music. And it is through offering up his own sorrow that he can take into his heart the sorrow of all of these people who've lost friends and family members.

Sarah's reflections lasted only a split second before her training took over. Instantly she was on her feet, taking the captain's hand and leading him out of the auditorium so that they could speak in private. Her fingers instinctively felt for his pulse. Rapid and thready. *Shock,* she thought, *I've got to get him to the infirmary.*

"I'm Doctor April. Captain April's other half. Captain's up front with the choir right now. Perhaps I could help?"

The captain was trembling all over, his breath coming in short gasps, his skin grey and glistening with perspiration. Whatever he had seen on his routine cargo run through deep space to the outermost colonies, he apparently had not eaten or slept since he had seen it.

He made an effort to pull himself up straight for the Doctor. "Captain Frank Wardwell, ma'am. Skipper of Merchant Marine *Castine* out of Port Clyde. Doctor, they're gone— they're all gone—"

"Take a deep breath, Captain," urged Sarah, "*who's* gone?"

"*Frank?"* Robert had heard his name spoken and had slipped away from the choir. The black choir robes swirled around him like autumn leaves.

The distraught freighter Captain tremblingly drew himself to attention. "Sir! The inhabitants of New Pennsylvania are under attack—

I couldn't defend them— the Border Patrol never answered my hails— there's no one left— they never saw the faces of their murderers—"

New Pennsylvania. A colony of Quakers, Amish, Mennonites, and Moravians. Non-combatants, farmers, pacifists, every one of them. God have mercy—

"Did anyone get off the planet, Captain?" Sarah asked shrilly, giving her husband a minute. He looked ashen.

The Captain was by now openly weeping. Robert slipped a supporting arm around his shoulders.

"Let's get you to the infirmary, Skipper."

"Captain April, you praying? Would you mind praying out loud?"

"Lark Rise, this is it. I have to go. A frontier colony is under attack. I need you to stay here and comfort and direct the musicians, arrange passage for them—"

Lark Rise's brave face was as pallid as her father's. She knew that look of old.

"Tad, I'm coming with you."

"Oh no you are not, my daughter. This is a dangerous mission. It's first contact with a hostile. We think they might be the same hostiles who destroyed the colony your grandparents were on."

"Tad, I can't do this one more time! I can't be the only one in the family left behind in peace and safety while my dearest ones go sodding off to get themselves *killed!"*

Sarah had been concerned about Lark Rise's state of mind for weeks and had been trying to conceal her concern from him. Lark, knowing her father was going through a bad time but not precisely what was wrong,

had not confided in him. He was feeling now the breakdown in communication and relationship with his daughter, and the weight of many years of struggle to communicate across light years.

He tried to be calm and reasonable. "I *can't* take a civilian on a mission like this. You know that, Lark."

"Then let me *enlist—"*

"My darling, what I need from you is that you stay here, safe, and do your healing work, hold us in the Light, and be here for us to come home to. That gives me strength as I cannot express to you. Now kiss your old father and go find your Mam—"

She seemed to wilt. "I love thee, Tad, I *love thee—"*

"Thee are my heart," he whispered to her, rocking her in his arms as though she were a child again. "I love thee."

"Number One, report."

Chris thought he had never seen his Captain look so stern, and so angry. Robert was formidable when he was roused, as most gentle souls are when they are stirred to anger. The quietude of his restraint indicated subdued ferocity. Chris pitied the fool who evoked that anger by wantonly destroying and inflicting pain upon the innocent.

"The crew is all present and accounted for, sir. We are ready for departure."

"Very well. Jose, lay in a course to New Pennsylvania. Jo, stand on it."

"Maximum warp, aye." Commander Meier looked relieved to finally be underway.

“Robert,” Sarah whispered, “I’m going below to prepare for casualties.”

“Sarah—” Robert’s hardened features melted into sorrow as they looked at her, “you do that. We aren’t giving up hope until… *Now hear this,* children: we’re *not* giving up hope. Full stop.”

“Aye, sir,” came the chorus for the crew.

“I’m going to be ready when we find the survivors,” she said firmly. Her preparations would keep her from losing her mind, and her faith that they would find survivors gave him strength.

Lt. Corbett looked up from her scope. “Captain April?”

“Yes, what is it, Meek?”

“Sir, I’ve analyzed the data tapes from the *Castine.* The hostile vessel which attacked New Pennsylvania does not match any known vessel within the Federation.” She paused to swallow dryly. “*Or* without.”

He saw the fear in her eyes and had to stop himself from reaching out to squeeze her shoulder in comfort. In her culture, a married man simply did not— “Thank you, Meek. Could you put the images of this vessel on the main view screen?”

Before Lt. Corbett could comply, a terrible cry of pain rang out across the bridge. Robert’s heart was in his mouth in an instant, picturing exploding consoles or short circuits, and was mentally cursing what Lorna would call the dock turkeys as he whirled to see his sister, at communications, wrench her earpiece from her ear as though it were a burning coal. A signal of such strength that it had overwhelmed her filters had come through the earpiece, and as blood trickled from her left ear, he realized that her eardrum had been ruptured.

“Get below and let Sarah have a look,” he said firmly, holding his sister’s hands in both of his to help her up.

She looked blankly at him, not hearing him. He nodded at Duncan to escort her, but she shook her head and gestured that she wanted to remain at her post to discover who or what had sent that signal. He knew how stubborn she was and what a high pain tolerance she had. He hated to pull rank on his older sister, but if she left him no choice…

“Sister, report to Sickbay. That’s an order.”

There were tears of pain in Mary Anne’s eyes as she nodded. As Duncan took her hand to gently lead her off the bridge, she glanced back just long enough to see the images Lt. Corbett had displayed on the main view screen.

There was no doubt. The ships that had destroyed the New World were the same configuration as the ships that had attacked New Pennsylvania. They didn’t know who these alien beings were or what they wanted, but they did know what they were capable of. The awful reports from the New World over thirty years ago rang in their ears:

No survivors.

*“*Dinna look there, lassie,” Duncan murmured to her, slipping his arm around her waist to support her as she staggered. He half led, half carried her off the bridge.

A solemn litany of names echoed in the back of his mind. He knew so many of those settlers as his Quaker brothers and sisters. Had seen them off as they left, full of hopes and dreams, to make a world for themselves on an uninhabited planet on the far reaches of the Federation. ‘Like the first settlers of the New World, the city on a hill,’ they said. They were the gentlest souls he had ever known, and they had

been wiped out by the same… *no.* NOT *the same beings. The beings responsible for our parents' deaths were summarily destroyed when the Border Patrol showed up, and we all hoped and prayed we'd never see them again. Now that they are here… we must redouble our efforts to translate that language so that we can communicate.*

The bridge doors slid open. Lyra dashed onto the bridge and slid under the comm panel to see what repairs they could make. Chris was immediately at their side to offer his assistance.

"Sir… do you know this ship design?" Lt. Corbett spoke tentatively, seeing her Captain wrap his arms around his body as if in great cold.

"Yes," he said quietly. "I'm going to check on the progress Hoshi and Amanda are making with that language. You have the conn."

"Sister, I'm flayed."

Sarah might have been shaken to see her unflappable sister-in-law so frightened. Mary Anne lay back on the diagnostic table as Sarah worked to repair the eardrum. Her first priority had been to get her sister's pain and shock under control. Duncan had helped, stroking her hair, holding her hand, and murmuring to her. She had managed a sickly smile and told him to get back to work, that her burst eardrum was no excuse for him to faff about.

"I know, Sister. I know. I'm here. We're going to have you good as new in no time, but not if you don't hold *still…"*

"No." Mary Anne shook her head, which movement made her grimace in pain and evoked a sharp rebuke from Sarah. "Hold *still,* I tell you! Sister, I know you and Robert have friends on New Pennsylvania. So have I. We *cannot* give up hope—"

“No,” Mary Anne whispered, using her hands to gesture this time. “No. Sarah—”

Sarah finished her healing work. “There. I don’t want you working until this has time to heal up completely. Come into my office. I’ll mash us some tea and we can talk in private.”

Over cups of medicinal lavender lemon balm tea brewed from the onboard herb garden, Sarah reached out her hand for her sister’s.

“I’m scared because I want the drugs again,” Mary Anne blurted all at once. “Sister, I’ve been sober for thirty years. Never in all those thirty years have I had any desire for the drugs. Not even when we lost Jennie and Candle. I was so focused on being auntie to Lark Rise and helping my brother heal. But *now…”* she drew a sobbing breath. “Now… I don’t know if I can trust myself… “

Sarah set her cup of tea to one side and stretched out her hands for Mary Anne’s.

“I know you won’t,” she said quietly. “I *know* you won’t go back to that horrible dark place. Sister, I stayed with you while you detoxed. It was bloody hell. It was the worst pain you’ve ever experienced, and you’ve given birth without pain medication.”

Mary Anne was trying to interject. “I *know* that, Sarah. No one else could have done for me what you did that fortnight, and I *love* you for it. You are a true sister to me. I’m scared because… I began taking the drugs to deal with the loss of our parents… and now that we are confronting their killers, the loss is just as raw as it was thirty years ago…” her voice broke.

“We don’t *know* that these are the same beings,” Sarah began feebly, knowing she was lighting candles in a hurricane.

“But we do, Sister. I saw them on the view screen. Just as I was coming down to you—”

Sarah took a deep breath. She would deal with this revelation later. Just now she needed to be strong for Mary Anne. “Sister, I know you. I know you don’t want the drugs. They’ve been out of your system for so long now that there is no chemical dependency to be concerned about.”

“But what about—”

“You want the *feeling* you had with the drugs. You want to forget the pain. The devastation. Sister, *you* know. You’d forget for a little while, and then when you became sober again, the pain would be still there, but the relationships that would help you endure that pain would be strained and broken.”

Mary Anne was quiet for a long time, soul searching, sipping her tea. Finally, she looked up with tears in her eyes.

“I know you’re right, Sister. It’s just… I’m still scared I can’t trust myself… I want to be held accountable every single second of every day until this is over.”

“You’ve got me. And your brother. And Mary Anne… you’ve got Duncan.”

“That daft ha’porth? Like a second brother to me, he is…”

“I’ve seen the way he looks at you when you aren’t looking. When you’re working. When you’re nurturing Betsy the not so little lamb. When you’re practicing your cello. When you’re kneading your bread and talking to yourself. When you throw your head back to laugh at your brother. When you’re gassing with Lark Rise like a couple of sisters. Duncan looks at you the way Robert looks at me.”

“That’s not possible…”

“He loves you, lassie,” Sarah said quietly. “He isn’t asking for anything in return. He just wants you to draw strength from him. I know this isn’t the time or the place for a declaration. But I want you to lean on him, draw strength from him, let his love support and heal you. This is how Robert and I helped each other after our parents were lost. Our connection to one another kept us from drifting into the open sea.”

“I can’t think about a relationship right now,” Mary Anne whispered.

“You two will sort it out, Sister. I’m not advocating a proper relationship. I’m advocating the mutual interdependence that Robert and I have shared for many years. Long before we became lovers and decided to share our lives together.”

Mary Anne finished her tea and stood up. “Thank you, Sister. Thank you. I love thee. I need to work. Can you clear me to rejoin the linguists? Hoshi and Amanda have been working on that language around the clock, and I thought another linguist might catch something they missed.”

“I think light duty is the best thing you can do for yourself in this time, but the moment you start to feel pain or feel you can’t control the urge to use, you haul arse to me, you understand?”

The two met in a brief but rib cracking embrace and mutual pats for reassurance.

When she was gone, Sarah April sank back into her chair. “Dear Lord and father of mankind, forgive our foolish ways,” she prayed, just as her Nan always had when she was troubled or vexed. “I need a quick fix.” Her

shaking hands unwrapped a butterscotch candy from a dish she always kept full on her desk.

The revelation about the alien beings had not sunk in until this very minute. Like Robert and Mary Anne, she felt her own wounds ripped open and the scar tissue that had formed in thirty years of living with the loss torn away. But unlike Robert and Mary Anne, who had a lifetime of nurturing, cherishing, and beautiful memories of their parents to cling to and give them a foundation, she had nothing to remember but an endless cycle of missed opportunities. Lost chances. Birthdays, holidays, school plays her parents had missed because they had been off world. No matter how hard she worked at school or how much she achieved, her parents were always too busy or too tired or too absent to notice. Robert and Mary Anne had lost the relationships that had built them, formed and shaped them, and given them the strength to go on after those dear ones were dead. Sarah had never had those relationships in the first place, and she had had to come to terms with the fact that not only had her parents died, but her last hope of a proper relationship with them had died too.

I wonder if this is why my sister Emily is so flaky, so flighty, so difficult to get close to. God knows I feel closer to my sister-in-law than I do my own flesh and blood… she didn't have the anchor that I had of friendship with someone like Robert.

Funny how differently they had all coped. William had coped by refusing to leave, from that day to this, the utter safety of his little world in Coventry. Mary Anne had taken refuge in drug abuse. Robert had thrown himself into linguistics, losing himself in languages, so absorbed in his studies that for some time, he had numbed himself to the pain.

She herself had existed for some time in a profound dissociative state in her books, emerging only to care for her beloved horse, Patches. It was an act of profound trust the day she first showed Robert what she was reading and let him into her world, and they had shared the world of books, and the love of the outdoors, ever since.

She hadn't thought about all of this in so long. Just as Robert had, she had found surrogate parents who had provided her the nurture, wisdom, life experience, and support she had needed. She had never known what it was to be unwanted and unloved; her Nan had been everything to her, her mother in every sense but the biological. She had her Aunt Joanna, and Charles, and Lorna, and these relationships fulfilled all her needs for mentorship and love. And she had Robert, her soul's companion, her dearest friend. Always she had Robert. There had never been a time when he wasn't there.

So why was the pain of loss and regret as raw and fresh as though it had just happened?

Something was happening in her heart. It was ugly, and she didn't want to face the hideousness of it. But Sarah's strength lay in being plain spoken with herself, and she looked within to face squarely the awful feeling rising like magma.

It was envy.

Envy that Robert had his father's books, marked in his father's own hand. His mother's musical scores with her own handwritten notes in the margins. That he could go Home again and find comfort in his father's pipe and his mother's rose garden. That he could still talk to them both and feel himself in communion with their spirits. That he could carry the lessons they had taught him and the wisdom and faith

they had passed on down to him. In so many ways, although he had lost them, they were still a constant presence in his life.

Sarah had only cold, dry research… research that had consumed her parents' lives, only to be utterly disproven in the years following their deaths.

"Sarah, Mary Anne says to tell you not to worry, she's working on transcripts of the language rather than the spoken— my darling, what *is* it?"

Sarah was so lost in her own thoughts that at the sound of her husband's voice, she lifted her head from her desk, looked darkly at him, and snapped, "And that's *another* thing…"

Understandably bewildered, Robert came to sit on the edge of her desk and reach for her hand. "What have I done? I only wanted to ask if I could help in any way. We're twenty-six hours out from New Pennsylvania and if I can't do something for those poor souls, besides pray, I'll go out of my seven senses."

Sarah shook her head bleakly. "I've got the sickbay as ready as I can make it. If I *knew* what we were preparing for— Robert, is it true, is this the same species—" her voice choked before she could complete her thought.

Robert nodded silently. He was in "keep calm and carry on" mode, his emotional armor locked into place. He wouldn't begin to process what he was feeling until long after the crisis was over.

If we all survive this upcoming confrontation…

"What are you going to do? When we do confront these beings?" She was almost whispering.

“I’ve trained all my life in diplomacy and linguistics so that should I encounter them again, I could communicate with them,” Robert responded quietly. “I want to communicate to them who we are. What ideals we represent. I want them to know what good people they killed that day.” Sarah’s eyes stung, but his voice was even and measured. “And then I want to make peace with them. If I cannot find a non-violent solution, one that prevents any more lives from being lost, both ours *and* theirs, then I shall have failed in my life’s ambition.”

Sarah wasn’t herself and she knew it. Perhaps if she had not been so worried about her sister in law— “Is it cold up there on the moral high ground?” she asked him fiercely. “These beings massacred an entire *colony* thirty years ago. Men, women, and children had no time to get off the planet, they ignored cries for mercy— and they’ve just *done it again,* and you want to make *peace* with them?”

“I’m not on the moral high ground,” Robert answered, now completely bewildered by his wife’s outlook, “I’m trying to honor those whose lives were lost that day— pacifistic souls. People of peace and love, everyone—” his voice faltered this time. “I’m trying to honor the ideals of the Starfleet in which we serve, and the ideals my parents taught me and which I hold so dear—”

“It’s *easy* for you. You *know* your parents loved you and were proud of you. They were *there* for you. I wasn’t quite so privileged!” Sarah’s pain erupted in a flow of molten lava and a cloud of ash.

Robert wasn’t quite himself either. He let go of her hand and started back as though she had slapped him. “For heaven’s sake, it isn’t the Struggle Olympics!” he said crossly. “It’s *never* been so between us. Our losses are incalculable— we’ve never stood in competition regarding

which of us has suffered the most, we've only ever comforted each other—"

Sarah melted. "I'm sorry. That was beastly. I'm just so *angry…* Robert, don't you sometimes get so angry…"

"You *know* I do." Robert smiled down at her. "But a very wise woman once taught me to take that anger and turn it against *all* evil and *all* that hurts and destroys—"

"There you go preaching my sermons back at me—"

"And you *aren't* beastly. *I* am. You're trying to open your heart to me about something that is hurting you and what do I do but snap at you— please forgive me, Dearest."

Sarah shook her head. "No. You were quite right to call me out. But I'm *raw…"*

"I was about to go to the chapel and hold the souls from New Pennsylvania in the Light. Will you come with me?" He held out his hand for hers.

"I will. I need a Quaker meeting about now."

Robert slipped their clasped hands into his sweater pocket, and they went both of them, together.

They met Lt. Corbett finishing up her own prayers.

"Don't hurry away on our account, Meek," Robert pleaded with her, "this is a sacred space for *everyone—"*

But she explained that she was just leaving and had to get back to her duty station.

Not speaking, not touching, not meeting eyes, but feeling their spirits knit together in love as they each sought communion with the

source of all love, Robert and Sarah sat for a long time in the sacred space of the unadorned all faiths chapel and let the holiness of the quiet soothe their heartbreak. Their Quaker upbringing felt perfectly at home within the four bare walls; their Church of England heritage missed and longed for stained glass, iconography, and organ music. Their only concession to that heritage was a single lighted candle on a low table before them. The flickering light provided something to focus on.

Sarah's cheeks were wet when she finally lifted her head. Softly, she began to sing a simple Taize song, a single sentence that was meant to be sung in a round with another person, and by the repetition, was meant to bring a meditative transcendent state to the singers.

Within our darkest night, you kindle a fire that never dies away…

Robert's soft, clear tenor joined her sweet alto. They had begun singing this song together during the darkest hour of their lives, so many years ago when they had first lost their parents. Now, remembering that dark night in the midst of another, perhaps darker, night, they sang of the great light that guided them.

Their chairs had unaccountably become closer and closer together. They had just become close enough for Sarah to feel the warmth of his thigh against hers, and for her to slip her hand through his arm and rub her wet face on his shoulder, when the doors to the chapel slid open, and Ambassador Sarek walked in.

"I ask forgiveness for the intrusion. I wish to meditate. I will find another place more suitable—"

Robert held out a hand in welcome. “Please, join us, Sarek. My wife and I are in Quaker meeting, which isn’t so very different from your meditation—”

Sarah gave her husband’s hand a fierce squeeze and stood up with an air of finality. “I got what I came here for. I need to get back to work. You two, you talk it out and don’t let me see your faces until everything’s resolved between you.” She crossed herself, and slipped away.

“A woman of adamant,” Sarek commented, nodding toward the doors. “She who is my wife describes her as a woman of good character.”

“‘The heart of her husband safely trusts in her,’” Robert rejoined softly. “Sarek, don’t let her interrupt your own meditations—”

“We must speak.” Sarek folded his hands in one of their myriad contemplative configurations. “She who is your wife has brought to my attention that my mind meld with you has caused you harm. I ask your forgiveness. This was not my intention.”

“I know it wasn’t, Sarek,” Robert pleaded, “and I didn’t mean for her to trouble you with this—”

“It seems my logic was in abeyance.” Robert had come to know the Vulcan well enough to recognize that his eyes, that an observer might have described as impassive, were troubled.

Why was this so hard? Archer had had intimate knowledge of Vulcans, gleaned from many years of painful and difficult experience. He had shared his insights on the work it took to build a lifelong friendship with T’Pol, whom Robert held in high esteem. He had explained as best he could what he knew of Surak’s teachings and what insights he had gained from holding the reformer’s katra, although by the time he

shared his experiences with Robert, those memories were beginning to fade. He had described the long journey toward a friendship of sorts, or at least mutual respect, with Ambassador Soval. Of all humans in Starfleet, Robert knew himself to be the best equipped to form a friendship with a Vulcan. Why then was this such a struggle for him? *Because Jonathan's path cannot be my own,* he reminded himself, *he went on before and showed me the way, but I must walk the path for myself.*

"But it wasn't, Sarek. You saved my life. The two of us working together were needed to complete the mission—"

"But I inadvertently caused you harm," Sarek persevered. "I did not wish—"

"Sarek, a mind meld is a terrible intimacy," Robert said painfully. "I— I simply wasn't prepared— I now have knowledge of you, such intimate knowledge, that I would wish to give back to you."

"Of what knowledge do you speak?" Sarek asked with equanimity.

Robert hesitated. Would the venerable one be insulted— "Vulcans have always presented themselves to humans as having no emotions. Yet I have come, through our mind meld, to understand…"

Sarek spoke as though he were both confiding in a friend and instructing a pupil. "It is not that Vulcan has no emotions. It is that the Vulcan has powerful emotions that must be kept ever in check. Emotion must be ruled lest it rule. This is our way. In IDIC, we acknowledge that our way is not better than your way, merely that it is different. For this I make no apology. For the fact that my Vulcan… emotions—" he spoke the word with distaste— "overwhelmed you and caused you pain in a moment of crisis and vulnerability, I ask your forgiveness. I did not wish

to intrude upon your privacy. Will you let me ascertain that there was no lasting damage?"

Everything in Robert shuddered away from the Vulcan's offer. The memory of that first mind meld was so painful he did not think he could endure another. Still, if he were to command his ship in the greatest crisis of his career, he must know for sure if Sarah's scans had missed anything that a Vulcan would instantly recognize. He nodded slightly and leaned forward.

Long, gentle fingers reached for the touch points on his face. And this time there was no subtle knife blade of violation. There was only a humble asking to enter, and then waiting for that permission to be given.

My mind to your mind. My thoughts to your thoughts. Our minds are merging— our minds are one—

The words had the sacredness of a prayer.

Although Sarek's mind touch was as impersonal as a medical exam, he could not help but feel the warmth of the Vulcan's compassion. He would not pry more deeply into areas of his mind that he had been able to access last time, during severe trauma. He simply wanted to know if his friend was unharmed.

Are you well, my friend? I mean you no harm, Sarek thought to him. Kaiidth*. What is, is. You are well, and I am gratified.*

Sarek gently withdrew his hand, and with it his mind.

"Thank you," Robert whispered. "I forgive you, my friend. Forgiveness is logical."

A rare gleam appeared in Sarek's eyes. "You are most innovative in your use of logic," he observed. "I look forward to learning from you on this mission. Shall we discuss our strategies for first contact?"

"In a bit, Sarek. For now, let us meditate together."

CHAPTER 20: THE RIDGES OF GRIM WAR

"Jo, your shift ended ten minutes ago. Get Lt. Brockway up here to relieve you and go get some rest."

Commander Meier shook her head. "Sir, respectfully request permission to remain at my post. It… it's better than lying in the dark thinking about those poor souls—"

The captain moved a little closer to speak privately to his helm officer, placing a warm, supportive hand on her shoulder. "Jo, are you holding up? You went through a lot, last time out-"

Jo valiantly squared her shoulders. "But last time out, I wasn't serving under you, sir. You can rely upon me."

"Sir?" It was Lyra, just scrambling out from under the comm console. "I've got those repairs done and additional filters in place. Shall I see if we can 'listen in' on their communications?"

"Go ahead, Lyra. Please, pass me a headset."

The Captain and Lyra took up monitoring positions and picked up their earpieces.

Even though he was braced for it, the shock of hearing the alien language was every bit as painful as it had been the first time.

Endure, he thought grimly.

Even with the filters preventing the feedback that had injured Mary Anne, it was evident from the cacophony that they had discovered a vast communications network. The voices all sounded the same, metallic and

cold, but there were so many of them, all speaking variations of the same language.

"Well, we needed more samples of the language. I think we've got it. Lyra, could you prepare me some recordings of these communications and bring them to the linguist's circle?"

"Captain, we're an hour away from New Pennsylvania. How goes the battle?"

His First's voice on the comm line roused Robert from a state of deep concentration. His eyes were gritty and burning. His ears were ringing, and his head felt like fog on the moors. Perhaps Sarah had been right; perhaps he should take an hour to rest…

He and the other linguists had been in the Situation Room working on the alien language for the past twenty-four hours, subsisting on tea and rations as the easiest things to consume. Ambassador Sarek had come to take Lady Amanda back to their quarters, concerned that his human wife was not possessed of either Vulcan stamina or the energy of a younger person.

Hoshi finally looked up in despair. "I enjoy a good game of 'stump the linguist' as much as the next person, but this has gone from sublime to ridiculous," she said impatiently.

"Go lie down for a while, Hoshi," Robert advised absently, too absorbed in his work to notice how pale she was.

She shook her head. "I worked much longer hours than this under Jonathan, I don't want to give you any less—"

Farm woman and midwife that she was, Mary Anne was accustomed to grueling hours waiting on a difficult birth or a busy lambing season.

She sat, outwardly placid, knitting a sock as she worked on the language. Perhaps if she kept her hands and her mind busy enough, and surrounded herself with those who supported her…

"There is no progress to report." Robert's voice was heavy with sheer exhaustion. "We simply cannot crack this language. Hoshi is working on a theory that because this language does not conform to any of the algorithms or patterns of syntax that have originated within our galaxy, we may be looking at extragalactic beings."

Pike had had very little rest himself. "*Sue's taken over for Lt. Corbett at science, sir. I'll have her try analyzing the ships' data in accordance with that theory. Anything I can do to help?"*

"Make sure our shuttlebays and transporter rooms are ready for search, rescue, and evacuation," was all Robert could tell him. He knew all those systems had been triple and quadruple checked, but one more time couldn't hurt—

"*Aye, sir. Pike out."*

"Sir, let me try. Reaching out with my mind, I mean."

The captain thought that Lyra was quite possibly the bravest officer he had ever had under his command. He thought for one split second of Sarek, whom he knew to be a staunch ally and benevolent being, and remembered the pain of Sarek's mind meld with him. If the Aenar, who had even more sensitive and far-reaching telepathic skills than did the Vulcan, was willing to attempt to telepathically contact a known hostile race, how could he be responsible for the damage that might be done to Lyra?

“Negative, Lyra. You’re my best comm officer, I can’t risk anything happening to—”

“Sir, respectfully suggest I may be your last best hope, as this language continues to elude us. Commander April is as skilled by now at the comm systems as I am.”

Robert rubbed his forehead. *How… because we are out of options. That’s how. “*Very well, Lyra. You will be noted for special commendation. How would you like to proceed?”

The faintest blue flush had come to Lyra’s pale cheeks. Their antennae were intently focused on the captain. “Sir, one of my Aenar ancestors, who inspired me to take the way to the stars, helped design a device that can augment my telepathic capabilities. If I may have your permission, I will enlist the help of medical engineer Grok and Engineer Barry to help me construct one?”

“Proceed, Lyra. Lieutenant—”

Lyra turned from the doors. Their captain spoke a quiet phrase in Andorian that made their face light up with the radiance of a sun. “Yes, sir. Thank you.”

Robert had told them that they made their ancestors proud.

“Hoshi? *Hoshi!”*

Robert had been too distracted by his conversation with Lyra to notice Hoshi’s face growing paler and paler, her eyes looking more and more like two burnt out holes in a blanket. It was Mary Anne who caught the older woman as she collapsed and gently cradled her in strong arms.

“Sickbay. Medical emergency. It’s Hoshi.”

“Sarah? Is she going to be alright?”

Robert had been restlessly pacing the sickbay, waiting for the doctor’s report, trying and failing to catch her eye to read what was there, trying to guess from her terse communications with her head nurse and dear friend Mel.

Exhaustion, he tried to tell himself. *It’s just exhaustion. Hoshi’s not a young woman, and she has pushed herself too hard this time. She’s bound and determined to stay at my side and help me finish this journey that she started me on so many years ago, and her heart runs away with her good judgement. A night in Sarah’s sickbay will set her right.*

When Sarah finally looked up from her patient, her eyes were blazing. There was no mistaking the look on her face. Sarah was furious.

“Robert, in my office.”

The door had no sooner closed behind the two but Sarah tore into her husband. “Would you mind telling me, what the *bloody ‘ell fire* is she doing here? She has *no business* being here in her condition and if I had the doctor who certified her for off world travel right here, I’d cheerfully vivisect them with my bare hands!”

“She came of her own free will, Sarah,” he replied feebly, feeling as though he had just swallowed a hundred ice cubes. “I told her the mission and she practically jumped at the chance to be part of it—”

“*You* talked her into coming, didn’t you. Robert, I always said I wanted to get old with you if I didn’t kill you first, and right now, growing old together isn’t looking good.”

“Please just *tell* me what is wrong—”

“Hoshi Sato is *dying*. That’s what’s wrong. Her body is simply worn out. We’re just now realizing how destructive the effects of the Expanse

were on the human body, not to mention all the other space anomalies and the lack of modern shielding in those old space vessels—"

The look in her husband's eyes broke through Sarah's defensive anger. She spoke in a softer tone. "Robert, she's tired. She's worn. She misses Takashi. I've seen it again and again, that long married spouses don't live very long after one of them passes away. There comes a time when death is 'the last best friend.'"

Robert shook his head in instinctive denial, holding up his hand as if to ward off news he wasn't ready to absorb. "No— not *Hoshi*— she is so vital, so beloved, so wise… she has such a wealth of history and experience to share— I *can't* bear to lose her— "

"Bridge to captain! Bridge to captain!"

Robert, grateful for the distraction from the fraught conversation, tapped the comm panel.

*"*Go ahead."

"Sir, the aliens are broadcasting in… in Standard!"

"That's impossible, Lyra, we haven't been able to translate their language—"

"No, sir, this isn't a translation. They are speaking *Standard."* They paused for a moment. "*And sir— they are speaking Andorian, and what sounds like Basic Vulcan—"*

"I'll be right there, Lyra. Hold the fort. Sarah, keep her comfortable—"

"What does tha' *think* I'm planning to do—"

"Your best, Sarah," Robert responded quietly. "Hoshi deserves no less."

Grok rushed to Sarah's side and grunt whispered in her ear, cutting off the sharp retort quivering on Sarah's lips. By way of having the last word, she stepped past him to tap the comm panel.

"Sickbay to Lt. Lyra? We're ready for you down here— we just need to run one last diagnostic on this device—"

The frightened and troubled eyes of his crew struck the captain as he ran onto the bridge. *I have to be strong and calm for them,* he thought, slipping his hands into his pockets and coming to stand by Mary Anne, relieving Lyra at the communications console. *This is command.*

In the last moments before he made the first contact for which he had been preparing his entire life, Robert gathered himself. He yearned to have his wife at his side but for now, it was enough knowing she was there, in sickbay, monitoring the effects of the device on Lyra's physiology and caring for Hoshi.

"Sister, can you put the broadcast on the speakers?"

"Brother, it's a prerecorded voice message."

Attention, Federation creatures. This is the Sheliak Corporate. We have been monitoring your broadcasts and communications and we have concluded from your irrational and imprecise linguistic capabilities that you are inferior beings. The Corporate requires planets for colonization. The vermin will be cleansed from the planets of your Federation and resettled by the membership. Long live the Sheliak.

Mary Anne broke a fraught silence. “Brother, another prerecorded message— this one’s in Basic Vulcan—”

And there was one in Andorian, another in Tellarite, and a fourth in the vernacular unique to Alpha Centauri. All saying the same thing.

Invasion. Conquest. Destruction.

*“*Sir? Long range sensors are detecting a fleet of ships—”

A vast armada, so vast that long range sensors could not even pinpoint the number of ships in the rearguard.

Commander Meier was the first to speak, and her words were a prayer. “Oh, gracious Providence—”

Robert April parted his lips to speak, found his mouth too dry to form words. He swallowed hard and tried again.

“How many ships, Meek?”

Lt. Corbett looked up from her scope. She, too, had been praying at her station, and the peace of those prayers steadied her. “At least one thousand, sir,” she managed crisply. “Some appear to be scout ships; those are in the vanguard. Some resemble colony ships; they are protected by the rearguard. Some appear to be cargo ships. The configuration doesn’t match anything we’ve ever seen before, sir, that was speculation—”

“Their ships look as though they were designed by a committee,” Pike finally found his voice and tried to inject some humor into the situation. His attempt fell flat.

“‘*The ridges of grim war*,’” the captain murmured.

He thought he had spoken so softly that no one could hear him. But as his side, his sister rejoined,

“‘*A numerous host; in strength each armed hand a legion.’”*

"*'No thought of flight, none of retreat.'*" The Captain's eyes never left the view screen.

"*Sometimes, a standing fight.*" Mary Anne fought the urge to slip her hand into her brother's for support.

"*'Then soaring on main wing, tormented all the air.'*" Robert shivered. To see the invasion force before one was in communication range, to wonder if the force would negotiate, or if they would continue to destroy all before them, was the burden of command.

"Would ye twa pack it *in?"* Duncan said irritably. The engineer was working at the science station, boosting power to the long range sensors.

"I don't know what got me started on *Paradise Lost.* Sister, can we contact Starfleet command and advise them of our current situation?"

Mary Anne bent over her panel. "Hailing on all frequencies— negative, repeat, negative, no response from the floater buoy— I *just* repaired and recalibrated that. It was functioning to specs when we left—"

"Please prepare a comm probe with all pertinent information and send it to Starfleet Command." *In case we don't come back, we need the brass back home to prepare a fleet to meet this threat.* The thought was unspoken but understood.

"Probe prepared and standing by, Brother."

"Launch probe, please, Sister."

"Probe away, aye."

"Coming into visual range of New Pennsylvania now, sir," Jo reported from the helm.

“Scan for life forms.” The Captain took the command chair. It would be best to be sitting down for whatever those scans found.

“Sir, there’s— I can’t understand these readings—”

“Let me see.” Chris was at her side in a second, and the two scientists murmured back and forth.

“Report, Meek.”

“Sir, there are no humanoid life forms left on the planet,” the science officer said slowly. “The planet has been irradiated with hyperon radiation, which is lethal to humans. However, there are non-humanoid life forms all over the planet— apparently unaffected by the radiation— ”

“So it begins,” Robert whispered. *Is this what King Theoden felt as he watched the approaching invasion fleet from the strong hold at Helm’s Deep?*

A deep breath. “Sister, please transmit friendship messages on all frequencies. Let’s show them we are open to negotiation.”

“I’m picking up some strange readings from the planet—” Mary Anne twisted around from the console. Her face was calm, her voice composed, but her eyes were shining. “Brother, there are survivors. They’re broadcasting on primitive subspace radio on such a low frequency that the hostile did not detect it. I recognize these frequencies from our Border Patrol years. The caverns in the northern hemisphere are studded with selenite— it blocks the radiation. There’s a good chance we can get them out!”

“*How many?*”

There had been one hundred twenty thousand souls on the colony at last count, Robert recalled. If only *one* of them survived—

Mary Anne was listening intently. “Brother, they have transmitted coordinates to their location, in code— let me decipher— there are only fifty survivors and they are extremely ill with radiation sickness— they barely got to the caves in time.” Mary Anne blinked away tears and worked feverishly to decode the coordinates.

“So, here’s the problem.” Chris got up from the science console and began to pace. “The selenite blocks the radiation with which the aliens are flooding the planet, but hyperon radiation interferes with our sensors, our weapons, and our transporters.”

“Remember Dunkirk.” Robert made his voice strong. The joy of hearing that there were survivors had made him believe that all things were possible, after all. “Here’s what we do, Chris. We open communications with these beings and keep them distracted whilst we run evacuation sorties—”

Commander Meier, too, had found fresh strength in the news. “Captain, I volunteer to pilot a shuttle. We can fit all fifty survivors in the hold. It will be a tight fit, but if we can avoid detection—”

“Sir— “ Lt. Corbett called from her science station. “I think I know a way to use the radiation in our favor to shield us from their sensors—”

“Go with her, Meek.”

Two mighty women of valor, he thought. He nodded at Jo. “Full radiation protocols for the landing party. God—” he glanced at Meek— “*And* Allah go with you. Jo—” he caught her eyes as she gestured Duncan to take the helm until her relief arrived. “Come back safe.”

“Yes, sir.”

Sarek's arrival on the bridge was as silent as a snowy owl in flight, but his presence brought a wave of tension to his already tense crew. Robert was surprised to discover how comforting he found Sarek's presence. Memories of many crises faced and conquered in one another's company bolstered him. But they had never faced anything quite like this.

Strengthened by Sarek's presence at his side, realizing that the brief mind touch had augmented his own emotional strength and inner calm, Robert locked eyes with his sister for a long moment of silent communication before saying,

"Sister, open a hailing frequency to the ship orbiting New Pennsylvania."

Mary Anne nodded. "Brother, they're responding to our hails—"

"Onscreen, please."

Ringwraiths. They look exactly like the ringwraiths.

The aliens' faces, if indeed they were possessed of faces, were obscured by a wrap of black, mucous-secreting folds. There seemed to be a shadowy head within the wrap, but he could not make out eyes or other distinguishing features. The mysterious alien was shrouded in shadows and darkness. He could not make out limbs or appendages; as far as he could tell, the creature was without form and void.

He forced himself to put aside his utter distaste of beings who could wipe out life and call it 'cleansing vermin.' There must be some common ground between the species. It was his job to find it.

"I am Captain Robert April of the United Federation of Planets starship *Enterprise.* I am authorized to represent my people, the

Federation. We are a peaceful alliance dedicated to exploration, philanthropy, and diplomacy—"

The being spoke. Robert could not make out a mouth, but the harsh sounds emanated from somewhere within the black folds.

"I represent the Sheliak Corporate. Conversation is neither desired nor required. You are an inferior life form, Captain April of the *Enterprise*."

"I wish to open diplomatic relations with the Sheliak Corporate. Let us negotiate in good faith." Robert took care to keep his voice even and calm. His hands were clenched in his pockets.

"Negotiate to what purpose?"

"The purpose of diplomacy is to ascertain what you need, to inform you what we need, and to come to a solution that meets the needs of everyone present. Ultimately, to the end of negotiating a treaty between our two cultures. A treaty is designed to smooth relations between intelligent species of good will."

"Meaningless. You are not capable of rational thought or intelligent discourse—"

"Regardless of our capabilities," the diplomatic warmth melted away, revealing the inner steel beneath, "we simply cannot permit you to continue to destroy our colony planets, and we will defend them to the last ditch."

"We observe no… 'ditches.' Your language is irrational and imprecise."

Robert's voice was doggedly patient. "Permit me to be more clear. We are prepared to devote resources to helping you resettle in a new and uninhabited system. We are two intelligent species, far too

intelligent to mutually destroy one another. Let us instead learn from one another—”

“We have nothing to learn from Federation creatures. We will exterminate the vermin from your planets and settle them as we see fit.”

“But—”

The transmission ended. The Sheliak’s form was replaced by the image of their ship in orbit around the radiation devastated planet, and the Sheliak invasion force in the background. Every minute brought them closer to the habitable worlds of the Federation. Closer to Earth. *Closer to young Timmy,* Robert thought, *and all whom I love.* He realized he was trembling all over, as if with great cold.

What can we do against such reckless… no. Not *hatred. Far worse than that. Indifference. Utter disregard for human life. What was the opposite of indifference?*

Love. He fingered his Celtic wedding ring, drawing strength from the tangible reminder of Sarah’s love for him.

“Thoughts, Number One?”

Chris came to stand at his captain’s shoulder. “Profoundly xenophobic, sir.”

The captain slowly shook his head. “Frightened? Or simply *indifferent?* Suggestions for communication?”

“I believe it rests with Lt. Lyra.”

“I concur.”

“Robert?” Why was Sarek choosing to use his first name? “I wish to attempt to negotiate with them. Perhaps, a logical approach to diplomacy…”’

“Perhaps they will find you more capable of rational thought and intelligent discourse than they did me, my friend,” Robert replied wearily. “Sister, open a channel for the Ambassador.”

“Shuttlebay 4 to Captain April. This is Operation Shadrach, Meshack, and Abednego. We are standing by awaiting orders to descend into the burning fiery furnace.”

“Three of you, Jo?”

“Nurse Mel is coming to help stabilize the survivors,” Jo explained. “*Dr. April wanted to go, but Nurse Mel insisted she be allowed to take the risk.”*

“Understood.” The simple word concealed a depth of relief. “Our gracious hosts have just declined our offer to negotiate, so I’ve sicced the Ambassador on them. I’ll be right there to see you off.”

The captain looked long and earnestly into each of the three faces of his valiant officers, as if to memorize what they looked like. “Take care of each other. If you find you cannot reach the colonists without detection and destruction from the hostiles, don’t risk your own lives. Come back, and we will find another way. Children, that is a direct order. I hold you in the Light.”

“Sir! Yes sir!” They chimed in unison, straightening their radiation helmets and filing into the shuttlecraft.

It’s unlucky to watch parting friends out of sight. He turned and ran back to the Bridge.

“Captain?” Yeoman Grace nearly ran into him in the turbo lift. “Captain, do you have a moment?”

“For you, Prevenient Grace? I shall make one.” Robert forced a sickly smile.

Seeing that his eyes were far away, knowing that he had just sent off three treasured officers on a dangerous S&R mission, Grace jumped right to the point.

“Sir, I want to be a hero. Like Nurse Mel, and Lt. Corbett, and Lt. Lyra, and Commander Meier. They’re all off doing such heroic things in this crisis and here I am running around like a chicken doing *paperwork.”*

She had her Captain’s complete attention now. “Prevenient Grace,” he said gently, “Do you know what I reckon a hero is? It’s a person who goes about doing their job the best they know how, even when they’re frightened or sick or in pain, even when no one seems to notice or appreciate their hard work. I’ve seen you continue to do your job under *all* those conditions, Grace, and that makes you a hero in my book.”

“Well, that’s lovely and all, sir, but I want to do something that makes a *difference.”*

“I understand that feeling. Just doing your job makes a difference—you know what I need right now?”

“A cup of tea?” she asked eagerly.

“More than a cup of tea, I need another comm officer. Lyra’s in sickbay attempting the impossible, Commander April is injured and on light duty,

and Lt. Perry, our third shift comm officer, needs to eat and sleep sometime. Would you be willing to cross-train on the comm system? My sister would happily train you.”

Grace sighed. “I’ll do anything for you, sir. But comm… isn’t that just a glorified switchboard and a comm officer just a commissioned telephone operator?”

The conversation was going on longer than he had anticipated. But it was an important one. The captain stopped the lift and fixed Grace with a thoughtful gaze.

“You know your Captain was once a comm officer?”

She nodded, a bit awed.

“So, I can give you some insights into the position. You want to be a hero, eh, Grace? The comm officer gets to be the first person to convey to the captain that the hostile is suing for peace. They also get to be the first person to hear the voice of someone who was thought dead. They have the responsibility to convey important messages upon which the Federation could stand or fall.”

“Sir— I never knew what Veronica saw in the job, but that sounds—”

“Now there is a dark side, Grace, and if you do train to fill in at comm, I don’t want this to take you off guard the way it did me. Being a comm officer during battle is the seventh level of hell. Because you have to keep the channels open and keep listening in case the hostile wants to surrender. And you hear it all. The screams and cries of pain and fear. Sometimes the hostiles are crying for their mothers as they perish. Desperate prayers and curses and shrieks of rage and grief. I have sat at comm and heard all this, and I will hear those screams ringing in my ears until Gabriel’s Trumpet drives them out. This is why I am *so adamant* that there shall be no war on my watch. Because I never again want to

hear those awful sounds. And I don't want anyone else to hear them either."

Grace had tears in her eyes. "I admire the hell out of you, sir. I'll train. And I'll make you proud of me."

"I already am, Grace. Now go make Veronica proud. I've got to go see how Sarek's negotiations are going."

He found Ambassador Sarek looking grim. "Did you dazzle them with your Vulcan logic, Sarek?" he asked lightly.

Sarek's frown deepened as he gestured at the viewscreen. "I believe the human expression is, 'They hung up on me.'"

"Very well." Robert tried not to let his face betray the sickening feeling of another hope shot to hell. He clung to the memories of his father's face and his mother's voice for calm and resolution. He would not fail them. "Let me see how Lyra is faring—"

"Sickbay to Bridge. Robert, can you come down?"

*"*Affirm. Chris, keep the *Enterprise* between that ship and the planet until our people come back. *They shall not pass."*

"They shall not." Pike's blue eyes blazed back into Robert's.

Unattached from the device that looked to Robert's experienced eye like an instrument of torture, Lyra lay upon a diagnostic bed, their filmy

eyes even more unfocused and blank, their antennae drooping limply, their body looking too small and fragile to house the valiant spirit within.

"Sarah? How is Lyra?" Robert gently took Lyra's hand in both of his and was dismayed by how cold and weak it was. They tried to squeeze his hand in return but could not quite manage.

Sarah was visibly pale and shaken. It was all he could do not to gather her in his arms and comfort her, but the sickbay was a bustling hub of activity right now and he knew she wouldn't want that.

"We almost lost them. Whatever contact they had with that alien intelligence, it completely overloaded their synapses. We barely got them out in time."

"Sir… sir…"

Lyra's lips had not moved, but he clearly heard their voice. He squeezed their hand more tightly still. "Just rest, Lyra. Just rest."

And then he realized that they were communicating telepathically. They were too physically exhausted to struggle with speech; their telepathy came as naturally as breathing.

I give you my thoughts, Lyra. Please don't exhaust yourself.

Sir, I tried to communicate. It was like expectorating into solar winds. It was like attempting to convince the ice cliffs to give me their thoughts. It was like sending light into a black hole. I have failed you, sir. I ask… forgiveness…

"Lyra, *no—"*

Sarah was there with a spray hypo. "Let them rest, Robert."

"Are they— will they—"

"I need another Andorian to bond with them and help them heal mentally. Is Shrax—"

Robert was at the comm panel calling Shrax to sickbay before Sarah could finish her sentence.

"Ta, if anyone can reach them, it'll be Shrax. Rob, has there been any word from the team?"

Robert simply shook his head. "Is there anything I can do to help?"

"Could you talk some sense into her?" Sarah's hands were busy, but she nodded in the direction of Hoshi's bed. "She's awake and demanding work. She wants to continue her research on the language—"

"Is she strong enough?" Robert wasn't sure he felt strong enough to talk sense into Hoshi.

Sarah sighed. "No, but I think she's going to wear me down."

"Hoshi? How are you feeling?"

Robert beat back a flood of emotion and fought to keep his expression serene and benign. He sat down next to Hoshi and took the hand she held out to him. He looked deep into her eyes and saw nothing but perfect peace there. If Hoshi was at peace, then surely everything else would be alright.

"I feel *fine,* Robert. I want to get back to work. Could you fill me in? What's happened since this silly collapse?"

He briefed her. "Hoshi," he finished, "is this what it felt like, going out to meet the Xindi?"

Hoshi considered for a long moment. "Out of contact with Starfleet. In a dangerous area of space. Pursuing beings we could barely communicate with. In terror for the safety of Earth. Grieving lost life. Yes, but your ship has technology that we never dreamed of. Can you

imagine what it feels like to hear you say ‘raise shields’ after hearing ‘polarize the hull plating’ before all those battles?”

Hoshi, he thought, *what is it going to feel like on the day I can’t look into your eyes and listen to you tell me stories*? *I have never been able to get enough of your stories—*

The tears were threatening and he wasn’t sure how much longer he could hold them back. He squeezed her hand gently. “I heard a rumor that you’d like to have another crack at our friends’ language?”

Hoshi gestured impatiently. “Sarah won’t let me out of this bed, but I can work from here—”

Before he could respond, the ship shook like a tambourine in the hands of a giant. Sarah dashed off to lock down restraints for her more vulnerable patients. Robert fastened Hoshi’s own restraints before running for the Bridge.

“Report!”

“The Sheliak have spotted our S&R shuttle,” Chris reported grimly from his place at Tactical, where he was filling in for Shrax until his relief could arrive. “Shields are at fifty percent. Repeat, *fifty percent.* Damage reports coming in from all decks. Another hit— Shall I return fire?”

My crew. “No,” the captain replied hoarsely. “No. Given their weapons capabilities, if we start a war with them now, we will be responsible for interstellar Armageddon. Sister, hail them. There’s only one thing left to try.”

CHAPTER 21: NO COWARD SOUL IS MINE

"Parley!"

His self-possession and English reserve did not permit Robert April to raise his voice very often, unless he needed to make himself heard across great distances. But there was a time and a place, and he believed this was it.

"Parley?" Was it the same life form he had talked to before or was it another? Was this the ship's commander or communications officer? So many questions, but no answers.

"Parley," the captain repeated more calmly. "Parley is a universal code of interstellar law. It demands a cease fire from both parties in order to discuss terms for an armistice."

There was a long, heart-stopping pause. Finally, the being replied, "The law is paramount. You may proceed."

Robert now saw that the being was indeed possessed of appendages, but they were so shrouded in shadow that he could only make out a gesture he understood to be "cease fire."

He took this as a hopeful sign, and pressed on. "There is *no* logic in continuing this… extermination. Be advised that an attack on a single Federation colony is an attack on all, and that by starting a war with the Federation, you start a war with an alliance who values freedom and life above all else. We shall not flag or fail …"

Chris recognized, as his Captain continued, the "we shall fight on the beaches" speech. It seemed completely out of character for the man of peace he had known for so long.

"Why is he channeling Winston Churchill all of a sudden?" Pike whispered to Sarek, who replied *sotto voce,*

*"*The Captain answers to his own logic."

If that was the sound of Sheliak laughter, he would be perfectly happy never to hear the awful sound again. *Like a dull knife sawing through thick cardboard…*

*"*Meaningless. Lower life forms are not capable of—"

"But why force us to prove to you what we *are* capable of*?* Under the code of parley, we are entitled to face-to-face negotiations to settle the dispute."

In cricket parlance, Sarah would have said that Robert had got the Sheliak's mid-first wicket with the first ball. The Sheliak seemed to nod once.

"Granted."

"Brother?" Mary Anne looked up from her board. "The Sheliak transmitted… coordinates."

"Parley? Gandalf, I have been in Starfleet since I was seventeen years old, and I consider myself well informed. I have never *heard* of the code of interstellar parley. You made it up as you went along!"

"You're damned right I did. Chris— I am going over to negotiate with the Sheliak face to face. If I do not signal for retrieval in an hour, I want you to evacuate the planet and get out of this system and advise

Starfleet of what is happening out here. Without subspace communication—"

"Sir, we don't even know if human life can exist aboard their ship—"

Lt. Corbett's replacement at science, Lt. Sue Jaeger, looked up and nodded. "You'll be able to breathe, sir, but you'll find it unpleasantly cold and dark, and you won't be able to withstand the radiation they live in for more than an hour without experiencing severe radiation sickness."

Chris gestured his captain to the rail where they could speak in semi privacy. "Captain, let me go. You have a wife and daughter—"

"They understand the concept of sacrifice. Just as I do. I have to do this, Chris. I have to do everything in my power to make peace with these beings."

"Sir, these beings have no regard for human life. They'll kill you as soon as they get tired of looking at you!"

"If I perish, I perish. What I said goes, Chris. If I am taken, or if I don't make it back before the radiation overtakes me, consider me lost and get out. That is a direct order."

Sarek's mellifluous voice added another layer of poignancy to the solemnity of the moment.

"He will not be alone, Commander Pike. I shall be with him."

"Sarek, I *can't* risk you, one of the Federation's most respected—"

"Your reaction is emotional and illogical," Sarek replied coldly.

Robert had to bite back a childish response. He had gone without sleep for long enough that his mind was beginning to give way. He was going to have to be aware of that fact and on his guard.

“Where is your logic, Sarek? You have tried and failed to communicate with the Corporate.”

“I am a telepath,” Sarek reminded Robert with some asperity, “perhaps…”

“Sarek, I have a telepath lying brain damaged in sickbay right this minute because they attempted contact with these beings. I can’t, and I won’t, risk that happening to you.”

“Lyra did not possess the Vulcan mind control techniques and disciplines that I possess.” In a human, it would have been pigheadedness, and where was the Lady Amanda to tell her husband so?

Robert capitulated. “Sarek, logic dictates that the longer we stand here and argue about it, the shorter our window in time with the Sheliak grows. Let’s… go inform our wives. Chris—”

Chris Pike took one long look at his commanding officer. “Galdalf, don’t do anything I wouldn’t do.”

“That doesn’t give me very many options,” his Captain tried to tease him back.

A brief handshake with his First became a longer four-handed clasp. There were no words between him and his sister; when two linguists are at a loss for words, a rib-cracking embrace must suffice. He took one last lingering look at his bridge, as if to say Goodbye. Finally, the captain gestured for Sarek to follow him into the turbo lift so that they could say their own farewells to their wives.

“Of course you are. And I’m going with you.”

Sarah was barely one and a half meters tall. Her head reached her husband’s shoulder, and to kiss him whilst standing, she had to stand on tiptoe. But the power and strength of her spirit more than compensated for her stature.

Knowing it was useless to appeal to her heart, her husband appealed to her sense of duty and her passion for saving lives. “You’ve trained with the Federation’s leading experts on radiation sickness. Hyperon radiation is nasty business, and those survivors are going to need you. I can’t spare you—”

“Those shuttles won’t be back for *hours.* We’ll be back from negotiating in plenty of time—”

“That’s why you should be here making Sickbay ready—”

“It’s *been* ready. For the love of all things holy, *listen* to me. If I can get close enough to one of the Sheliak to get some medical readings, I might be able to take that knowledge and help us understand who they are. Know thy enemy…”

His wife’s dedication moved him. He was weakening. He tried one last appeal. “It’s too dangerous— we don’t know what they will do to us— kill us, torture us, experiment upon us—”

Sarah was fierce as an autumnal wind on the moors. She scattered his arguments like dry leaves. “If they do tha’ll need a doctor, see thee? Do thee remember our wedding vows? ‘Where thee dies will I die, and there will I be buried. The All do so to me, and more also, if ought but death part me and thee!”

Robert closed his eyes for one moment. When he opened them again, they glowed with gentle light. “Very well, Sarah. Let’s go move Sheliak Mountain.”

Ambassador Sarek was waiting for them in the transporter room. He and Amanda were standing very close together. They were not embracing, but you could not have slid a piece of paper between them. They had been speaking quietly to each other, but upon Robert and Sarah’s entrance, the ambassador turned from his wife to his colleague.

“Robert, there is an old Vulcan proverb that you would do well to remember as you negotiate. ‘Remember Munich.’”

Robert nodded wearily. “A Terran proverb as well, and one I know quite well. Noted and logged, Sarek. Jessie, have you got the coordinates?”

The transporter chief looked up from their controls. “Aye, sir. It looks as though the Sheliak have given us the coordinates of their bridge or control center.”

“Very good.” Robert turned away to give Sarek and Amanda a moment of privacy to say Goodbye.

Just before the transporter effect took the three of them, he felt Sarah reach for his hand and squeeze hard.

“Thee and me,” he whispered, and then the familiar egg white walls of the transporter room melted away, and in their place…

Why was it so dark? And what was that… squishing, squelching sound… were these beings aquatic or amphibious? The entire area was shrouded

in darkness that could be felt, whilst surrounding the Sheliak representative…

Sarah threw up one hand to block the searing glare from what looked like two crystalline chandeliers, one over the head of the being and the other on the deck at its… feet? Base? Sarek's nictitating membrane came down to protect his eyes. Robert found himself winking and blinking like a barred owl in the daylight.

Above all else that he was feeling… trepidation about a first contact with a hostile… smoldering fury over the loss of thousands of good people on the colony… the bone-deep ache of loss over the death of his parents… Robert realized that moment that utter fascination and a desire to make peace with these beings so that they could learn from one another was paramount in his being, and he knew he had at his side two people who were as one with him in that desire. He could already see Sarek going through the mental disciplines to prepare himself to open his mind to these beings. Sarah, as insatiably curious as any Vulcan, already had her medical tricorder out on discrete scanning and was intent on her readings. Just as Sarek had, she had heroically set aside her utter loathing for beings who destroyed life and was bound and determined to discover what made them tick.

"Advance and speak." The voice was impossibly deep and impossibly metallic. Could the being be utilizing a translator device?

The being was as dark as the room they inhabited, but studded all over with tiny lights. Sensors? Was this how they processed radiation? Was the radiation food for them?

"Your communications network has been interfering with ours," Robert began mildly.

“As has yours with ours,” the Sheliak countered. “We could not carry out our discussions with the membership when there was so much background gibbering and jabbering. We shut it down. The communications of vermin are of no consequence to *us.”*

“But free and unimpeded communications across the light years are one of the many things that unite us as an interstellar community,” Robert explained eagerly. Communication was his passion. “You do not need to be our foes. We would rather you were our neighbors. Please give us our communications back and work with our engineers to ensure that our comm technology never interferes with yours, and yours with ours, again. So can we live peacefully.”

“Inconsequential. Of what interest is it to *us* whether the vermin can communicate or not? They will all die, squeaking—”

“You are hardly in a position to refuse to bargain with us.” Robert went from affable to steely. “You have destroyed one of our colonies. It would have been preferable had you not done so. We wish to discuss terms for a peace treaty so that there may be no further loss of life, on either side.”

“Unacceptable. We do not have time to discuss terms with inferior creatures. Many of your years ago, our galaxy was rendered uninhabitable by a cosmic disaster. We have traveled far into the intergalactic void searching for a galaxy to live in. We have lost many scout ships sent out into the void—”

By the pricking of my thumbs. An intergalactic scout. *That* was the Sheliak vessel responsible for their parents’ deaths. He felt Sarah freeze at his side. Both her hands were full with her instruments, and he didn’t dare take his eyes from the Sheliak, but he thought, *Peace, Sarah.*

“And this galaxy you call the Milky Way… we can detect no… milk? Nonsensical, irrational language… this meets our needs. We will take what planets we need. We will expand as we require. Our technology is superior to yours. We cannot be deterred.”

“If you will give us *time,* Director, our Federation will send survey ships to map uninhabited planets for your use. This is why I am requesting a conference to begin negotiations for a treaty, so that territories can be clearly defined, and therefore prevent future… misunderstandings.”

“You need time, April of the *Enterprise*? We will save you time. We will eradicate the human infestation.”

Sarah had heard all she could stand. As a healer, she cherished life above all else. “They are not vermin!” she cried out, her eyes blazing. “They are citizens of the Federation. I will not permit this outrage. Not on my watch!”

The being’s metallic voice did not change, but the tone became a bit irritable. “Intelligent converse is impossible. You do not discuss, you gibber.”

There is no telling what Sarah might have said if Sarek, who had been attempting telepathic communication all the while, had not uttered a single hoarse cry and hit the deck. Sarah was immediately kneeling at his side.

Robert stepped forward in near desperation. He was the only person still standing. The negotiations rested upon him and him alone. “Then teach me your language, so that we may— Sarah, NO!”

As he argued with the Sheliak, the being had turned to another being to port. “Eliminate the vermin.”

Only the instincts of a loving husband could have permitted him to sense the danger and move that quickly. The Sheliak had raised an energy weapon and pointed it directly at his wife. In the split second before the deadly discharge of the weapon, Robert April threw his body between his wife and the weapon.

One moment he was standing, his arms outstretched as if to embrace the waiting universe, chin lifted, eyes blazing with purpose, in mortal danger and yet completely unafraid. A heartbeat later, so quickly that he didn't even have time to cry out, his body was consumed by the powerful Sheliak weapon.

Of the hands that had kept Starfleet on good footing since the beginning of the long-range exploration program, hands that had made music and dug potatoes and plied a comm panel and held dying crew members in their last moments, there was nothing left. The dauntless spirit and the heart of love that had defined the man had flown free, but of the voice that spoke peace, there was not even an echo.

CHAPTER 22: THOUGH EARTH AND MOON WERE GONE

Before she knew what was happening, Sarah was materializing on the *Enterprise* transporter pad, next to the prone figure of Ambassador Sarek. The Lady Amanda immediately jumped onto the platform to gather his limp form in her arms, nor would she let it go until the medics arrived and gently took her husband away, half leading, half carrying she who was his wife.

Frantically, Sarah looked around for her husband. He had always been there. He was the other half of her, how could he not be here?

Her stunned brain began to process what had happened before her eyes. There was only one thing to do, and she did it. She began to scream.

"No! NO! Send me back— we can't *leave* him there— let me go back over there— it's *me* they wanted to kill. Not *him*. Make them give him back and take me instead!"

Chris Pike took the newly made widow into his strong arms and held her as he might have his mother. "Sarah," he said gently as he could, "there is nothing left. We barely got you and the Ambassador out in time. Jessie here was on the button, and the minute we read energy discharge on board that ship, we pulled you out—"

Nothing left. She had not even been given the chance to fight for his life. The mysterious weapon had left no body for her to cradle, no hand for her to hold as his questing spirit broke free to rejoin the stars, no lips that she could kiss Goodbye. There was not even a handful of ashes for

her to gather up and carry home to scatter in the places he had loved in England. It was incomprehensible that a man so vital, so joyous, so in love with life, should be gone.

Sarah crumpled into a merciful heap of unconsciousness in Chris's arms. He wouldn't let the medics take her away; he insisted upon bearing the limp figure of his captain's widow in his own strong arms and placing her upon a diagnostic bed in sickbay with his own work roughened hands. It seemed the last thing he could do for the man who had been his mentor, his role model, and his friend.

Was this what Aragorn felt when Galdalf was taken by the Balrog? Chris wondered. *Wondering how the hell he was to lead the Company against great evil without the wisdom and guidance they had depended upon for so long?*

It seemed to Sarah that her soul, the very essence of herself, had left her mortal body behind and gone on a journey. She was looking for her husband— surely he would not go where she couldn't follow him? The land that was very far off would not seem so far away if she could only catch a glimpse of him—

And he was *there* before her. He looked as youthful as the day they had first met up on the moors, yet without the brokenness of grief. He looked at the same time as ancient and ageless as a very old man, a beautiful man who had aged into wisdom and serenity and acceptance. There was both the innocence of youth and the wisdom of age, and she had never seen that beloved face so radiantly happy.

He was calling out to her, holding out his hands to her, and she could see him distinctly, but she couldn't quite touch—

He was glowing with transcendent joy, as though he had found something he had been seeking for a long, long time.

"Don't worry about me, Dearest." His familiar voice was filled with warmth and tenderness. "I'm just fine."

The vision of his face faded, but not before she made out the background. It was their stile on their moor in Yorkshire. *Of course,* some part of her acknowledged, *he's in Yorkshire. He's in God's own country.*

He was just fine. He had said so. He wasn't hurting anymore. He was happy. With a sigh, Sarah's essence settled back into her body, and she sank into quiet sleep.

Sarah April opened her eyes to Pandemonium.

Her sickbay was flooded with desperately ill survivors of hunger, thirst, and radiation. Dr. Pollard and Mel were doing the best they could to triage, taking the most seriously ill patients first, letting the others sit in the corridors lining sickbay whilst the younger officers brought them rations and water bottles and space blankets.

There was a cry of a mother in premature labor, and Mary Anne's calm voice soothing her, reminding her to breathe, explaining that she was giving her medications to stop her labor and get the pain under control. Unlike Duncan, whose eyes were so swollen with crying that he was incapable of standing his post, Mary Anne knew she could not permit herself to begin to grieve. Too many people depended upon her. *Here's one way to stay clean and sober,* she thought grimly. *The only*

midwife on the ship, I am, and two laboring mothers, and another only a few weeks along…

Through the quiet sobs, the cries of pain, and the wails of anguish came a very determined, very distinctive bleating. Betsy, the not so little lamb felt that she had been neglected long enough, and she was moved to lift up her voice and make herself heard.

Hoshi Sato had taken advantage of the chaos to slip out of bed, against orders, and go find people to comfort. A six-year-old whose mother was too ill to comfort him had climbed into her lap and into her heart. At the sound of the little lamb's bleating, Little Mark lifted his blonde silky head from its resting place on Hoshi's maternal shoulder. "A *wamb?!"* he cried. *"*I *wuv* wambs*,* don't I?"

"Yes, you do, darling," Hoshi assured, "would you like to meet our Baby Betsy?"

"Ee by *gum,* why did you let me *sleep* like that!"

Sarah tried to sit up, but her body felt as if it were weighed down by sandbags. When had her carefully donned dress uniform been exchanged for a sickbay gown?

Dr. Pollard was at her side in an instant. Her elegant brown face was both clinically detached and coolly compassionate. *Coldly efficient,* Sarah had thought of her when they first met, but some months of working together had shown her a colleague with a kind heart. The two had become, if not close friends, at least a deeply respectful partnership of mutual trust and cooperation.

“Oh no you don’t, Dr. April. You took a full dose of that radiation, and you’re going to be on virotherapy for at least two more hours. Back to that bed you go.”

“Who’s CMO around here, anyway? Have I been through decon?”

“Don’t make me sedate you, Doctor—”

“You need me,” Sarah said flatly. “You can’t possibly handle this load without me.” She snatched a pair of scrubs out of the synthesizer and slipped into decon, ignoring the screaming of her joints, the burning of her skin, and the crying out of her heart.

He’s alright. He said so. I saw him, she kept telling herself, letting the decon rays bathe her body. *He’ll be back. He’ll walk in here wondering why he feels terrible when he couldn’t be arsed to come in for radiation therapy—*

“Sarah, I need you.” Mary Anne’s sharp voice cut across the sorrowful sounds. “I need radiation therapy that is safe for a pregnant woman—”

“Am I going to lose my baby?” The mother whispered brokenly. “He’s all I have left of David—”

“Over my dead body you’re going to lose your baby,” Sarah said ferociously, mentally thanking her stars for the years of study she had put in to become well versed in radiation treatments. Never again was she going to let a disaster like *Rosenberg* catch *her* without a life saving skill.

“Do you have a name for him?” Mary Anne asked as she worked. “There now, you just listen to that heartbeat. Strong and healthy, it is. That’s the most beautiful sound there is. You listen to that, then, and try to rest.”

“Ichabod.” The tears had begun to trickle down the mother’s face. “It means ‘where is the glory?’”

“No, Rachel,” the other laboring mother gasped, “no, don’t call him Ichabod. That’s a terrible name for an infant. Call him ‘Ebenezer.’ It means ‘stone of help.’” Her voice was cut off in another gasp as the contraction caught up with her.

Mary Anne was bending over her in an instant. “How’s your pain, Bethany? I’ve got you pretty well dosed up but if you need more, you sing out. The days are *long* over when a woman has to suffer through childbirth—”

“Pain’s much better, thank you, Mary Anne. Thank Love you’re here. My own midwife…” she gasped again.

“*You* went med free, Sister,” Sarah reminded her.

“I went med free because I’m allergic to half the chemist’s, just like my—” Mary Anne bit her lip so hard she tasted blood. If she should remind Sarah of Robert now, when she was so desperately needed for her skills— but Sarah was focused on the mother in premature labor, who was whispering as Sarah frantically worked over her, “‘Woe unto them that are with child, and who give suck in those days—‘“

“Which makes me think,” Sarah said firmly, “your milk won’t be safe for your baby for a bit until the radiation and medication leaves your body. We have not got infant formula on board.” Seeing the look of utter panic on the mother’s face, she rushed on, “I’ve wet nursed a couple babies and I’m happy to re-lactate and do so again, just until you’re able to take over.”

The mother was openly weeping, for gratitude this time. “Oh *would* you? Dr. April, you are an *angel…”*

Mary Anne looked up sharply. “You *can’t,* Sarah, you took a full dose of radiation, remember? But I can, if you can doctor me through the process?”

Sarah sighed. The thought of nursing an infant once again had thrilled her heart. “I’ll support you with everything I have, Mary Anne. Just like you did me, all those years ago.”

Eight tense hours later, sickbay was quiet, dark, and filled with the soothing scents of herbal tinctures the herbalists were using to help soothe their traumatized patients. The survivors were stabilized and the premature labors halted. Mary Anne had begun the herbal and hormone protocols necessary to relactate and was already feeling quite uncomfortable. Little Mark had completely fallen in love with Betsy the lamb, and she with him, and after wearing each other out playing, the companions had fallen asleep together.

And a quiet, patient voice that had been drowned out by the cries of the wounded finally surfaced and made itself heard. The Lady Amanda had been sitting by her unconscious husband all this time, whispering to him, holding his hand, trying to reach his wounded mind through their bond, her elegant face becoming paler and paler, her elegantly coiffed hair in tangles around her face.

“Dr. April? Could you have a look at my husband? I cannot reach him to engage the healing trance—”

Sarah had been deliberately blocking out the memory of Sarek’s collapse. If she thought of it, she would remember the vessel, would remember—

Focus, she told herself grimly.

“You need some cherishing,” Nurse Mel cooed, gently taking Amanda’s hands and leading her to a quiet corner. Mel was from the Inuit culture, and it was ingrained in her to cherish older people. “Let me take care of you a bit while Sarah examines your husband. How about I make you a cup of mint chamomile tea and brush your hair. That can be soothing.”

Sarah approached Sarek’s bedside with some trepidation. It wasn’t that she was unused to treating Vulcanoids; she regularly corresponded with her colleague, Dr. M’Benga, who was doing his residency on Vulcan, and he taught her everything he knew. She had reached out to M’Benga after Cael, their Romulan defector, had asked her if she would be his personal physician. But nothing she had learned from M’Benga or Cael had prepared her to treat psychic trauma in a Vulcanoid.

Sarek was responding well to the radiation treatments; that wasn’t the problem. What, then, was keeping him unconscious and unable to engage the healing trance?

Wait a moment. Sarah paused as she scanned Sarek’s brain wave patterns. She didn’t know as much as she wished she did about Vulcan mental capacity; M’Benga had only tossed out general references to the healing trance and touch telepathy, and had suggested she consider a residency on Vulcan in order to learn more. Biting her lip in puzzlement, she called up Lyra’s scan. The patterns of two different species showed the same overload in the synapses. Whatever they had experienced in those moments of telepathic contact with the Sheliak, it had been more than their brains could process.

She glanced over at Lyra. Shrax had not left their side for an instant. They were resting together, their heads side by side on the soft pillow. Tiptoeing so that she didn't disturb the much needed repose of the two, Sarah quietly initiated yet another brain scan on Lyra. Through their connection to Shrax, there had been slow but measurable improvement and healing.

I think the healing is coming from telepathic contact with one of their own species. What I need to do is get Sarek back to Vulcan so that he can have that healing, Sarah thought. *Vulcan healers are much better qualified to treat this kind of trauma than I am. I think the thing to do is to keep him comfortable for now.*

She raised her head with a sudden realization. "Where's Robert?" she asked, puzzled. "I want to have a look at him— he must have taken a bigger dose of the radiation than I did. He'll have forgotten all about himself and will be comforting one of the survivors—"

One could have heard a heartbreak in the fraught silence of sickbay. It was Mary Anne who finally broke the shocked stillness.

"Sarah," she said gently, encircling her sister-in-law with her strong arm, "you're going to have to be very brave. But Brother didn't come back."

"Yes, he *did!"* Sarah insisted fiercely. "I saw him. He was *right here.* He smiled at me; he told me not to worry because he was just fine—"

"Sister," Mary Anne led her back to the bed she had occupied when she first got back, "let's get you back to bed. Now listen to me. When a loved one passes away, hallucinations about them are very, very common— it's our brain's way of processing—"

“But—” Sarah stammered— “all that was a *dream,* wasn’t it? He beamed back with us—”

How was Mary Anne so *calm?* And then Sarah got a good look in her eyes, saw the tearless anguish there, and she *knew.*

The merciful numbness of denial could no longer shelter her from the terrible truth. Mary Anne hastened to snatch what small shred of consolation she could.

“He didn’t suffer, Sarah. It was over so quickly. He didn’t have time to feel any pain.”

Sarah shook her head. That sop of comfort couldn’t fool a doctor for one minute. But whatever pain her husband had felt in life, whatever pain he had felt as his body was dissolved in death, was long over now, while her own pain was only beginning.

“Sister, I’d like to be alone for a bit,” she whispered, and Mary Anne wisely let her go.

“Chris? She knows. It’s time to inform the crew,” Mary Anne said quietly.

An hour later, Captain Pike made his formal announcement that, following the loss of Captain April aboard the hostile vessel, he was taking command of the ship.

The crew of the *Enterprise* could not stop crying.

CHAPTER 23: UNTIL THE DAY BREAK

Space, like grief, was an endless night. A void whose desolation was accentuated only by the unpitying light of stars, those taunting points of light that had allured mankind out into this emptiness in the first place. In all this vast nothingness, not even one sunrise.

Sunrises. How Robert had loved them. Every new world they visited, he had insisted upon taking a shuttle planetside so that he could see the alien sun shatter the night, let the strange dawn splash its colors across his upturned face. He loved the stars and the void between them, yet the rising and the setting of those stars as seen from the surface of a planet had given him the greatest delight. The first thing he always wanted to do upon arriving Home in England had been to watch the sunrise over the Yorkshire moors, fill his ears with the familiar bird songs, let the freshening wind blow through his hair, wash his face in the morning dew.

Alone on the observation deck of the *Enterprise,* Sarah ran her fingers lightly over the piano keys. “Where I live and move and have my being, I shall have my Knight piano,” Robert always used to say. She could see him sitting here, the expressions on his face changing like the sunrise sky as his music led him through the gamut of emotions. The sheet music to the last piece of music he had played was still open upon the music stand. He and Lark had been working on “Urlicht,” from Mahler’s Second, he playing piano, and she singing. Strange that the last

song he and his daughter had sung together had been a longing for transcendence. He knew what that was now.

Sarah had hesitated for a long moment at the doors of the observation deck. She wasn't ready yet to face the emptiness of the quarters she had shared with her husband, but she desperately needed to feel close to his spirit. Her eyes, blurred with exhaustion, dimly registered the sheet music before her. Handwritten notes in the margins brought him close to her.

Alone for the first time since her husband's life had been snuffed out, with only the old piano and the view of the Armens system at station-keeping to witness her agony, Sarah April bowed her head in her hands. The pain was like the north-east blizzard she had braved long ago to find Robert, who had become lost on the moors and in mortal danger of freezing to death. Space cold winds had sliced her face like lasers, snow had swirled from every direction, effectively blinding and deafening her, smothering her breath. She had thought she was too late, both to save him and to save herself. But they had come home safely. Always before, they had come home safely.

The pain drove her to the deck. She crouched against the bulkhead with her fists crammed against her mouth, trying to stifle the cries of pain she felt rising in her. She vaguely heard the doors to the deck slide open and shut again, but she couldn't find the will in herself to lift her head to see who had entered her space. It did not even seem physically possible to take the next breath, knowing that Robert would never take another breath.

A warm and sturdy presence settled onto the deck beside her. A big, calloused hand gently gathered hers in a warm, supportive clasp.

Looking up and blinking a few times, Sarah realized that Chris had come down to sit with her.

Chris. Robert's erstwhile first officer and protégé, who had formally taken command only a few hours before. Would she be called upon to try to comfort him in his loss, when she couldn't even imagine finding comfort for herself?

"Sarah, what am I going to do?" Chris's whisper broke a long, grief laden silence. There was nothing more to say. Robert was gone and it did not seem possible to go on without him.

"Do?" Sarah's voice was still husky.

"What would the captain do?"

"You're doing what he'd do, Chris. Kneel down on the deck with the wounded and hurting. Try to comfort them. That's what he always did."

"He was always the chaplain first," Chris whispered. "He taught me that being a Captain wasn't about being in power, it was about humble servant leadership. About making hard decisions."

"And now it's up to you," Sarah said quietly. "What are you going to do?"

Chris sighed. "Captain's orders are to get out of here and advise Starfleet, so that's what we're doing. We're monitoring the invasion force and it's moving in fast to the Federation border colonies. If they start attacking another colony, as I have no doubt they will, we'll have no choice but to declare war. And that, as Gandalf would have said, means that we have failed in our mission. My first mission onboard the *Enterprise* and what do I do to justify the captain's faith in me but commit the entire Federation to a war we can't possibly win with a species we can't communicate with."

“It isn’t for want of trying,” Sarah whispered.

“I know it isn’t. I’ve never been on a mission before on which linguistics took priority over engineering or the sciences,” Chris confessed. “I… I guess we just took the UT for granted…”

Sarah wasn’t listening. “Start that war,” she finally said, her voice low and fierce. “Start it. It’s the only thing those heartless bastards understand. I want them all to *die,* Chris. Do you understand? They called him vermin. They snuffed his life out just like vermin and they don’t deserve to be in the same galaxy as his memory—”

“Sarah,” Chris said gently, “this is strictly off the record. You’re grieving, you saw your husband die before your eyes, you aren’t yourself…”

“It should have been me and not him!” she cried. “If he were still here, he’d find a way to prevent war. It’s what he *did.* And here I am hell bent for leather to start one—”

Chris squeezed her hands still more tightly. “Why don’t you go lie down for a while. Try to rest.”

Sarah stood for a long time in the door of their quarters. Against closed eyelids, she was seeing their final few moments here. Just before transporting to the Sheliak vessel, they had come here to help each other change into dress uniforms. She was standing directly where he had taken her in his arms and held her as if to imprint the memory of her bones against his.

Had Robert known? As he had so carefully placed the Coventry cross of nails and the Candle medallion on the bureau, folded his sweater on the foot of their bed, made sure that a book he had been reading aloud

to her was opened to a certain page on the low table… had he known he wasn't coming back? Had he known, as he held her so long, so silently, his cheek pressed against her hair, his hands moving over her back and hips as if he could take her into himself?

Shaken like a willow tree in a spring wind by the memories, Sarah began mechanically stripping off her stained and rumpled scrubs. Her eyes averted so that she might not see the many reminders of their lives together, she made her way to the shower.

But it was no use. She was standing where the water had so recently run over his body. Mary Anne's handmade sheep's milk soap with garden herbs smelled like his freshly scrubbed skin. If she glanced at the mirror, surely she would see his reflection next to hers, as they cleaned their teeth together and talked over their respective days. Surely any moment, he would come around the corner and ask if she would like him to wash her back for her…

"Will it cost me?" she whimsically spoke out loud, and was shocked not to hear his lyrical voice respond, "Only a kiss."

The emptiness of their quarters struck her like a physical blow. Their last cribbage game was still set up on the low table; the green pegs for her and red pegs for him still in their final holes, the hands tossed carelessly to the side. Two teacups that somehow had not gotten washed sat companionably side by side, and Sarah instinctively knew that she would leave them so, a memory of their last cup of tea. His slippers were tucked neatly side by side next to the love seat they had found whilst honeymooning in Bath; hers were scattered under the table. The hand dipped white candle they had lit as a focus for prayer and meditation

was nearly burned down to a nub. The smoke from the candle had clouded the glass jar that held the shells and seaglass they had gathered on holiday in Cornwall. A bouquet of heather and broom he had gathered for her on the moors was faded and dry, and tiny blooms had fallen to the table. She wouldn't move that tiny bouquet for anything. Robert had placed it there for her, knowing that the flowers of home would give her more delight than any hothouse floral arrangement. A couple of books they had been reading… anniversary gifts to one another… lay open on the table, but she couldn't even glance toward them. Not yet.

How could he be everywhere… and yet so terribly terribly absent? She could feel the abyss within herself, the emptiness where another heart, another spirit, had been at home. Her own heart, her own spirit, were raw and bleeding where they had been ripped from his.

This is intolerable. I'll snatch a dressing gown and go sleep on the cot in my office— I just can't stand this—

Rounding the corner to their sleeping area, her eyes caught sight of the cream-colored Irish cardigan, neatly folded up upon the bed. *Had he known?* With shaking fingers, she snatched it up and buried her face in it. The hand spun wool had retained the scent of the peat fire at Home, vanilla pipe smoke, fresh heather, and the cleanliness that had been an integral part of him. Hugging the sweater, which had become emblematic of him, was almost as good as hugging him.

She slipped her arms into the sleeves, imagining they were his arms around her. He was taller than she was and the sweater fell nearly to her knees. She fastened the buttons, fancying that she could still feel his

residual warmth, and she pressed it to her heart, trying desperately to remember what his body had felt like against hers.

If *anything* could bring the tears she needed to shed, surely it would have been his sweater? The pain was a solid iceberg inside of her. But the feeling of his embrace had so emboldened her that she felt she could open one of their books again.

Persuasion. Her birthday gift to him lay open to their favorite passage. Sarah tenderly picked up the book they had been reading together.

Anne Elliot to Captain Harville:

"*I hope I do justice to all that is felt by you, and those who resemble you … I believe you capable of everything good and great in your married lives. I believe you equal to every important exertion, and to every domestic forbearance… All the privilege I claim for my own sex… is that of loving longest, when existence or when hope is gone."*

Not so, Anne. Not so. Robert taught me that. A single tear fell to the page and wrinkled Captain Wentworth's note to Anne:

"*Dare not say that man forgets earlier than woman, or that his love has an earlier death. I have loved none but you."*

Persuasion was evoking that wonderful night when they had read it in bed, their bodies replete from lovemaking, when they had decided to

consider coming back to Earth. If only he had not insisted upon taking one final mission…

Sarah set the book down rather as though it were a hot coal. *Had Robert known? Had he placed this book just here to remind her how much he loved her? To tell her that he heard her?*

She picked up Robert Louis Stevenson's *Collected Poems*. The antique book lay open to their favorite passage. Sarah tenderly set her husband's neatly folded reading spectacles to one side, and picked up the book, placing her hands directly where his had last been. A fragile dried wood anemone blossom fell out. As she attempted to pick it up and fold it back between the pages, the flower crumbled to dust.

She could barely see the words on the page but she could see the handwritten note in the margin. "*My Sarah."* The words were underscored thrice.

She could see his eyes shining as he read aloud to her. "My wife," he would begin, and always he would add, "I wish I had written this about you, Dearest. The poet's wife was a twin to you."

Trusty, dusky, vivid, true,
With eyes of gold and bramble dew,
Steel true and blade straight
The great Artificer made my mate.

Honor, anger, valor, fire,
A love that life could never tire,
Death quench nor evil stir—

She couldn't keep reading. She was gulping with sobs, and it seemed indecent to cry like this without him here to comfort her, to cradle her and whisper to her that she need never weep alone because she had him now. The book fell from her hands and she blindly rushed into the bedroom. She slipped into their bed and rolled over onto his side, put her face in his pillow, and keened until merciful oblivion claimed her.

He was there in her dreams, holding her, making love to her, knowing her heart and spirit as no one ever had, tenderly solicitous about her pleasure as he had always been, covering her face with kisses, his hands knowing every bone, every curve of her body, every inch of her skin, knowing just how to please her and rejoicing in the knowledge. She opened herself to his love, felt overwhelming delight drenching her like sunshine under his gentle hands, but when she reached out to hold and caress him, to draw him into herself, it was like grasping cobwebs. Feeling the emptiness where his body fit inside hers as perfectly as her heart nestled within his, she woke with a shriek of desolation on her lips. Finding herself on his side of the bed trying to feel the imprint of his body in the sheets, she dived off the cliff back into oblivion, content never to return.

She was awakened by gentle but calloused hands stroking her hair away from her face. She recognized the calluses caused by years of cello

playing on Mary Anne's hands, even before she opened her eyes. She blindly stretched out her hand, and Mary Anne took it in both of hers.

Her sister was calm and composed. Her voice was slightly husky, but very tender.

"Let me take care of you now, Sister, just as you took care of me in my hour of need. It's my turn."

"Sister," she whispered, "it's really true, isn't it? Robert is—"

"He's gone on to be with Candle," Mary Anne said softly. "If I think of the two of them together, I can bear up. Now first. Your radiation medication." Skillful hands administered the hypo.

"Sister—" Sarah gripped Mary Anne's arm frantically. "Has Lark Rise been contacted? Does she know that her father—" she couldn't breathe. She was seeing her daughter's sweet face ravaged by grief, and the sight was unbearable.

"No," Mary Anne whispered, "we still cannot get messages through the jamming layers. We've been trying since—" her own voice cracked. As if she could wash away the grief, she gently sponged Sarah's face. The warm water dissolved the crusty residue of crying.

"Now. I've brought you tea, toast, and some soup Hoshi made for you. Don't move. Let me prop you up. I know how weak and achy radiation sickness makes a body— you lean on me."

"Hoshi has no business being up out of that bed—"

"Hoshi knows what it is to lose a husband," Mary Anne said simply, "and she was neither to hold nor bind. She says the important thing is to keep up your strength. Nothing makes a person as hungry and tired as grief."

“Oh Sister—” Sarah was sitting up, propped on the pillows Mary Anne had tucked behind her. “I can’t eat this soup— it’s chicken and I became a pescatarian years ago when I married Robert—” she was near tears.

“Brother would want you to have it,” Mary Anne said sternly. “He would want you to be nourished by the soup, the nutrients, and the love Hoshi put into it as she made it.”

“Always the wise big sister.” Sarah’s eyes felt scratchy and blurred as she lovingly looked up at her sister.

“Taught you everything I know, didn’t I?” Mary Anne said with a little chuckle that quickly turned into a choked sob. “Now then. You eat and I’ll catch you up on the news. I have a little nephew now. Little Mark has adopted me and Hoshi as his Aunties. His Mum is going to be alright, but she has a long road of healing ahead for her. She can only spend a few minutes at a time with him, so when she gets tired I take over caregiving. And Sister… we lost Grammy Charlotte in the night. She was too sick and too frail and the radiation was too much. I saw Dr. Pollard slip out into the storage bay and cry her eyes out.”

“Oh Sister… but she died in peace, and comfort, surrounded by those who love her, and not in pain and terror,” Sarah whispered, wiping the tears off her own cheeks with trembling fingers.

“I hope I can say the same when my turn comes. Now you eat this toast before it turns to shoe leather. Bethany and Rachel are having a joking competition which of them is dilating faster. Bethany is holding steady at two centimeters and Rachel has inched ahead to two point five. I want those babies to stay put and bake as long as they can. Ugh, I had forgotten how much it hurts when the milk comes in—”

“You were an overproducer with Glorianna, remember?” Sarah reminisced. “I was with Lark Rise, too. I remember waking up in a pool of milk the first time she slept through the night!” Her eyes grew far away. “You know, Sister, being her Mum saved *my* life. When I lost Judith… I didn’t see how I could go on. But I did, because I had her.”

“And she’s going to need you more than ever now.” Mary Anne poured her sister a fresh cup of tea and watched her drink, thirstily.

“But it doesn’t seem as though I *know* how to go on without him. There has never been a time when he wasn’t *there,* Mary Anne. And now he’s gone. He’s just not *anywhere—*”

“There will be a way,” Mary Anne whispered. “He went through the same thing when he lost Lark and Candle’s mother. He said he didn’t see how he could go on but he had to, for Lark’s sake. And he felt like it was going to hurt forever but it didn’t. Not in the same way anyway. And finally, he found life very sweet and beautiful and full of joy again. And you will too, just as he did. Remember what you just told me, Sister? I’m telling you now. You are a strong woman, and you will find a way through this.”

“Oh Sister,” Sarah sobbed, “even we strong women need our men. There’s *no* shame in the two of us needing one another, I used to tell him—”

Mary Anne held her sister and let her cry for a long time. When she finally began to grow calmer, Mary Anne whispered, “Would it help to read his last letter to you?”

“It’s in the bureau—”

Mary Anne placed the letter in Sarah’s hands and stooped to drop a thistledown kiss on her cheek.

"I'll leave you two alone now. Call me if you need anything. I need to go pick up little Mark. It's time for his meds and his snack. His meds make him sleepy, and he wants me to sing to him so he can nap on me." But Sarah didn't even hear her.

Robert's handwriting. Elegant, whilst hers was illegible. The letter was written on old, old rosewood stationery that had belonged to his mum, and a faint scent of rose leaves wafted up from the page, from a faded rose from his mother's garden.

For a long time, she couldn't bring herself to read a word. She sat with her hands on the paper that he had touched, bringing back the feeling of those hands on her.

I won't cry, she told herself grimly. *I won't blister these pages with tears.*

My dearest Sarah,

If you are reading this, it means I didn't make it home. I want to try to find the words to tell you how much you have meant to me over the years we have shared together. At first, I thought I would make a recording for you. But that seemed impossible to get through without weeping, and I don't want you to remember your old husband in tears. I want you to remember him laughing, and singing, all for the joy that he has found in loving and being loved by you. Then I remembered why my friend George

writes handwritten letters. It is so that his family can touch the paper that he touched.

God sent me you. Of that I have no doubt. You are my shining, guiding North Star. You are my angel, my better half, my anchor to windward. You have translated divine Love and Light to me through the fragile medium of human flesh. You believe in me, and you believe that together, we can accomplish anything. We are stronger, wiser, more compassionate, more loving, together, than we are apart. Your strengths reinforce my weaknesses. You forgive me for my many faults and always you inspire me to be the best that I can be. You look straight at the brokenness of my heart and body and you call me beautiful. You have taught me that when I am weak, and vulnerable, then am I strong. You have taught me to weep without shame. I can face any terror or threat unafraid with you at my side.

I am yours, heart, soul, and body. To be in you, to be one flesh with you, is to be Home, and yet the oneness of our flesh is but a pale reflection of the oneness of our souls, our spirits. To be your other half is the glory and joy of my life.

The sweetest hours of our marriage have been the quiet hours of 'mutual society, comfort, and help, that one ought to have of the other.' We have had those things in spades. The hours we sit together in our quarters as, work and play finished for a bit, we are each absorbed in reading, or research, or correspondence, not talking, not touching, not looking at one another, but supremely content just to be in the same space, just to know the other is there. Those rare leisurely moments when we can lay together in our bed, sharing the simplest details of our lives together or talking over our hopes and dreams. Those moments

when I see you fussing before the mirror, and you don't realize that in my eyes, you are the most beautiful woman in the universe. Those moments when I come upon you unawares when you are playing your guitar and I get a glimpse of your sweet spirit in your music and fall more in love with you than ever. Those moments in chapel when you lift your head raptly with your eyes shining and I wonder what glorious inner light has been given to you. Those moments at tea when your small hand finds mine under the table, and the spaces between my fingers fit yours like puzzle pieces. Those moments when I watch you work and I see your love and dedication and compassion, the same love and dedication and compassion with which you cared for me during the darkest hours of my life, and I know that you have found your calling and that, difficult and painful as it is for someone as sensitive as you are to be always faced with pain and disease and injury, you will continue because you know you have the gift of healing. You have a passionate allegiance to life and to the quality of that life that I have never seen to quite the level in any other doctor that I do in you.

Teacher, tender, comrade, wife,
a fellow-farer true through life,
Heart-whole and soul-free
The august father
Gave to me.

This is what you are to me, my dearest love.

I won't tell you not to grieve; that is downright silly. I won't make you promise to find someone. I won't make you promise not *to find someone.*

What I do ask you to promise me is, that you rebuild your life as you think best. Do you think it best to go on and find another person to share your life with? We know the sweetness of companionship, and if you do find love again, I will rejoice over you with singing. Do you think best to go on alone, dedicating your life to your work and your family and your friends, being a mother to the motherless? We both know that a single and unattached life can be rich and full and beautiful. We have both been alone and found the beauty in solitude and independence, and if that is the path that you find best, I will also rejoice over you with singing. I have relied upon your judgement for a lifetime; I know you will find a way to go on that is best for you. I want you to take everything that we have had together over the years and use it as a foundation to build something beautiful. Only you get to decide what you will build.

I have loved you with everything that I am. Many waters cannot quench love, neither can the floods drown it. By the time you read this, my body is no longer with you, but my spirit is, and my love for you will never, can never, die. And as you once promised me, so I promise you. When it is your turn to cross over to the other side, I will come back for you and help you over. Then, ah, then! 'O thou soul of my soul, I shall clasp thee again. And with God be the rest!'

Your own,

Robert

Sarah sat for a long time in absolute silence, head bowed, holding his letter as though she were holding his hands. She thought she should

have been completely incapacitated with weeping, but she wasn't. This feeling was too deep for tears. It was as though he had come back from the dead to give her one last reminder of his faith in her and his love for her. She could see him, hear him, almost touch him, and she didn't want to drown out the echoes of his dear voice by sobbing.

"Be reight," she finally whispered. "Promised you I would be, didn't I? I'll never be the same without you; you'd never be the same if it were I who went on before. But I'll carry on your life work, as well as my own."

His life work. Oh my God what have I done. I encouraged Chris to start a war, when I knew, I knew, *that that war would be the failure of my husband's life work, and against everything I believe as a healer—*

Sarah April sprang out of their bed and snatched an off-duty jumpsuit as the most comfortable article of clothing for her aching body. She hurriedly wound her hair up in a messy bun.

"You're beautiful without makeup," Robert had always told her, "I don't see why you ever put it on, you ravish my heart without a stitch on your face."

But hours of crying had made her face puffy and swollen, and she didn't want to look like a poster child for a grieving Starfleet widow. With shaking hands, she programmed the dispenser with her makeup choices and applied foundation, lip color, and blush to hide her deathly pallor. Wisely, she avoided mascara and eye color; there was no telling when the tears might start again.

Where were her rings? The flesh where they had lately been was pale and bore the imprint of the cool metal. The doctor must have taken her rings off when she was being treated. She felt naked without them; she would stop by sickbay and slip them back on, the rose gold Celtic

band and the emerald. He had put them on her finger, and she wished no one else to take them off.

She hesitated for a long moment at the bureau before slipping Robert's Coventry cross of nails over her head. The metal that had warmed to his flesh felt so cold in her hands. This little object was what had kept Robert grounded, kept him remembering why he must never lead the Federation into war, why he must always choose forgiveness. Now, it would keep her grounded.

She gave one last, long look around their quarters.

"'And what thou art may never be destroyed,' Robert," she whispered.

CHAPTER 24: ALL SOULS DAY

"Sarah, it's too late."

Pike was standing at the table in the Situation Room across from his captain's widow, looking up from star charts and strategic maps and ships' formations, analyses of the hostiles' defenses. What little information they had been able to glean had been analyzed within an inch of its life.

Sarah shook her head desperately. "It *can't* be—"

"I need Ambassador Sarek *badly.* What are the chances—"

"He suffered brain damage in his attempts to communicate telepathically with the Sheliak. His injuries are beyond the skill of anyone but a Vulcan healer," Sarah stated flatly, "and since I can't *communicate* with one to diagnose his condition, much less get one to examine him—"

Pike sighed. "Now that the captain is gone, Sarek was my last best hope for… well, here's the situation. The last twenty-four hours have changed everything."

While she had been working feverishly in sickbay to save the lives of the New Pennsylvania survivors, Yeoman Fletcher had had her chance to become a hero. She had remembered something that Veronica Hall had taught her about telemetry and communications, and working as a team with the other comm officers, they had been able to communicate with Starfleet Command in spite of the communications blackout.

"They used the Sheliak's own signals, which overwhelm everything we try to put out, to 'piggyback' our own messages back to HQ," Chris

explained. “Mary Anne is out straight in sickbay with her midwifery work, but she was able to slip away and contribute her old school knowledge to Yeoman’s basic idea, and Perry was able to execute it. Sarah, this crew makes your husband very, very proud.”

“He has… he *had…* faith in them,” Sarah whispered, “and they could never bear to disappoint him.”

Pike nodded. “But in all honesty, I think I was happier *before* we could contact Command. Because then I didn’t know about *this.”*

This was a fleet coming out to meet the Sheliak. There was at least one newly commissioned Constitution class starship. Heavy cruisers which had been pulled out of retirement. Privateers. Border patrol vessels had been pulled from the Klingon and Orion borders. Sarah was shocked as she realized why.

“The Klingon High Council contacted us,” Pike said, subdued, “asking us to permit them to fight side by side with the Federation, after the manner of Kolos, in glorious battle against a common foe. It seems the Klingons have lost even more lives to the Sheliak than we have, and they won’t stand for it.”

“Robert’s been lying awake at night worrying about how restless the Klingons have been lately,” Sarah croaked. “He would be so glad to know that a common enemy…”

“I never thought I’d die fighting side by side with the Klingons.” Pike was haunted by visions of bone yards and scrap heaps he had explored in past years. They had been fascinating bits of living history then.

“Pack it *in,”* Sarah snapped, “you are neither a prophet, nor the son of a prophet—”

Pike treated her to an ironic grin. “That *you* know of— Look at the numbers. Over one thousand of them to three hundred of us. Three hundred, Sarah. Even if the Naussicans join our forces, they won’t have more than twenty ships, and given the firepower of the Sheliak, we’ll all be blown to Kingdom Come before more backup can arrive—”

“The Spartans did it at Thermopylae,” Sarah said fiercely. “But Chris… *isn’t* there another way?”

Chris threw up his hands, and let them drop at his side. “You told me to start this damn war,” he said irritably, “and lo and behold, while we were sleeping and tending our wounded and mourning our dead, Starfleet decided that we had tried everything to keep us out of war, and failing to do so, scrambled the forces. The first wave of ships will be with us in twenty-four hours, and if the Sheliak have attacked another colony by then— and it is almost certain that they will— we will have no alternative but to engage them.”

“‘And the blood shall flow from the winepress, and shall rise even to the horse’s bridles.’” Sarah was shaking so badly she wondered if her words would even be intelligible. The look in Chris’s eyes told her he understood just fine.

“Have you got a better idea, Sarah? Because now’s the time, if you do,” Chris snapped.

“No. But I *am* bound and determined that this war is not going to be my husband’s legacy. He *died* to prevent this war, Chris. That’s what peace means to him. Did you know that just before we were married, he considered starting a war on a… a certain planet… in the hopes of preventing a larger scale war. When we first got married, he didn’t sleep at night that first year. He used to wake up crying out that he had

become death, the destroyer of worlds. He finally found peace on a pilgrimage to Taize, France, a monastery built after WWII for the purpose of reconciliation and healing. And that was his life work."

"And yet people called that man naive," Chris muttered. "What do you want from me?"

Sarah stood to her full height and looked him straight in the eye. "I want you to pull everyone who can be spared from repairs to Medical so I can concentrate on the medical data I gathered on the Sheliak. Perhaps I can find something to help us understand them."

"Sarah, you *hate* them. They killed your husband. Why are you *doing* this?"

"Because Robert and I both lost a child. Because if there is a war, a lot of people are going to lose a lot of children. And I don't want any other woman to lose her child or her husband to these creatures," Sarah said passionately, "because I know how it f-feels—"

She stood sword straight, refusing to lower her chin, refusing to hunch down over her pain, and put her hands over her face. The sobbing ripped her in half, like an autumnal tempest lashing the leaves from a mountain ash.

Chris came to her side with the intent to take her in his arms, but she shook her head, refusing his comfort. "I have got to stop this foolishness and get to work," she said incoherently, "but I can't stop crying—"

"Sarah," he finally said, patting her shoulder awkwardly. "I have a crew who has lost a captain they love dearly and they are like a ship without a rudder. They don't know and trust me the way they do you. They need to see *you.* I have arranged for an informal memorial service

for your husband. I think it's necessary to let the crew have a safe place to do their grieving and have some closure before we are called upon to join the battle. No one expects you to speak, but if you'll be there, I won't leave your side for a moment."

"Is it time?"

Sarah April looked drearily up from her research to face her sister. Mary Anne, looking drawn and exhausted but holding herself very straight, had just come into her office.

Mary Anne shook her head. "Not yet. I wanted us to have a bit of time to talk. And I mashed you some tea."

She was too wise a woman to ask foolish questions like "are you alright." Sarah wasn't alright, and she wasn't going to be for a long time. Instead, she asked,

"How is the research going?"

"Ohhh…" Sarah put up her hand to try to loosen the knot in her own shoulder, and then froze. Her husband's warm hands had always done that for her—

As if understanding what she needed, Mary Anne was at her side in a moment, her strong farm woman's hands firmly massaging Sarah's tight shoulders. "You're a knotty knotty lady, Sister," she teased gently, and Sarah managed a sickly smile.

"Sister, I feel like a first-year biology student. I cannot make heads or tails of these beings' physiology. I thought it would be so simple. If I could get a grasp of their basic make up, we could figure out what they

need and how they communicate, and use that as a bargaining chip, but either I have forgotten everything I ever knew—"

"You saved forty-two lives yesterday," Mary Anne reminded her firmly. "I doubt that's the case—"

"Or they are so different from anything we've ever seen before that we have no frame of reference. What I wouldn't *give* to have one of them in my sickbay for a proper examination and a battery of tests."

"We're having the exact same results from our linguistic efforts," Mary Anne replied tiredly. "There is simply no frame of reference. All we know is that they like to talk more than a school full of five-year-olds."

Sarah looked a little more closely at her sister. "And you, Sister? Are you bearing up?"

Mary Anne studied her hands folded quietly in her lap, for once not knitting, or kneading bread, or playing cello. She looked up with tears in her eyes.

"In just a few hours… maybe days… I want those babies to stay in the oven and bake for as long as possible… I'm going to be breastfeeding infants again. Tandem nursing two babies. Sarah, I passed the test. The same beings who massacred my parents killed my brother, and I didn't turn back to the drugs. I knew when I committed to relactation that the option to relapse was completely off the table for me. Talk of accountability!"

"I knew you could do it, Sister," Sarah whispered, covering those quiet hands with her own. "No one who fought as hard as you did for her freedom would relinquish it, no matter what the pain."

"And you, Sister?" Mary Anne's hands squeezed hers, hard.

“I’m committed to avoiding war,” Sarah said slowly, weighing the truth of each word. “Because *no one* can possibly understand the cost of war like those of us who have carried babies in our own bodies and nurtured them at the breast and protected them at the cost of their own comfort and sanity.”

“My Brother did,” Mary Anne said quietly. “Sister, we can’t fall into the trap of thinking that fathers love their children any less than we mothers do.” Mary Anne knew there was a wounded part of Sarah that not even years of happy marriage to Robert, who defined faithfulness, had been able to heal.

“Ah! But there was *no* one like him, Sister. ‘He was the noblest Roman of them all!/ His life was gentle, and the elements/So mixed in him that Nature might stand up/And say to all the world, This was a man!’ Robert would want to be remembered with Shakespeare, wouldn’t he? Sister, how can I be talking so calmly, when my husband is dead—”

There’s something in her that isn’t believing it just yet, Mary Anne thought wisely, but did not say. Out loud, she said, “It’s time. I will not leave your side, and you don’t let go of my hand.”

“Sister— I need to change,” Sarah said desperately. “He… he always said that if I wore black at his memorial he’d come back and haunt me, and I rather fancy being haunted by my husband about now—”

Sarah April had attended her fair share of memorial services. Their mission, before the Sheliak Corporate had called them to the edges of the galaxy, had been holding memorial services, after all. She remembered being fourteen years old, in her stiff school uniform and

shiny boots and locked and shuttered face, her rigid body encircled by her Nan's warm arm at her parents' service. But she had never before attended a service where there was so much crying.

It's the pipes, she thought dazedly, *it's that daft ha'porth of a brother of mine up there on the stage with his skirling bagpipes.*

Of all the laments Sarah had ever heard, *The Flowers of the Forest* was the saddest sound she knew. The crying of the pipes and the plaintive melody were battering against her Northern reserve and if that music didn't stop soon she was going to—

Duncan set down his pipes and crossed the shuttlebay to her. Wordlessly he kissed her cheek. Taking his place beside her, he wrapped his arm around her shoulder.

"Duncan, if he were here, he'd be asking you if you'd learned to play the pipes properly yet—"

"Ah, there's not much about the dear man I will ever be forgetting. There now, Lassie, I won't leave your side. A proper brother I am to you. Promised himself, I did, if anything happened to him, that I'd be here for you."

Talking seemed to take more strength than Sarah could muster, but the question was burning a hole in her heart. "Has anyone been able to contact Lark Rise yet?"

Duncan's arm tightened around her shoulder. "Nae. No one has, unless Admiral Nogura has been able to reach her. Until she receives the news, he's still alive in her world…"

It felt so wrong to have anyone but her husband at her side, so wrong to not hear his calm and compassionate voice leading the service…

The service was a blur. Chris was speaking, his voice broken with barely restrained tears as he spoke of a Captain who had taught him by example to believe in service, sacrifice, compassion, and love. He finished,

"Rest easy, Captain. We'll take the watch from here."

Every member of the crew, it seemed, had a story of some quiet kindness, some unobtrusive support or encouragement, for which they would remember their Captain. Some owed him their Starfleet careers; others their very lives. Some had been unhappy in a particular department, and their Captain had helped them to find a better fit for their gifts. Some remembered him for insisting that the enlisted crew mingle with the officers in old fashioned country dance classes, so that they might learn to know and rely upon one another in times of crisis instead of segregating by discipline and rank, and thus friendships that might not otherwise have been possible had formed. Others had funny stories about their Captain, who had also been their instructor, as the absent-minded professor, and how much they had learned from his style of teaching. Still others clung to the anchor of his understanding of how hard it was to be a parent in the service and to miss family back home. Sarah had always known that her husband was the single most beloved Captain in the fleet, and today, as story after story poured from the grieving crew, she understood why.

Robert had long ago asked her to read Rupert Brooke's *The Soldier* and Tennyson's *Sunset and Evening Star* at his memorial, but when Mary Anne squeezed her hand and asked if she felt able, she frantically shook her head. The grief was too close to her; it was for tears, and not poetry.

There was only the flag ceremony to get through now, and then she could retreat back to her quarters, and hide away like a wounded animal. The four bridge officers who had been closest to him, Jo, Meek, Grace, and Chris, came together to fold the flag. Duncan supported Sarah with a strong arm around her waist as she unsteadily rose to receive it.

No, her entire being was crying out, *no, I don't want a* flag, *I want my own husband in my arms—*

Just as Chris Pike placed the folded Starfleet flag into her outstretched arms….

The door opened and Robert walked in.

IV

Part Four: The Resurrection Symphony

CHAPTER 25: THE GATES OF DAWN

Was he walking? Running? *Flying?* Had he taken the wings of the morning? He didn't know; though he was moving, yet he was resting. Was he in the body or out of the body? He could not tell; he looked within and realized that, for the first time in many years, it didn't hurt anymore. There was no physical pain, no heartache, no heaviness of weary sorrow, no consciousness of loss. There was only a fountain of joy within, pure and scintillating as a mountain spring, bubbling up inside. It came out as the heartiest laughter of his life. It was the laughter of a baby's innocent delight mingled with the wise laughter of the old who know what life is and still find it good. He held out his arms to the crystalline sky of sunrise, the first light just beginning to pierce the mysterious dusk of the wood, the faintest flush of dawn on the face of the new day, and laughed into that blue dome. It came to him that he must sing.

My strength within, and joy unbound…

It was unbounded joy he felt. The visions he had seen as a sensitive, imaginative child, the visions of immortality, those things that he had seen that he thought he could never see again, were before his delighted eyes now, and he looked at them as though he had never

looked on death, and cruelty, and disability, as if his eyes had never been blinded by tears.

The light all around him grew brighter, and he could see that he was surrounded by the great oaks of an English wood, their boughs like arms stretched forth in welcome. At his feet was a carpet of bluebells so sharply, greenly fragrant that he instinctively stopped to gather a bouquet for Sarah. The ethereal voices of thrushes embroidered the air with the cross stitch of song. Little brown creatures scampered and scurried into the underbrush, 'a running that could not be seen of skipping beasts.' As the sun came up and dried the morning dew, there would be dragonflies flying their aerial ballet, and the background hum of many insects in chorus.

Somehow it was a wood he knew, had seen many times in dreams, but had never walked in. Yet it was a place he had been searching for his entire life and now that he was here, he felt more at home than he ever had before.

And there, glimmering through the trees, was distant water. He could hear the soft murmur and splash of water creatures diving in, and smiled, thinking of Ratty. He could smell the freshness of it, the sweetness of it. *The river,* he thought, and began to run toward it, still laughing, still singing.

And abruptly he stopped singing. He had heard the faintest far off chord of music. A chord so perfect that it struck the deepest resonance in his soul, and he knew he would travel anywhere to hear it once again.

Again… again, perfect chord…

He felt the way he had when he had first heard *Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis,* the "stained glass windows of sound." A sacred feeling

that pierced straight through his soul to his very spirit. It was a feeling of utter cleanness, a sense of the soul washed free from dirt and filth, a feeling that his very being was a mirror to reflect and transmit the light all around him… "beholding as in a glass the glory… are changed from glory to glory," he murmured, and the spoken words were like a song.

And just then the sun came up over the horizon and flooded the world with the purest light, like sun and moon and candle together and yet brighter than any of these. *They have no need of the sun, neither of the moon, to shine in it…*

And he laughed aloud in sheer joy, for he knew where he was. He knew why he had been born into the other life that he had left behind. And he knew why all those he had loved and lost had been born into it, had suffered, and had left their mortal lives behind. The pain he had suffered in his life had sand blasted his spirit, stripping away all impurities, so that he might be an instrument of peace and a reflection of this glorious light, just as his dearest ones were.

As though it had been waiting for him to come to this realization, the perfect chord of music called to him again, and flooded his pain-cleansed soul with joyful longing to run after it, to hear it again and again, a yearning so deep it was pain. He was running through the wood toward the river as though he had been given the wings of the thrush.

Overhanging the riverbanks were apple trees, their fragrant petals slowly falling and dropping onto the halcyon surface of the river. A soft wind of dawn was stirring the rushes and cattails along the water's edge. The newly risen sun had turned the river into a still mirror, to reflect the willowherb and meadowsweet nodding on the bank. Somewhere out of sight, the first roses of summer were just beginning to open with the

dawn, and the warm wind caught their fragrance and dispersed it upon the clear air.

And then, he saw it. A white deer, the most perfect creature he could imagine, the great antlers branching into the form of a cross, the great head raised and such kindly, laughing eyes looking straight into his, the muscles of the flank rippling as he prepared to leap.

It was the white deer from the ancient painting he had loved since early childhood, Pisanello's *The Legend of St. Eustace.* How many happy hours had he and his sister spent chasing the white deer, in imagination, across the moors, imagining that they could almost get close enough to put their arms around his noble neck before he sprouted wings and took flight.

But on his back…

Someone had caught up with that elusive deer. Someone had caught that deer around his neck and swung herself to sit astride his back and cling to his milky hide. Someone had gathered bluebells from the wood and woven them into a coronet for her buttercup yellow hair. And that someone had a face he had not seen in twenty-five years, as different from her twin sister's face as two siblings could be, but a face he would have known anywhere. Eyes that had been closed in death for twenty-five long, aching years were open, and filled with delight and innocent mischief and love, such love, and the same lighted candles in her eyes that Lark had in hers.

It was Candle.

She wasn't the infant he had held in his arms and sung to eternal rest. She had grown up. Day by day, he had traced her development,

and so now, seeing her face to face, she was as familiar as if he had watched her grow up.

My daughter. I must get to my daughter. I cannot exist one more minute without holding her in my arms—

He ran to the banks of the river and was about to cast himself in and swim to the other side, heedless of currents— he had won swimming competitions in his youth and he still swam laps an hour every day without fail— when he abruptly found his way blocked by two figures clad in the hooded robes of the Franciscan monks.

"Please, excuse me— that's my daughter, I *must* catch my daughter—"

But the monks would not be brushed away. Every move he made, they blocked him, and there were two of them to one of him.

And then one of them spoke. He thought he should know the familiar gravelly voice.

"Have you finished with your mortal corporeal life?"

"Yes, I suppose," he said impatiently, "*nothing* matters to me but getting to my child—"

"Have you *finished* with your life?" The monk asked again, as patient as he was impatient, as serene as he was frantic.

"I suppose I have died and gone on to Glory. Of course I am finished, what else could I be?" She would soon be out of sight, and if he didn't catch her—

"Right now, you have a foot in both worlds," the monk said serenely. "If you cross that river in pursuit of your daughter, who crossed over many years ago, there will be no return for you."

It was no use; she was gone. She had been there one moment, smiling radiantly at him, and the next, the white deer had made a mighty leap and disappeared over the mountain crest.

The cry that broke from his lips was an echo of the one with which he had mourned her death. He sank down on the banks of the river, and would he were in a corporeal body so that he could wash this feeling away in tears!

"What is your choice?" The monks were kneeling beside him, their hands on his shoulders in what felt like… compassion.

"I *know* you both," he said slowly. "I've… you've been watching me for months…"

"Years." The second monk finally spoke; it seemed he deferred to the older one. "We have been observing you for twenty-five of your years, ever since you were a visitor to our world. We are of Organia."

The two made a welcoming open-handed gesture to him, but he hardly saw it, so blinded with sudden rage was he. "You were… *observing…* on Organia… and you saw my first wife taken prisoner… a woman heavy with child taken and subjected to the torture the Klingons call Mind Sifter… and you didn't *intervene?"*

"We couldn't interfere with the natural development of corporeal species," the first monk explained dispassionately.

"Why in the name of Love and Light *not?"*

"Don't you have a similar directive? A Prime Directive that forbids interference? Have you not stood in the same place we have, and known that you could do nothing?"

In an instant, Robert was on the unfinished bridge of *Enterprise,* facing down a Romulan defector who was trying to pressure him to

overthrow the Romulan government for the greater good. And how close he had come to saying Yes.

"Of course I have. Making that decision tore me apart!"

"Do you suppose our rules are easy to follow? Our rules and protocols are to observe only, not to interfere. For hundreds of years, we have had to watch people suffer and die."

"But… but your behavior is…"

"Appalling. Yes, we know. Dr. Phlox informed us."

"Dr. *Phlox…* how the *hell* do you know Phlox…"

"It all began in a Klingon garbage dump…"

"It was that encounter," Second finished, "that spurred us to prepare for official first contact. We were on our way to make first contact with you and Sarah when the Sheliak claimed your life. We brought you here."

Here or *hereafter,* nothing mattered so much as the fact that these two had saved the lives of Hoshi, Trip, and Jonathan.

"Jonathan and Hoshi are beyond words and past all expression *dear* to me," he said slowly. "They helped shape and form who I am."

"That was why we took such an interest in you and Sarah," Prime said quietly. "Because she is so close to Phlox, and you to Sato and Archer."

"I never knew Trip very well," Robert said thoughtfully, "but he is dear to one I cherish, Ambassador T'Pol, and I know and have worked with their children. Tell me again. *When* did this take place?"

Realization was beginning to set in. If the Organians had not restored these three to life, there would have been no Federation. Starfleet

might not have looked like an organization he would have wanted any part of. The Romulans might have won the war.

And on a personal note? What would his life have been like if not for the influences of these two, their wisdom, experience, and inspiration?

As he had listened, he had continued unobtrusively to glance around for his daughter. Surely, she would come back— his arms ached to hold her— but the words of the Organians haunted him. *There will be no return.*

What if Jonathan had not returned? Hoshi? Trip couldn't talk about many of the exploits he had been part of, but Robert could read between the lines and guess that the Federation owed its existence to him as much as to Jonathan and Hoshi. How would the Federation be different if he did not return?

I can't *go on another day without my daughter,* his heart cried. *If I've already gone on to Glory, what difference does it make? I don't want to go back to my old life. It* hurts *too much to go on without her…*

What do you think he'll choose? Second thought to Prime.

Whatever he chooses, it must be his *choice. We cannot interfere,* Prime thought back.

"Can you show me how the Federation would be different if I didn't go back?" he asked desperately. Perhaps if he *knew,* he could make a decision.

Prime shook his head. "We cannot tell. But what we do know is that the Federation is teetering on the brink of destruction right now. You do not know the strength of the Sheliak forces. But we do."

"But… I tried *everything* to communicate with them—"

“Not everything,” Second said quietly. “Think. There is another language, one close to your heart, the very language of your spirit, that you have not tried to speak to them. It is this language that they will hear and understand.”

“Perhaps I should attempt to speak to them in Gaelic?” Robert asked despairingly. “No, my friends, you speak in riddles. Tell me more about your observations… it’s important.”

“We mean you no harm,” Second reassured. “We only wanted to learn more about you.”

“You could have done that by simply *talking* to us.”

“Do you not have elaborate first contact protocols and procedures?” Prime retorted.

“We do, I am trained in them…” Robert’s voice trailed off. Why did what seemed so right in the service seem so wrong when the mitten was on the other hand and a more powerful race was observing *them?*

“Our species evolved beyond the need for corporeal bodies hundreds of thousands of years ago,” Second explained, as if reading his puzzlement. “It was the desire to transcend pain that motivated our evolution. In studying you, and how willing you were to take on pain so that your first wife need not feel it, we came to understand that even though we feel ourselves to be more advanced than you, that you had much to teach us. We still don’t understand why any species should feel such weakness. But we see you learn from your pain and let it shape and mould you into more compassionate beings. We believe that where we have intelligence, you have wisdom. Where you, Robert, taught us self-sacrifice and caring for your family and crew members more than for your own well-being, Sarah taught us compassion.”

Sarah. *Sarah.* So *that* explained the nearly unbearable emptiness within him. He was so used to having her always by his side that he had not registered her absence until just this moment.

He couldn't breathe. He felt weak and completely undone. What use was Paradise without someone to share it with? And the person he most wanted to share Paradise with, at that? Who did he know who would love this place more than Sarah would?

"Your time in the in-between world is growing short," Prime told him quietly. "Go or stay, you must make a decision one way or the other, and you must make it soon."

"I… I don't know what to choose," he finally said brokenly. "I want to be with Candle, but the thought of leaving my wife and living daughter—"

And she was there before him, radiant as the sun, her face filled with love, looking at him over the crossed antlers of the white deer. She was across the river and out of reach but somehow, he could see her as clearly as if she stood close enough to him to snatch her to his heart.

"Have you finished your life's work, Tad?" she asked softly. He had never heard her speak before; she had died before she ever said her first word. Her voice was just as clear and sweet as he had always imagined it would be.

"No… there is still much work for me to do," he said unsteadily, "but I don't want to go back. I just want to be with you, my Heart's Delight."

"I'm not alone, Tad." She looked to her right hand. Another young woman just her age stood next to her, her hands caressing the white deer's neck and her face turned away from his, utterly absorbed in kissing the deer's nose. When she turned to face him, though—

It was Sarah. Only it *wasn't*— it was Sarah as she had been twenty-five years ago—

"*Judith*?" he asked wonderingly.

The young woman nodded. "Candle isn't alone. She has me. We have always had each other."

Candle nodded, and her golden hair fell down over her shoulders. "Go back and finish your life's work, Tad. We have each other, but Mam Sarah and Lark only have *you.* They need you. Don't worry about me. I'm just fine."

"If I could but hold you both in my arms one last time—" he choked out.

"Would you be able to say Goodbye? Again?" Second asked him quietly.

Robert stood before him, shivering in pain so deep it went to the very marrow of his bones. "No— no, I could not—" he cried out.

"You will see them again. You shall return to this place when your life's work is over," Prime assured him.

"I love you, Candle. I love you, Judith," he cried chokingly. If only he could throw himself to the ground and let weeping overtake him—

"We love you," they called back. "When you come back to this place, you will come back forever. We will never be separated again. But now it is time for you to finish that which was given to you to do. Go well, Tad."

His heart torn from looking for the last time into the face of his daughter, Robert looked long and earnestly at the wood, the river, the mountain

range over which the white deer had leaped. He listened one last time for the perfect chord.

“I have made my choice.” Robert didn’t even recognize his own voice. “I will go back. Please… tell me how to prevent a war!”

CHAPTER 26: JOY COMES IN THE MORNING

Music.

As he made his choice, the perfect chord chimed again. In those poignant notes, he heard the answer.

Before he knew where he was, he was standing between Prime and Second on his own ship, and the doors of the Observation Deck were opening before him, and the two had begun to sing, in plain song, *forget… forget… forget…*

"Music." Robert's voice rang out across the crowded Observation Deck. "That's the answer. We have got to convey to the Sheliak that we are not the mice or ants they have been thinking us."

"*Sir?!*" Pike was looking at his Captain as though he had suddenly grown three heads. How *could* his Captain be here… and yet it seemed the most natural thing in the world that he was. Had he not been just in the other room on another deck, working on the language?

The crew's reaction was similar. One moment, the room had been filled with people either crying, trying to hide their tears, or trying not to cry. But some wave of forgetfulness had swept over them. What were they crying for? Who had died? Oh, it must be that they were holding a memorial service for the dead of New Pennsylvania. Of course that must be it.

The flag fell from Sarah's outstretched arms and billowed to the floor. She couldn't breathe. The wave of forgetfulness that had swept the crew had not reached her. She was a grieving widow, and she was not going to be fooled by hallucinations again.

Not once, but twice, she had seen him so clearly that she had been convinced that she had not seen him die before her eyes. Waking up from that dream hurt too much. She wasn't going to be fooled again.

As though he had on the seven league boots, he was at her side in an instant. He was gathering her in his arms, and he was kissing her right in front of God and everybody. And if she must persist in dreaming, she may as well kiss him back. She knew what was going to happen, even as her arms went convulsively around him, her hand cupping the back of his neck to bring his head down to hers. The warm, tender lips on hers would melt away into mist and she would be left alone, with empty arms, aching heart, and memories of not nearly enough time together.

"They're under a lot of stress. Let's give them a minute. Clear the way, people. Nothing to see here. Return to your posts. Back to stations, everyone, we're within the width of a gnat's eyebrow of galactic war—"

That couldn't be right. There hadn't been voices before. There had only been the two of them. But there were many quiet murmurs all around her, like the sea in the calm after a storm. And was that the bosun's whistle?

Sarah wrenched herself out of his arms and folded her own. "Feck off."

"My Dearest Sarah… "

“I am not your Dearest Sarah. You are a ghost. You aren’t really here with me. You’re just a hallucination. A wraith. An apparition.” *What my Nan, the original Mrs. Malaprop, would have called an ‘operation,’* she thought.

“Handle me, and see,” he said patiently. “A spirit has not got flesh and bones, as you see me have. Here.” He slipped the command gold dress uniform tunic over his head and presented his bare, scarred, lean chest for her examination.

Sarah shook her head. “You’re just going to disappear, like all the others. I don’t want to believe. It *hurts* too much to wake up…”

As a chaplain, he had seen denial of an unbearable loss over and over again, and yet it still stung a bit. *Sarah, I came back from Paradise for you, and you don’t believe it’s really me…* but then he looked a little closer, at her ghostly pallor under her makeup, her swollen eyes, her lower lip bitten raw, and knew that she had been too deeply hurt. Perhaps… he hadn’t realized what it would mean for one of them to lose the other.

“It is I. Be not afraid. Reach out your hand, and touch me,” he gently coaxed her. “You know every scar. Every imperfection.”

Sarah’s hands were trembling as she reached out and touched his chest. Is this what Doubting Thomas had felt—

“But— but— you— I *saw* you—”

“I made first contact with non-corporeal beings,” he hastened to reassure her. In her light touch, he could feel her beginning to believe, and he wanted to give her something she could rest her whole weight on. Facts for the scientist. “They have been observing us for twenty-five years. They were able to restore my body. They knew Jonathan. Sarah,

they told me the most beautiful story about meeting Jonathan— a story I had never—"

The look of utter lostness and desolation was beginning to fade from her eyes. Perhaps it was only false dawn, but he was beginning to see the dawning of great joy in her eyes. Just a few more minutes with him, and she would understand—

"Pike to Captain April. We could use your idea about now. The Sheliak colony ship is moving into attack formation around Armens Seven."

The seventh planet in the system. Two planets from New Pennsylvania. A world rich in minerals but sparsely inhabited. Perhaps they were resource poor…

"Number One, put the *Enterprise* between that ship and the planet. They want to get to those miners; they are going to have to get past us."

"Sir, the damage to the ship— our shields have not been restored to full function, the hull breaches—"

"Trust your Captain. I'll be right there. April out."

Realization was dawning. His voice was muffled as he slipped his tunic back over his head. "Sarah, I swear to you on my parents' graves, as soon as this is over, I will explain everything. And then I am going to take you in my arms and love you as I have *never* loved you before. But right now—"

He was holding out his hand to her. Perhaps it was just a dream. But if it was, she didn't ever want to wake up.

“Sir, they aren’t aren’t going to be threatened by us,” Chris warned as the two stepped out onto the bridge, still holding hands. *Perhaps if I hold his hand tightly enough, he won’t fade away… “*They think we are ants.”

There was a twinkle in Robert’s eye that said ‘Oh ye of little faith.’

“Watch, Chris. Just watch. Position, Helm?”

“Between that ship and the planet, sir, just as ordered.” Commander Meier’s voice was crisp and her hands steady on the controls, but her outward composure gave no hint to the pounding of her heart. After flying the S&R shuttle through the irradiated atmosphere, landing just outside the selenite caves, and using every maneuver she knew to fly back up to the ship undetected, she had realized that past trauma or no past trauma, she still had it. She was an ace pilot flying the ship of the line, and she wasn’t afraid anymore.

“Sir, they’re powering up their weapons!” In Shrax’s absence, Chris had taken tactical. “Shall I—”

The Captain held up his hand. “Do not touch the weapons.”

“Sir, they are locking on,” Chris insisted. “We have to raise shields—”

“Don’t *touch* the shields, Chris.”

“Captain!” Pike shouted. “Respectfully suggest you’re trying to get us all—”

“Trust him,” Sarah April locked eyes with the First Officer. “He’s the Captain. He knows what he’s doing.”

“*Peace,* Sarah. What are our friends doing now?” How was he so *calm?* What did he know?

Pike turned back to his board. “Sir, they’re— they are attempting to fire— but they can’t engage their weapons systems—”

“No, they can’t,” the Captain replied coolly. “And neither can we. Long range scans, Meek? What are the rest of the fleet up to?”

“Frozen in space, sir,” Lt. Corbett gulped. “For a few moments there it looked as though they were going to engage our fleet, and then they just *froze—”*

“*Captain!”* Chris was breathless. “How did you *know!”*

“I have friends in high places,” the Captain responded drily. “Sister, hail the Sheliak.”

“What have you *done?* Our systems are too hot to touch—”

“So are ours,” Captain April replied calmly. “Checkmate. You cannot destroy us. We will not destroy you. Will you negotiate with us now?”

“We refuse to negotiate with ver—” but the Captain drew his finger across his throat to signal Mary Anne to end the transmission.

“Rather a people of one idea, aren’t they?” the Captain said wryly.

“I guess the hell,” Pike responded, shakily. Had he almost *mutinied,* against this trusted captain? Had his experiences aboard *Aldrin* so destroyed his trust in Starfleet leadership? “You had a thought, sir, before you were so rudely interrupted—”

“Words and force are all we have been using. Music,” Robert said again, “*music*. They think our language is irrational. Their mathematics are far above ours. But music is another language. A transcendent language. If we can just communicate to them that we are capable of higher, rational thought, they will negotiate.”

“*How* do you suggest we do this?” Commander Pike’s nerves were completely shot. He had no idea why his Captain was advocating music, but they had tried everything else—

“Sister.” He turned to comm. “Prepare a transmission to the Sheliak. Mahler’s Symphony Number Two, ‘Resurrection.’ Leonard Bernstein’s recording.”

“Perhaps we should listen, too,” Mary Anne said a bit shakily, as Meek sent the recording from the library computer to the comm station.

“Agreed, Sister, put it on the ship wide intercom.”

“Gandalf, I still don’t understand…”

“Chris, it’s a hope in hell. I swear to you, if this all works out the way I believe it will, I will explain everything to you.”

Robert walked slowly to his command chair. He settled into it with a long sigh, murmuring something under his breath about “when the Toad came home.”

“You aren’t Toad, Brother, you’re old Badger,” Duncan chuckled over his shoulder.

The moment when she had angrily confronted Pike had been the moment that Sarah *knew.* This wasn’t a dream. This wasn’t a hallucination. She didn’t know how, but her husband was *alive.*

If she allowed the full weight of the realization to dawn upon her all at once, she felt she would have lost consciousness again, this time, for sheer overwhelming joy. It was better to stand next to him, reach her hand over the arm of the command chair for his, and slowly, slowly, slowly, like the blood rushing back to a limb that has been without circulation for a long time, let the fact that he was alive become real to her.

Robert knew what was going on for her and he turned his hand in hers to hold it tightly, giving her the time she needed. And together, they listened to the music.

And so did the Sheliak.

Across the entire invasion fleet, ship after ship ceased the transmissions that had shut down the Federation communications network. The comm panel lighted up with crazy colors and lights as message after message that had been blocked for so long came crashing in, like a storm tide.

“Report,” Robert almost whispered. “What are our friends doing now?”

“Brother—” Mary Anne had tears in her eyes. “The entire Sheliak fleet has gone to silent running. They’re just sitting there, listening to the music. One ship has passed it to another ship and so on down the line.”

“Why Mahler? Why Mahler’s Second?” Sarah whispered, “why not Beethoven’s Ninth, or Mozart’s Fortieth, or Mendelssohn’s Fifth—” she knew all his favorite symphonies, just as he knew all of her favorite Gerry and the Pacemakers songs.

“Because I was thinking about what you told me,” he said slowly, “not to give advice but instead give my heart. This Symphony… this *is* my heart. It evokes my Mother. Her heart, her love, her spirit. I hear her voice in it. I hear her longing for transcendence. I hear her last cries and I am reminded that those cries of pain are not the end for her, that she ascended to another level of existence when she died, and that she is not separated from my father there. All of that is in the music for me, and by sending it to the Sheliak… I can’t communicate in any way more intimate than this.”

Regulations be damned. Her husband was alive. Sarah settled herself on his knee and leaned her head against his chest. His heartbeat was even sweeter music to her than the Mahler.

As the last transcendent note faded into the silence of space, Mary Anne turned from her station. “Brother, the Sheliak are hailing us.”

Robert gently set his wife off his knee with mutual pats for reassurance. Slowly, in no hurry, he got to his feet. Walked the circumference of the bridge. Touched with reverent fingers the dedication plaque. Paused at Jo’s station to squeeze her shoulder in reassurance, by Meek’s station to greet her with downcast eyes and a hand over his heart, and then to comm to clasp hands with his sister.

Finally, he nodded. “Onscreen.”

“We have received your transmission,” the metallic voice intoned, “and we have decided that a life form capable of this level of complex language is a life form capable of negotiations. Armed conflict with the life forms of the Federation would expend valuable resources. Negotiation is permissible, April of the *Enterprise.* We await your earliest convenience.”

“Robert,” Sarah noted softly, “there are tears running down your face.”

“‘Ark at the pot calling the kettle grimey arse!” he retorted, wiping first his wife’s face and then his own with his sweater sleeve, and then regulations be damned to bloody hellfire, he bent his head so their lips could meet in a long kiss. The other officers on the bridge were too busy celebrating to even notice.

Over at communications, a strangled cry startled them all.

Mary Anne, who was such a shelter of a great rock in a weary land, the calm and unflappable midwife and comm officer, who had not shed a tear when she believed her brother dead, was crying. Deep, racking sobs from the very depth of her being were shaking her sturdy form. She crouched over and buried her face in her hands.

"Permission to leave my post, Brother?" she managed to stammer out between sobs.

"Go— go—"

"Let her go," Sarah said gently to both men who were braced to run after her. "Let her be. That great heart of hers is that full—"

Hearts were overflowing all over the ship, in cheers, and hugs, laughter, and tears.

It was peace. There would be no war today.

When the celebrations began to quiet down, the captain turned to his wife.

"Dearest? Where's Sarek?"

"He's badly," Sarah said quietly. "He suffered traumatic brain injuries whilst trying to telepathically communicate with the Sheliak."

"Oh *Sarah."* It hurt to see the effervescent joy fade from his face, replaced by concern for his colleague. "Could I see him?"

"I don't think he will recognize you. He's catatonic. He doesn't even know his own wife."

"Even so dear, but if I could tell him— talk to him, as we did Veronica—"

“I will try anything at this point, and if you are there, we can coax Amanda to go rest for a bit. She will not leave his side unless she knows someone is sitting with him.” They walked together to the turbo lift.

“Chris? You have the conn,” Robert called over his shoulder. “Perhaps they would like some Beethoven. Transmit Beethoven’s Ninth, please? And assure them that we are making preparations for negotiations?”

They were alone together inside the turbolift, and the air was electric. Sarah had imagined a thousand times what her reaction might be in this exact same situation. Would she silently hold him until her arms went numb? Would she kiss him so passionately that her lips left bruises on his? Would she make love to him right here as they stood? Would she weep, or would she sing, or would she press her head to his heart and laugh until the tears came?

She did none of these things. Instead, she counted to ten, stopped the lift, and turned to him.

What she had not counted upon was being so overcome with rage that she could barely speak.

“You *fecking eejit!”*

She sounded like one of her strident Irish cousins, but Robert nodded in patient agreement.

“You are absolutely right, I am. I’m a fool for you. I promised you I was. Wasn’t kidding, was I?”

“You— you—” Sarah could have told the Sheliak that they hadn’t seen gibbering until now, because she could gibber with the best of them. “That was a really, really STUPID thing to do. Know it?”

“I certainly do.”

She was just getting started. “I’m talking about the Sheliak vessel. In that situation, we needed a diplomat and a Captain who could speak for the Federation far more than we needed a doctor. *How* could you be so—”

“Because I wasn’t thinking as a Captain, or a Starfleet officer, or a diplomat,” he told her quietly. “I was thinking as a husband who would do anything, suffer anything, to spare his wife suffering and death. For twenty-five years, Sarah, I have been the spouse who didn’t die. I couldn’t live through that again.”

His calm, reasonable voice, his quiet, pleading eyes, with the inner light glowing brightly in them, was reaching her.

She stepped a little closer to him. He held very still, letting her process. “You… would do that for me? Even though it wasn’t the… *dutiful* thing to do?”

“You come first,” he said quietly. “You come before duty. Before Starfleet. Before the ship. Before orders. Before my own life. That is what I mean when I tell you I love you. Do you understand?”

“I… always wondered, see thee?” Sarah’s voice was a croak. “I always wondered if… when it came right down to the wire… if you loved me as much as you loved Jenny… if you would lay down your life for me as you did for her—”

She thought his heart would shatter on the deck before her. “My Dearest. Have you been married to me for seven years and not known this?”

“Well, now I’m sure. Look, where are we going?”

“We need to talk in inviolable privacy. Your office?”

CHAPTER 27: ON THE ROAD, A LIGHT

"I have such respect for you, Dr. April."

Prime of Organia stood before Sarah April and made the ancient gesture of welcome and respect. He had never meant it more sincerely. "I have so longed to meet you in person. Everything I know about compassion, I learned from observing you."

Sarah felt that after seven years of marriage, she really should be used to the unusual beings her husband was in the habit of making friends with. She had, after all, grown quite fond of a talking cactus on one of their missions, and she had become resigned to the fact that she had to look past a prickly looking countenance to see a truly kind and honest being inside ("much like yourself, Dear," Robert had teased her). The scientist in her was utterly fascinated by the infinite diversity of the life forms they had met along the way. But *how* two Franciscan monks had ended up in her office, many light years from the monastery near the old farm in North Riding, she was completely unable to understand.

Then she looked more closely, and felt a flash of recognition. Something in the eyes—

"Why, I've *seen* you before," she gasped, "I thought I was just daydreaming about my Nan, but it was *you,* wasn't it?"

"*You* saw them, Sarah? I did, also, several times, but I thought I was just tired and ill, and I didn't like to mention it—"

“We terrified Archer’s crew,” Second of Organia explained, also making the welcoming gesture. “We wanted you to become familiar with us. We have waited so long to make first contact with you.”

“You gave me my husband back,” Sarah said simply. “For that, I will forgive *anything.”*

“But we didn’t,” Prime argued, “he made the choice to come back to you and to finish his life’s work. We just helped because we wanted to meet you so much.”

“*Why?”* Sarah asked bluntly. “We’re just plain simple country folk who live and work in space…”

“Because we learned self-sacrifice and compassion from Jonathan Archer and his crew, but we didn’t understand it until we came to observe you,” Prime said quietly. Second might have been gloating; he had known Prime would come around. “You have both forced me to admit that Starfleet people are different. You didn’t abandon your injured crew member, Veronica; you didn’t cease to interact with her. You all stayed with her until the very last moment. Doctor, you knew from the very first that you couldn’t save her, didn’t you?”

Sarah April stood shivering under Prime’s austere regard. She felt her flesh had been stripped from her bones and her skeleton laid bare before them all.

“I… I didn’t *know…”* she whispered. “But I had to *try.* Just as Robert had to try.”

“Just as Phlox tried everything to save Hoshi and Trip even when he knew it was hopeless,” Second said eagerly.

“But *why?* Why would you do that?” Prime was fascinated. It wasn’t a lack of intelligence on Dr. April’s part; he knew her too well for that.

“Because I’ve had to make the call of who is too badly injured, too far gone, to save.” Sarah’s voice was almost gone but they could hear her. “And I’ve had to choose to let someone die so that I could focus on someone I could save. But once… a very long time ago… I made the decision to try to save someone who was too far gone. I *did* save him. Twenty years later, I married him.”

“She’s been saving my life ever since,” Robert said tenderly.

“You have a concern and a care for one another unlike any we have ever observed,” Second said wonderingly.

“Now that you know who *we* are,” Robert suggested, “may we know who *you* are?”

Prime rose to his full height. “We’re Organians. A few of our race are explorers, but most like to, what is your expression, ‘be home for tea and sleep in their own bed.’”

Her own homely expression on the lips of an alien being disguised as a Franciscan monk was one too many for Sarah, whose nerves had been stressed long past the breaking point, and she laughed rather wildly.

“We would learn from you. We would wish you to learn of us. We mean you no harm. We recognize kindred spirits in you two and we want to be friends. Will you let us show you our true faces, speak to you in our languages?”

The monks threw back their hoods, and it was like coming over a sand dune and facing the dazzling flashes of sunlight dancing upon the ocean.

Robert and Sarah, hands locked together, turned to face the light of pure energy.

"Robert! Are you frightened?" she whispered. Later, trying to describe what she had seen that day, she would quote her Nan: "I could have stood up in the ash nook with a top hat on, I felt so small." But for now, all she knew was that she was surrounded by such light as she had never seen in her born days. Was this what the light on the Damascus Road had felt like—

"Afraid!" Robert whispered, his face lifted to take in the vision, his face filled with unutterable love, unconsciously quoting *The Wind in the Willows.* "'Afraid! Of *him?* Oh no, Sarah, never, never! And yet— and yet— oh Sarah, I *am* afraid!'"

The colors and light all around them were so heavenly that they could not look any longer. Against her will, her mortal eyes closed, and she buried her head on her husband's shoulder.

The light grew closer, and closer, until it encircled them both, and for a few transcendent moments, the barriers of time and flesh were set at naught, and they saw one another as they would be outside of entropy. No longer through a glass, darkly, but face to face, and for a few moments, they no longer knew in part.

Slowly, gradually, the light and heavenly visions faded, and venturing to lift her head from her husband's shoulder, Sarah saw only her own familiar office and her own familiar husband, looking back at her with the face of sunrise.

"You're *glowing,"* she said accusatively.

“Nowt o’ th’ soart,” he protested.

“‘Moses wist not that his face shone,’” Sarah snapped back. The enormity of what they had just experienced together was too much to put into words.

“Did we just entertain angels unawares?”

“I don’t know,” Sarah said simply. “All I know is that they gave me my husband back, and that is gift enough for me.”

“Thanks to the gifts of the Organians,” Robert said finally, trying to grasp it all, “you have seen me, inside out. My soul, my spirit. You know me now as well as one soul can know another, this side of Paradise. Do you still want me? Do you still love me?”

Holding out his hands to her but holding his body perfectly still, waiting for her to come to him, seeing her struggling even more than he was to process what they had just experienced together.

“Dearest.” She looked into his eyes with fierce love. “You are a good man. I have always known it. But tonight… tonight I saw your spirit, as I have never seen it before, not even in the most intimate moments of our lives together.” She looked down at her boots for a moment and then back up at him. “And I tell you. You have got the most beautiful spirit I have ever seen in all my born days. And if I weren’t already your wife, I’d fall in love with you tonight. I love the very bones of you.”

She held out her own hands and placed them in his. “Wherever you are, that’s my home. *You’re* my home.”

“And you, mine. Will you have me, Sarah?” he asked huskily.

“What, now? Right here?” Sarah glanced around at her cramped office, and her eyes lit upon the single cot in the corner. Giggling, she averred, “Robert, we *can’t!*”

“Well, we’d lock the door,” he said mildly, doing so, “otherwise all hands and the ship’s cat would come down on us, saying, ‘oh, now isn’t that nice, and isn’t it so cute at their age—”

“Shrax to Doctor April! Shrax to Doctor April! Come here, quickly!”

“*No* rest for the wicked,” Sarah sputtered. “My husband *just* got back from the *dead* and I *still* cannot get a second alone with him. Should’ve stayed dead and had me join you—”

“My darling, ‘*The grave’s a fine and private place, but none, I think, do there embrace,’”* he quoted playfully.

“Doctor? It’s Lyra. They’re awake and asking for you.”

Robert caught Sarah’s eye and indicated that he was going to sit with Amanda for a bit. Sarah acknowledged with a gesture as she flew to Lyra’s side.

“Lyra? How are you feeling?”

The Aenarian reached out a hand gropingly and Sarah gently took it in her own, forgetting as she instinctively felt for a pulse that the Aenarian physiology was different. “I have walked in the darkness and the shadows,” they said slowly, “and I have come back now. Doctor…” they shivered, and Shrax drew closer.

“We are so glad you are back, Lyra. You were sorrowed for and missed. Could you eat a little something and then rest?”

Lyra’s antennae rose and pointed toward their doctor tentatively, and then toward Shrax. The gesture looked like someone seeking the source of a burning smell, or perhaps a muffled cry of pain.

“You’re going to have to give yourself some time,” Sarah said gently, “that mind touch did a number on your system. I am going to officially recommend medical rest leave on Andoria so that your own physicians can make sure you’re alright—”

“No. No time,” Lyra gasped. “I sense—” weak from days without solid food, from trauma and exhaustion, they wobbled as they slipped off the table. Shrax was there for support. “Ambassador Sarek. He is walking deeper into the shadows and the darkness, and if we do not reach him soon, it will be too late.”

“Lyra, you *can’t,* you’re still damaged yourself, you could exacerbate—” but Lyra was at Sarek’s side before Sarah could intervene.

“Lady Amanda,” they said softly. “Will you come with me to find your husband?”

“I would go anywhere for him,” Amanda said simply.

“Amanda, what’s wrong?!”

Amanda Greyson, *aduna* Sarek, fell back into her chair with a hoarse little cry. Robert was there to take her hand, and Sarah was at her side to monitor her vital signs.

“He’s *fighting* me!” Amanda cried out, heartbroken. Robert murmured soothing words to her, feeling a kinship with what she was going through. So, his own wife had been fighting him until she realized it truly was him.

“Lyra, Amanda’s exhausted. You need to stop trying, and let her rest!”

Sarah realized, as she looked up from her readings, that in her concern for Lyra, she hadn't realized the effect the telepathic search for Sarek was having upon his wife.

Lyra raised their head. "There is not much time.

He is further lost in the darkness than I had thought. Sarek needs a family member to enter into the bond with him and augment Lady Amanda's strength."

"It's no bloody good," Sarah groaned in despair, "there isn't even another Vulcan onboard, and we're weeks away from Vulcan!"

Lyra turned to their Captain. "Yes. Sarek does have a family member aboard this ship. He thinks of *you* as his brother, sir."

"*Me?"* Robert was too taken aback to be grammatically correct. "I—never dreamed—"

"Will you enter the bond, Captain, and help us bring Sarek home?"

I can't. No matter how fiercely he berated himself for uncharacteristic cowardice, he couldn't face it. The pain of the first mind meld, the horror of violation, flooded back over him, and no matter how he clung to the memories of the last meld and the calming quieting it had brought his troubled mind, he knew that a meld with a mind broken by whatever he had found in the Sheliak consciousness would be a very different thing.

Sarah wouldn't let him. She had just got him back; the firm shake of her head and the wild terror in her eyes told him that she would not risk his safety for a hundred Vulcans.

And then he looked at Amanda.

And he looked back at his own wife.

"Sarah, I owe Sarek my life," he said simply.

Sarah looked deep within. How could she who knew what it was to be widowed deprive Amanda of a chance to save her husband? Would not she, too, do whatever it took? “Go get him,” she said quietly.

He nodded once to Lyra. Locked eyes with Amanda. Joining hands in a circle around Sarek, the three of them united to bring Sarek home.

No! No! I do not wish to be seen like this! Logic…

Sarek came up swinging, as though he were being challenged. The utter alienness of the Sheliak consciousness he had touched had sent him as deeply into himself as he could possibly go. He wanted to stay in this womb-like darkness and never come back to the sensation of super cold burns on his psyche. He would fight anyone *who tried to drag him out of this safe place.*

Sarek! It is I, be not afraid! Remember Munich!

Did he know that voice? All the more reason to fight, and punch, and kick—

Sarek! Remember our wedding night! Remember our garden in Vulcan! Remember the night blooming cactus we saw in the Forge. Remember your son!

I will fight!

Ambassador! I too have walked in the shadows, and I too have come back to the light. Come with us!

Amanda, stay behind with Lyra. Rest on them. I’m going to have it out with him—

Sarek, how could you disown your own flesh and blood? How could any father possibly—

A door cracked open, and light streamed in. The bright red sunlight of Vulcan. There were two young Vulcan boys… brothers. They had grown up together. Played, wrestled, studied, passed the ordeal of the Forge. Had shared meals and books and a kay'a'thyra. *And their father, angered by the life choices his brother had made, had declared his brother an outcast and forbidden him the house and his family.*

Years of aching loneliness passed for Sarek. Years filled with logic, and work, and the growing fascination with the human species. And around the same time that Love and companionship had come to him in Amanda, another companion had come to his side. A companion at first so human and so emotional that Sarek despaired of ever being able to work together, but as mission after successful mission proved to them both that their unique brands of logic and the deeply rooted belief systems that they had built their lives on were more alike than different, Sarek finally began to realize that the aching void left by his brother all those years ago was filled by a human named Robert April.

You are my brother. I will fight you!

Not today, Satan. It is time to come back. Your wife has need of you. Your brother has need of you.

But Spock— I have done to Spock what my father did to my brother—

You're alive, *Sarek.* Spock *is alive. If you come back, there is* hope *that you can make it right. Just as I have made it right with my own daughter and today we are the dearest of companions.*

Very well.

Reach me your hand— let us walk one another home.

Sarek's eyes finally fluttered open, and fixed upon his wife.

"Amanda." The word was filled with such love that Robert bowed his head and turned away. "My wife." He shakily reached out two fingers, and she crossed them with hers.

"Robert. *T'hy'la."*

Sarek feebly reached out a hand to clasp Robert's.

"Brother," he responded huskily. It would be a long time before he could even begin to process what had happened in that mind meld, but he knew one thing. By going back into the shadows, and offering himself as a lighthouse in the darkness to guide the lost ship home, he had gained a soul brother he thought he had lost.

CHAPTER 28: THE PEACE THAT PASSES ALL UNDERSTANDING

Captain's Personal Log, Robert April recording. November 11, 2249. Armistice Day.

We have made a covenant with death, an agreement with Hell, but the overflowing scourge shall not pass through our worlds. At long last, the armistice between the Sheliak and the Federation has been signed. By some cosmic serendipity, it was signed on the eleventh day of the eleventh month at the eleventh hour, Earth reckoning. My friend John Gill is going to have a field day over this fact. Treaty negotiations are underway.

The first round of those talks has been grueling, to say the least, but after nearly twenty-four consecutive hours, they have agreed to help us develop communications technology that will not interfere with theirs, in exchange for the planet upon which New Pennsylvania was built. The colonists took a vote and agreed unanimously to cede the planet to the cause of peace. My team of engineers is working remotely with the Sheliak engineers, who object to in person contact, to adapt their technology to ours, and we hope to have the new technology installed across the Federation in short order.

The colonists wish to return to Earth for now. Their losses have been too great, and they need the feeling of safety and protection that they can only experience on Earth. At Jo's suggestion, they would like to settle in the uninhabited North Maine Woods, but as those woods are already

deep with the first snow of the season, they will be staying with friends and relatives, close to the medical and psychiatric care they need, until they feel strong enough to travel North with the spring. The Enterprise *has personally committed to bring them home and shield them from the media circus that will most certainly await them. Those poor souls have suffered enough.*

The memory of Little Mark's face when my sister told him that she would like for him to give our little bummer lamb Betsy a loving home shines like a star over all this sorrow, and gives me hope. And so does the birth of two beautiful children: Baby Ebenezer, son of Bethany and David Snow. Baby April, named for her doctor and her milk mother, daughter of Rachel and Ethan Turner. Sarah and I, and Duncan and Mary Anne, are godparents of these precious little ones. As in the midst of life we are in death, so in the midst of death, there is new life.

Under home canvas, we are heading back toward populated space to pick up our musicians and finish our series of memorial services, making repairs to the communications relays and floaters as we travel. Although our hearts are heavy with recent losses, we are comforted that we have each other. The mains'l is bent, all our salt wet, and we are walking home.

"You're reading *Captains Courageous* again, aren't you, sir?" Yeoman Grace Fletcher chuckled, handing him a duty roster for his signature. Although she could freely tease him, she was also close enough to him to understand that recent events had brought his long dead father,

erstwhile professor of literature, very much to the forefront of his mind, and that his literary allusions were loving homage to his father.

"Too long and too late, Prevenient Grace."

"How many times have you read that book?"

"Not quite as many times as my wife has read James Herriot's *All Creatures Great and Small,"* her captain laughingly tossed back.

Lt. Corbett looked on in mingled shock at the familiarity, and envy at the ease with which the yeoman approached the captain. Although she had come out of her shell over the past few months— when she had first been assigned to bridge duty, she wouldn't, as her captain expressed it, have said Boo to a goose— she still would never have dreamed of teasing her captain as other crew members did.

Lt. Josephine Meier turned from the helm, chuckling. "Are you just now noticing that, Grace? I picked up on it the moment we could finally get messages from home again, and I tried to tell Captain that the potato harvest had been fair to middling and that they had sown winter rye. He told me to keep farming 'sep'rate' from spacefaring. He was teasing me, of course."

"Would I do that, Jo? Must have been 'mistook in my jedgements'."

In fact, he reflected, *the gentle melancholy that surrounded me for some days after returning from the Gates of Dawn has faded, and 'I am as light as a feather, I am as happy as an angel, I am as merry as a schoolboy. I am as giddy as a drunken man.' Strange how the first emotion we feel once a great weight is lifted is melancholy. It is as though we do not realize how heavy the burden we have been carrying is until it has been lifted from us.*

Happy, oh so happy, yes, but he still felt as though every major organ in his body had been removed, operated upon, and put back inside him twenty years younger. He still felt fragile, vulnerable, and dearly looking forward to returning Home with his family for a proper English Eastertide.

There was nothing, Robert decided, half so sacred as having a child fall asleep on his chest. These days, he was seldom without a child in his arms, on his back, or at his side holding his hands and talking nineteen to the dozen. The crew had long since grown used to the sight of their Captain coming onto the Bridge and settling into the command chair holding an infant, and in between orders and status reports, softly murmuring to the little one, soothing Northumberland dialect from his very earliest memories. The babies had been mostly protected from the radiation by their mother's bodies, but Sarah was still treating them for exposure, and as a result, they were both fussy. Robert took his turn deftly changing nappies and walking the floor with the inconsolable little ones to give the mothers, and his sister, exhausted from round-the-clock tandem nursing, time to rest. Their cries were the sweetest sounds he had ever heard; he knew as well as Sarah did what it meant when a seriously ill baby stopped crying.

Now, after hours of fussing, inconsolable both at the breast and in her mother's arms, baby April had settled her head against her godfather and fallen asleep to the soothing rhythmic patterns of the bridge background sounds. The knobby knees tucked up to the tiny chest, the tiny starfish hands finally relaxed and tucked under her cheek,

the button eyes closed, the sweet smelling silky head cupped in his gentle hand and the milky breath on his cheek… Robert's heart was so full that he had to swallow a couple times before he could say,

"It is well with the child. Helm, lay in a course… for Home."

Some quiet hours later, the little one in Robert's arms began stirring, with little baby squeaks and snuffles. She began to root, her tiny mouth open and searching, and brought her pink fist to her mouth. It would be well to get her to her milk mother before she became too upset to nurse.

"There now," he soothed the infant, "your Uncle Robert hasn't got the good stuff. Let's get you to your Auntie. She knows just what little girls need. Chris, take the conn."

He found Hoshi seated on a park bench in the arboretum, gazing thoughtfully at the evergreens and red-berried holly he and his sister had nurtured for the Christmas season.

"Dear Hoshi," he greeted her softly, with the gentlest of kisses on her worn cheek. "How are you feeling?"

"Better, Robert. Much better. Only a little tired."

Robert settled next to her on the bench and put an arm around her. She leaned her head on his shoulder, and they sat together in silence, looking at the greenery together.

“We’re finally on our way home, dear one. You’ll be with your children soon. In the meantime, I have a story to tell you.”

“A story? Are you not the one always asking me for my stories of the old days?”

“I am. But this time, I have a story to tell *you* about the old NX-01. It’s a story about you, and Trip, and Jonathan, and it’s a time in your lives you were not permitted to remember. I made first contact with the aliens who were observing you that day and they told me the whole story. Hoshi, you are *so loved.”*

He told her the story of a silicone virus that even Dr. Phlox could not cure. Of mysterious non-corporeal beings who visited the NX-01 to observe the crew’s response to that virus. Of a Captain so devoted to his crew that he willingly exposed himself to the lethal virus, while watching what that virus was doing to his treasured crew mates, in order that Hoshi might have a few more minutes of life. Of the sorrow of that Captain who watched Hoshi and Trip die before his eyes, knowing that he had been exposed to the virus and that his time was not long. Of cold, detached beings who were so moved by Jonathan’s sacrifice and his plea that they learn compassion that they had gone back to their home world to prepare for first contact.

Robert wiped the tears from Hoshi’s cheeks. His own eyes were wet.

“Why… why don’t I *remember* this? I remember… being in decon with Trip… we were taking care of each other… and then I remember waking up in sickbay and Dr. Phlox smiling at me…”

“The Organians erased your memories, that you might not retain a memory of their interference,” Robert said quietly.

Hoshi sat quietly, taking it all in.

“That’s how much Jonathan cared about you.”

“You did the same thing for your crew.”

“Because Jonathan set me an example.”

“I wish I remembered what death felt like,” Hoshi finally said thoughtfully. “I don’t remember anything but pain and nausea as the virus set in.”

“Hoshi… I’ve been dead. And where I was… it was so… beyond beautiful. It was… I was *home.* I was in a place I knew, a place I have been looking for all my life but didn’t just know what I was looking for. And I got to choose. To stay, or to come back. Hoshi, I can’t tell you how close I came to staying. Please don’t tell my wife I said that.”

Hoshi looked long and thoughtfully at him. “I’m not scared any more, Robert. When a person gets older, she isn’t as frightened as she was when she was younger. But… what you say does give me comfort.”

“Hoshi…” his voice was unsteady, “when you came aboard… did you *know?”*

Hoshi smiled serenely. “I didn’t just fall off the turnip freighter, Robert. I knew long before the doctors did.”

“But Hoshi, why… *why…”*

“You don’t know what it has meant to me to be a part of a crew once again,” Hoshi said quietly. “How much I have missed this. Having a Captain and a crew so loyal to me that they would die for me, and I for them. You don’t know what it’s like to miss and long for that.”

“But you’ve worked so hard all your life. You’ve contributed so much. Surely, you deserve…”

“I deserve to have the chance to contribute one last time,” Hoshi said sternly. “Robert, you don’t understand what I am saying to you now. But you will grow into my words.”

“How many times have you told me that…”

“You’ll remember everything we talked about, because it’s important,” she said firmly. “Keep practicing the Aikido moves I taught you but for heaven’s sake, stick to cribbage and stay away from poker.”

His laugh sounded more like a sob. He cleared his throat, and tried again.

“Hoshi, Jonathan would have been so proud of you. You didn’t have to come out of retirement to come out to space for one last mission, but it’s just what he would have done.”

“Do you still miss Jonathan?” Hoshi wondered, her dark eyes a little brighter.

“Beyond words and past all expression,” Robert replied softly. “It’s been seven years, and I don’t think it will ever get any easier.”

“I miss him too.” She rested against him for a long time in silence.

“I’m still sad I couldn’t interpret the Sheliak language,” she finally noted wistfully. “I keep wondering, if I’d encountered them when I was younger, quicker—”

Robert shook his head. “We are linguists, Hoshi, we know that all languages are based on patterns. The Sheliak language simply wasn’t built on any pattern we can interpret or translate. There’s no need for sadness, dear one, you gave this mission your all. And we reached them after all.”

“Well, Mahler reached them,” Hoshi said, chuckling, “who would have thought. We know that math is just another language, and music is based upon math, but damn it, I’m a linguist, not a musician…”

Robert chuckled with her. “And now, Hoshi. If you feel up to it… can you tell me again the story of the Battle of Cheron?”

Hoshi had scarcely begun the tale of the battle that had turned the tide of war, the battle in which Robert’s own grandfather had fought and been wounded, when the intercom sounded.

“Captain, it’s Commander Kirk on sub space for you.”

“I will take it in my ready room. Thank you, Lyra.”

Expression after expression flitted across George Kirk’s ruddy face as he looked into the face of his Captain and his friend. *I had the most horrible premonition that I was never going to see you again,* he thought, *and somehow I feel that you have been in mortal danger. But here you are. And the horrible foreboding is gone.*

“Just checking in,” he finally said tentatively. “We still on for Christmas?”

Starbase One

It hurt to say goodbye to the colonists, who had become like family members. Robert held each infant in his arms for a long, long time before he could let them go back to their mothers. He knelt down to the level of the little ones for earnest parting words and hugs. Mary Anne, saying goodbye to the babies she had delivered and wet nursed, was

openly in tears; he and Sarah were trembling on the verge. They took comfort in the welcome each one had, in the family and friends who were waiting with outstretched arms for them, and in many promises to visit and stay in touch.

And then it was time to say the hardest goodbye of all. He turned to Hoshi with an overflowing heart. Something deep inside told him, as he gathered into his arms the woman who had been a surrogate mother to him for so many years, that this was the very last time he would see her in the land of the living.

He couldn't hold back the tears as he whispered, "Go well, Hoshi. *Mother* Hoshi. I love you."

"I love you too," she whispered back, "but don't cry for me, Robert. I'm at peace. I'm happy. I'm going on to be with Takashi."

"I know," he whispered, "I know, Hoshi. I'm not crying for you. I'm crying for *me.* What shall I do without you?"

"Remember what Jonathan told us. You can't be afraid of the wind. Learn to trust it," Hoshi told him gently. She reached up to kiss his cheek, and then turned away into the loving and waiting arms of her children who had come to meet her and travel with her back to Earth.

I saw three ships come sailing in…

He was so absorbed in the sweetness of baby April, who had just learned how to smile and was treating him to toothless pink heart-melting smiles of pure delight, that he had not seen the doors of the Observation Lounge slide open and a newcomer walk onto the deck. He heard his

sister cry out, “Brother!” And assumed she meant him, but even his sister could wait. These baby smiles would not.

And then he heard the singing. Looking up, he saw his father. The same long-legged straight-backed walk. The same worn tweed coat worn over a hand knit jersey. The same shy, sweet, gentle face. How could his father—

On Christmas Day in the morning!

And the moment he saw his sister, laughing and crying at the same time, holding hands with the tall tweedy man, he realized it was not his father. It was…

Brother William had not left Coventry in years. He had been to London, which had scared him half to death, exactly once in his life, and he had not been North to the old Herb of Grace farm since their grandparents had passed away. But he was *here.* In space. At the Starbase. With the air of a man who had put on his traveling hat to circumnavigate the quadrant, he was tentatively holding out his hand to his brother.

“Thought I’d better come see your ship before someone blows it up,” he said tentatively, but before he knew where he was, his brother’s arms were around him and he was being hugged within an inch of his life.

“You did it, Brother,” William whispered. “You waged peace with the Sheliak. Our parents’ blood is no longer crying out from under the altar.”

“No one’s ever again going to lose their parents to those beings, Willie,” Robert whispered, and the two surrendered themselves to making up for the lost hugs of a lifetime.

POSTLUDE: HOME FOR CHRISTMAS

It was snowing in Yorkshire.

It was not a blizzard like the one they had been lost in as young people. It was feathery, whispery, scintillating *magic,* and as the first flakes landed on their eyelashes, Robert is and Sarah became children again. They took hold of hands and ran until they reached the edge of the moor. They chased each other, laughing until their sides hurt, holding out their arms to the swirling flakes, swinging each other into wild dances, before settling upon their prescriptive stile and abandoning themselves to kissing in the snow.

The crystals sparkled on her hair and stung her pale cheeks to rose. He took her cold face in his hands and focused on kissing every square inch of it, before finally she turned her chilly lips to meet his, long and deeply.

“I wish we could make love, right here in the snow,” she whispered against his cheek.

He chuckled softly. “Things don’t work very well in the cold for your old husband, dear, surely a doctor would remember that—”

“I could warm you up.”

“With these icy hands?” Seizing them, he kissed the fingertips. Thinking about her touch was quickly negating the effects of the cold. “Could we talk for a bit, my love?”

Their leave was to be only a couple days long, and then they would need to return to the front. There was not one moment to lose, and if he did not speak now, he would lose himself in her, and there might be misunderstandings as a result.

"Mmmm. One more kiss." She thought that she would never ever be able to get enough of him, like a survivor of malnutrition who struggles for years to make up for the strength and muscle mass lost to the famine.

"I had a long talk with Admiral Komack today," he said finally, chafing her cold hands between his own to warm them. The snow continued to sift down between them, creating a lacy curtain for them to look at each other through.

Concern immediately leapt into her eyes. "Robert, you didn't—"

"No," he said simply. "I explained to him that I cannot join the Admiralty at this time. I need to finish what I have started, Sarah. This peace initiative… I need to see this through to the end."

"What about *Chris?* You promised him the *Enterprise…"*

"I had a long talk with Chris. He's not ready. Says there are so many things he still wants to ask me and learn from me. He wants to serve under a captain for just a bit longer. I have *mad* respect for that man. It takes a man to admit he isn't ready and he still has learning and growing to do before taking the center seat. And after we have seen the peace initiative through to the end…"

Robert thought about Duncan's encouragement. Thought about the precious weight of the newborn babies in his arms. Looked within and felt the nearly unbearable yearning for another child. He knew he couldn't keep the words inside for very much longer. But he must wait

for the right moment, and their future must be decided first. Instead, he said, “Ambassador Sarek informs me that the ambassadorship that Daniel was training for is still open and urgently needs to be filled. The position would mean working closely with him, and he believes that given our history of working together, and my relationship with Daniel, I am a logical choice for that position. I told him I couldn’t commit to anything without talking it over with you first.”

He braced himself for Sarah’s protests and hurried on. “My Dearest, I promised you I would consider a ground-based assignment, and I have done. But this latest experience, with the Organians, and the Sheliak—”

“Robert, listen to me,” Sarah said earnestly. “I don’t want to keep you from doing whatever you are called upon to do. I just don’t want you in harm’s way, on the front lines, any longer. George says that the Diplomatic Corps has the best security in the Fleet and he should know, he’s it.”

“But dear, I don’t want to break my promise to you—”

“If I kept you from answering the call on your life, which is keeping the peace, you would no longer be the man I fell in love with,” Sarah continued. “I know that now. Losing you was my very greatest fear, Robert. And do you know what I learned when I really did lose you? I learned that I *cannot* lose you. Not ever. Your *spirit* is always with me. It’s as though we are not two separate people anymore; we’re *one,* and yet because of each other, we are more ourselves than we ever were before.”

“Sarah,” blinking the tears away, “I know what I am like when I am separated from you. It’s as though something vital in my spirit dries up.

But I know how much you dislike space travel, Dearest, I can't ask you to come with me—"

"'Appen we need to renew our wedding vows as thee cannot keep them in thy mind for two minutes straight," Sarah said sharply. "'Entreat me not to leave thee; for where you go, I will go, where you lodge, I will lodge, thy people shall be my people—' it isn't space I hate, Robert. It's seeing you in pain, and broken-hearted, and in constant danger, and being in terror that you won't come back. That's what I hate."

She sighed and sank back against him.

His arms tightened around her. "But I don't want to keep you from your work—"

"My work is going to look different." Sarah looked up at him thoughtfully. "I made a decision. After we leave *Enterprise,* I don't want to practice medicine any longer. No, I don't mean what tha' thinks I mean—"

"Make the decision that's best for you and I'll support you to the ends of the galaxy, dear—"

"I mean, I can't bear to hear the awful sounds of a child in pain one single more time," Sarah said, shivering with the memory of the children from New Pennsylvania. "I hear those sounds in my sleep. I *never* get used to hearing them."

He knew; she cried in her sleep and broke his heart because he could not comfort her.

"And I'm afraid that the only way I can continue to practice medicine, feeling this way, is if I harden my heart to the pain, and become removed, and distant, and calloused, and I will lose everything that makes me a good doctor."

“You have come so far in seven years, to so honestly and deeply know yourself,” Robert told her quietly, brushing an errant teardrop off her cheek. “I know your heart is in research and design and I know you can work on those projects anywhere. I will support you to the ends of the galaxy. But Sarah… are you *very* sure… that you aren’t running away from the pain because you feel you have failed as a doctor…”

“Like I did last time? No,” Sarah said slowly. “I feel differently about this. I know I’ve done good work over the past seven years. I can do that work anywhere. And there is so much more scope for research out here in space. I… I’m willing to stay out here, with you, as long as I have a lab and an office to work in.”

“And an herb garden. I promise you that.”

“And a graidley garden it will be. And now, Robert, I think we should be returning home, it’s getting dark.”

They began walking through the snow and the twilight, palm to palm and fingers locked. “I learned something from Sarek and Amanda,” Sarah began hesitantly, her eyes far away. “Amanda and I talked long into the night, just before we came back to Earth. We started talking about my medicinal herbs and went on to motherhood, which is a universal sisterhood. She opened her heart to me about how torn she is between her maternal instincts and the requirements of the Way of the Vulcan. And she confided in me how deeply Sarek *loves* Spock. And the pain… Robert, the *anguish…* that they feel, as parents, that they can’t express that love.”

Robert knew; in melding with Sarek, he had taken that frustrated, anguished love into his own heart, and it still ached there.

Sarah rushed on. There were so many things that must be said before they got back to the Herb of Grace, put the tea kettle on, and shut out the snow and the cold. Once they settled down before the fireplace and began to make love, there would be no stopping until break of day. And the best lovemaking happened for them after the deepest of heart to hearts.

"And I think my parents were like that too. Stunted emotionally. My heart tells me that they *did* love me, but like Sarek and Amanda, they just didn't know how to express it."

"There is more than one way of expressing love," Robert said thoughtfully. They had paused before the barn; Cousin Ellen had completed the farm chores and there was only the sound of contented animals from within. "I always think of loving… as *knowing.* As you and I know one another. As we and the Organians came to know one another. As Sarek and I overcame many difficulties to know one another through meld. But then I think of the Sheliak. And how they are clearly more advanced than we are, but they don't want to know us, and they don't want to be known. And how 'love thy neighbor,' as applied to the Sheliak, means leaving them absolutely alone, and setting boundaries to keep ourselves safe." With a long sigh, "I know interpersonal relationships like that, too."

"Perhaps it's for the best," said Sarah softly. "I… I guess I did feel compassion for them… in a strange way… they just needed a place to live because their home had been destroyed. They'll have it now, with the treaty."

“It’s going to be a long process, and we must keep up our strength. Now, my darling, what do you say we go in and fix a proper bouillabaisse for tea?”

“I’ll make drop scones if you chop vegetables?”

“Wait.” Holding up his hand. “Every year at Christmas, it is said that the animals talk to each other. Shall we listen in?”

Sarah thought for a moment. “No. Eavesdroppers never hear any good of themselves.”

Laughing like children, they walked hand in hand over the worn threshold, and shut out the night.

Coventry Cathedral, Christmas Eve

“Sir, it should have been me instead of her.”

The words burst from Jim like the very coolant explosion that had haunted his nightmares for months.

Jim Kirk and his parents were spending Christmas in England with the April family. George had been detained by a security emergency back at HQ and would join them as soon as he was able. Winona and Sarah had immediately picked up a conversation they had been carrying on remotely regarding a joint research project they had been working on for months. Duncan had taken Lark to visit her mother’s people in Scotland. This left young Jim Kirk alone with his godfather for the day.

It hadn’t been too bad, Jim had to admit to himself. Captain April was some of the best company a young man could ask for. With

consummate tact, he had avoided broaching any sensitive topics, had not asked how his studies were going, and had not mentioned their last painful conversation. Instead, he showed Jim around Coventry, to all the places he had known and loved as a boy. They had walked the grounds of the University, which would have been dull indeed if Captain April had not kept him endlessly entertained with his stories about growing up a faculty brat. Jim had nearly burst trying to keep from laughing out loud; Captain April had a good-natured mischievous streak that allowed him to bring the people he spoke of to life.

They had proper English fish and chips— “this is a different place from the shoppe we always went to growing up, but it’s just as good as I remember.” They had walked the street where the Lady Godiva had made her famous ride. Jimmy had snickered in his sleeve, young man fashion, until Captain April had said sternly, “That was courage and self-sacrifice on her part, Jim. She was doing something incredibly dangerous and shameful for the love of her people. She has always been one of the strong women who have inspired me.”

They had stopped in a local bookshoppe… a proper shoppe, with sofas to curl up on and read, a resident marmalade cat, who knew Captain April and condescended to his advances, and house plants green in the windows. Here Captain April had picked out Jim’s Christmas present, “The Two Towers” and “The Return of the King.” Because, as he said, Jim had devoured “Fellowship” and was hungry for more. Jim thought, but did not tell the Captain, that reading “Fellowship” comforted him when he woke up in the night after yet another nightmare. Weren’t nightmares for kids?

He had even shown Jim where he had grown up, the favorite tree he had climbed and the limb where he had spent countless boyhood hours reading and dreaming of the stars.

For the first time, it became real to Jim that his Captain had once been a boy of sixteen, just like him. Somehow with adults, it was easy to forget that they had ever been kids. But Captain April seemed to be able to slip off the years like a too-warm jumper and enter into the struggles of sixteen, and translate the wisdom of age into terms that sixteen could understand.

Captain April had been painfully shy around girls, save for one who was more like a sister to him. ("You can guess who she is, Jim. I used to get so cross when people mistook her for my sister. 'She's not my sister. She's just Sarah.' Thirty years later, I finally had the sense to ask her to be my wife and here we are.") He had been the object of ridicule because of his love for music and languages instead of sports and girls. He had been tall and thin growing up ("I take after Father's side of the family") and had been given nicknames like "String Bean." He had been brilliant with music and languages and literature, but had struggled with the maths and sciences. He had come to know himself as a leader by earning his Eagle Scout on an historical preservation project on the "new" (post WWII) Coventry Cathedral. And he knew everything there was to know about the freighters because he'd run freight with his grandfather, summers.

"This is the Cathedral you were telling me about, isn't it?" Jim asked. Their long day of walking and talking was coming to an end, as Captain April must 'report for duty,' i. e. choir practice, within the hour. An

English winter sunset, like a rose garden catching fire, blazed in the west, and the last light splashed across the ruins.

"Yes. And this… this is the statue of Reconciliation. This place means more to me than any other place in this galaxy, Jim."

The two sat down on the ground at the feet of the statue. Captain April was looking at Jim with eyes that were tender and wise.

"How are you doing, Jim?" he asked gently. "I mean, how are you *really* doing, right here." He reached out one hand and without touching Jim, gestured to his heart.

"It… it's been a great day, sir. I can't wait to start reading my Christmas present. I liked seeing your home, and I loved getting to know you a bit."

"But…"

"I keep asking myself… why am I here… with you… alive and enjoying the sunshine and fish and chips and funny stories… and Veronica is dead? It should have been me instead of her!"

Captain April's eyes were filled with understanding. He had guessed what might be wrong the moment he had gotten the call from George.

"Come here, Jim."

Captain April opened his arms and Jim found himself gathered into them. Perhaps, there was a distant memory there for both of them. For Robert, a memory of holding baby Jim in his arms and promising to be his godfather, to help him along the road of life, and to be there for him. For Jim, in a time before memory, a sense of safety and a gentle, reassuring voice.

It had been so long since he had been held in loving arms and comforted. His Dad had never been comfortable with showing affection,

not even when he was small, but there was an innate tenderness and fatherly nurturing in Captain April that he grudgingly responded to. Somehow, he wasn't a hero or a teen turned from a life of hooliganism into an Academy bound young man anymore, but just a young person who had lost a friend. Before he knew it, leaning his head on Captain April's woolen shoulder, he realized he was crying. Crying was for *babies…* he couldn't let Captain April see him—

Reading his thoughts because after all he had been a young man not so long ago, the captain said, his own voice husky, "Did you know, Jim, that in the days of chivalry, it would have been a disgraceful thing for a man *not* to shed tears when he lost a comrade? There are stories of men who soaked their sleeves with tears. Not quite what we think of when we think of the daring deeds of old, is it?"

Jim couldn't respond, but somehow, these words made him feel better. Perhaps Dr. April had been right too, about it being a shameful thing *not* to weep for a dying crewmate. He finally drew away, and Captain April handed him a clean handkerchief.

"Always the prepared Eagle Scout," he explained dryly. He waited until Jim had mopped his face and handed the handkerchief back before he spoke again.

"You're alive because your life's work isn't finished," he said quietly. "Because there is something for you to do. Perhaps a task that if you cannot complete, no one else can."

"I just don't see how I can go to the Academy without her."

"The promise of Starfleet, Jim, is that I give my life for you. You give yours for me. Veronica gave hers for you. Now you need to take the life she saved and make a difference. Because some people are worth dying

for. You will meet friends in the service, Jim, whom you will find are worth laying your own life down for. But even more, worth living for."

"I… guess I'll work harder on my studies, sir," Jim mumbled.

"I know you will. I believe in you. One last thing. I have a dear friend and colleague at the Academy. His name is John Gill. People say we could be twin brothers… do your best diligence to take every single class he offers. He's a good man, and he has much to offer. And perhaps you may have something to teach him as well. Believe it or not, Jim, we older people learn at *least* as much from the young as you do from us, and we glory in it. At least the best of us do. And now I've got to go sing."

"I think I'll read until service time, sir." Jim gestured at the books beside him.

"Happy reading, Jim." *You will meet a warrior in those pages who wept for his own fallen comrade,* he thought.

"Sir—" Captain April turned. "Thank you. Thank you for everything."

"It was my joy."

Coventry Cathedral was flickering with candles for the Christmas Eve service of lessons and carols. Every year, a young boy was chosen to open the service with the solo part of "Once in Royal David's City," and this year, Robert's young nephew Timmy was singing the part. Right on cue, the little boy stepped forward. His face was earnest, and he looked cherubic in his choir robes. From his vantage point up front with the choir's tenor section, his uncle smiled at the sharp contrast between Timmy the muddy little boy and Timmy cleaned up to sing at the

Cathedral. The clear sweet simplicity of the unchanged young voice singing out the first line rang out through the old church.

I would have missed this, he thought. *Had I stayed on the other side, I would not have been able to see my nephews grow up.*

The thought shook him like an oak in a winter wind. He looked over at his wife, in the alto section, waiting with hands clasped behind her back, cheeks like Christmas roses, and serene eyes shining in the candlelight for her turn to come in. *Did my heart love ere this? Forswear it, sight! For I never saw true beauty before tonight.*

She was always beautiful to him, in her crisp medical whites, in her off duty worn dungarees and brightly colored jumpers, in the red plaid flannel nightgown she wore to bed. He knew other people found her plain; he had always known the beauty of the heart and spirit that shone through her face and the compassion that blazed like a nova, and he counted himself blessed in the knowledge. But tonight, she wore a silk Renaissance dress of her favorite Christmas pine color, with bits of lace at the wrists and throat like frost feathers on a windowpane, and her hair falling around her face instead of severely pulled back as per regulation and practicality. The pearl necklace he had given her as an early Christmas present, to remind her that some of the most beautiful things in life are formed as a result of pain and irritation, glimmered at her throat like moonlight on snow.

He was meant to lead the tenor section in a moment and he couldn't even breathe, he was so overcome by his wife's beauty in the candlelight. By the sweet simplicity of her singing. By the love light in her eyes as she caught him watching her and winked at him.

We have the rest of our lives, the wink said.

All of a sudden, the lingering melancholy that had mulled like a sea fog on his spirit lifted as though blown away by a sea wind, and his spirit settled in the Here and Now. He would never forget the visions of beauty he had seen. He would never cease to ache for his Candle. But he knew he had made the right choice.

Is it well with the child? The age-old question of the begetter of life was haunting him tonight. He looked over at his daughter, singing in the soprano section, and asked her with his eyes, *Is it well with you, my Heart's Dearest?*

She had opened her heart to her parents on the way Home. As she listened to the story of how music had conveyed to a race of beings so alien that there seemed to be no common ground for communication that the beings of the Federation were indeed capable of higher, rational thought, she had come to a fresh understanding and appreciation of what her calling meant to her. She was a musician; and her work did indeed make a difference. Music was not just for the amusement of the class of diplomats her father avoided like poison ivy, who wouldn't have known a half step from a whole tone; it was for building bridges between cultures. Joy sprang from her eyes as she caught his, and she smiled across the aisle at him. All was indeed well with the child.

All was very well with his Candle. Instinctively he knew that there would be no more waking in cold sweat and hot tears, thinking he had heard her crying out for him. Although to his dying day his arms would ache to hold her again, some raw place inside his heart had healed. He had been able to speak of her without tears for the first time as he told his family about his experiences.

He looked across at young Jimmy sitting very close to his mother. Thought of the long-repressed healing tears finally shed. He thought he could see a new straightness in the young shoulders, as if a burden too heavy for them had slipped away, and a new clarity in those eyes that had so recently smoldered with burning resentment. All would soon be well with him; he would find friends at the Academy who would help him grow and heal and change in ways he could not now imagine.

With Grace, Meek, and Jo, all was well. Pike had come to depend upon the science officer in his captain's absence and had recommended her for the Command Training Program. Meek had been concerned about leaving behind science, her first great love, but Pike had rattled off a list of commanders who had come up through astrophysics, and Meek had felt that a commander with a scientific background had a unique perspective. The recent adventure had given her a taste for strengthening her leadership muscles, and she had accepted Pike's recommendation.

Jo had faced the memories of the trauma of her last mission in space and had performed heroically in the face of clear and present danger.

"I thought of what you said, sir, about being scared and doing it anyway, and, well, thirty-nine people are alive today because I overcame."

"And no one is prouder of you than your Captain."

Grace had gravely informed him that communications was a bit *too* heroic for her, thank you, and she wanted to pursue stellar cartography more than ever, as she was learning how important that discipline was in treaty building.

“It’s so nice and peaceful in stellar cartography,” she reflected.

“Until you folks discover a supernova,” her captain agreed. He had seen some of the wild parties stellar cartographers tended to throw at the least excitement.

He had put the four of them in for special commendations and medals, and the award ceremony would take place after Christmas. It was just as well, his superiors thought, not to mention to him that they had special commendations in mind for him and Sarah, as well, given his long history with dodging and ducking celebrity of any sort.

With his beloved Sister, his nail fastened in a sure place, his hiding place from the tempest, all was gloriously well. She had faced the great test of her life and had continued in recovery instead of falling back into addiction. Instead of isolating herself in her pain, she had thrown herself into helping those in desperate need, and so had worked out her own salvation. He knew it had been a wrench for her to leave the babies whose lives she had saved, but she had seen the colonists safely and comfortably settled, and knew that they were on the long path to recovery. He had inside knowledge that Duncan was going to ask her to marry him on Christmas Day, and so the two lives that had run parallel for so many years would run together, like two rivers converging.

Thinking about the two who were such mirror images of himself and Sarah, comfortable old shoe companions of many years, who had turned to one another in the brokenness of grief, who had leaned on one another through the crises of life in space, who had found their best delight in the unsentimental friendship, he knew those two he so cherished would make beautiful music together, in spite of the alleged limitations of the cello.

All at once he could sing again, and he poured his heart out singing, the sacred joy and the even more sacred sorrow, the love and longing. He found in the singing of the old carol, the valor of his daughter, the wonder of his wife's love, and the innocence of his young nephew, the transcendence he had left behind, and was utterly content.

In the midst of "Royal David's City," George Kirk, who had been unavoidably detained, abashedly slipped in and took his place between Wynn and Jim. The cathedral was shadowy in the wavering candlelight, but the two men could see one another's faces clearly. Robert met George's eyes, looked over at Wynn sitting next to him, and raised soft, inquisitive brows. In response, George held their clasped hands up. Robert's answering smile was radiant enough to light the entire church. His voice held a clarion note as he led the tenor section. At last, all was well with his friends.

At the end of service, he and Sarah rejoined their friends for the congregational singing of *Silent Night.* He was thrilled by the complete loss of her Northern woman reserve as she unabashedly put her hand in his. Thinking of the two sides of a battle long ago ceasing warfare for Christmas and finding common ground in the ancient carol, thinking of the peace process even now going forward on the frontier, Robert very softly sang in German, just as his mother had taught him so long ago.

Just as the final verse ended, two red shirted security guards rushed in. They had not been able to reach Captain April through his communicator, and so had beamed in from HQ with a Priority One message from the front. They placed the PADD in his hands and turned, eyes front, obviously self-conscious to interrupt a Christmas Eve service.

Attention Captain April, *etc.. … For your eyes only. Another love letter from the Sheliak. They're demanding legal experts to help negotiate the treaty. They are absolutely taken up with bureaucracy and legality, and the diplomats are in over their heads.*

Robert thought for a moment and then smiled as he picked up the stylus. Boldly, he wrote,

"Tell them that they can bloody wait until after Christmas."

CODA

"Well! *How was* that *for a first contact?" Second was basking in the glory of Ayelborne's approval. He had been right all along.*

"It is my considered opinion," Prime said deliberately, "that it might have been worse."

"You always think it might have been worse. What now? On to the next assignment? I'm going to miss Robert and Sarah…"

"I think we're going to want to stay fairly close to them," Prime said unexpectedly. He was once again staring behind the rim of the Organian horizon.

"What do your eyes see?" Second asked again, in wonder. Prime was a Seer, and while he was a Hearer, he remained in awe of the powers of the Seers.

"Not an invasion force this time," Prime said slowly. "Nothing so dramatic. Only a small, derelict, ancient Klingon freighter. Very insignificant fire power and of absolutely no threat to the humans. But… that freighter is going to mean a turning point for them. It's going to change their lives forever."

"How do you know?" *Second asked irritably. Sometimes the Seers got a bit too big for their britches, and he felt it was his life's work to keep Prime humble.*

Prime might have smiled. "Recommend we stick around, and find out. I have the feeling it's going to be a long road."

Second shrugged. "We have time."

AUTHOR'S NOTES, ASSORTED INSPIRATIONS, AND ANNOTATIONS

All bible references are from the New King James Bible (NKJV).

Pilgrim of Peace, title of work: this is a deep cut reference to Star Trek novel *Final Frontier*, by Diane Carey. She refers to Robert April as "Mahatma Ghandi in a sweater." Ghandi was known as the Pilgrim Of Peace.

Overture: I was thinking of the Overture to *"The Wasps"* by Ralph Vaughan Williams

Council of Elders chamber on Organia: Star Trek TOS "*Errand of Mercy*."

Malcolm and Travis: the Organians first hosts in Star Trek: Enterprise "*The Observer Effect*."

Every jot and tittle: Matthew 5:18.

Robert and Sarah April: first on screen appearance in Star Trek: The Animated Series "*The Counterclock Incident*." First Captain and first Chief Medical Officer of *U. S. S. Enterprise.*

Space pirates: Star Trek novel, "*Best Destiny*," by Diane Carey

The Romulan Incident: Final Frontier.

Tarsus IV: Enterprise Logs: "Though Hell Should Bar the Way" by Greg Cox .

"Come now, and let us reason together" Isaiah 1:18.

Charred cross of Coventry: Diane Carey gives us Coventry, England, as Robert April's birthplace, but no other details. As I researched Coventry, I found this story and felt that it would be formative to the peace loving human being Diane depicted in April.

Society of Friends: Quakers. Homage to my beloved cousins Ginny and Dave.

Franciscans: a peaceful religious order founded by St. Francis of Assisi. Homage to the Franciscan brothers who live and work in my hometown.

Xindi conflict: Enterprise: Season 3.

Shuffled off this mortal coil: Shakespeare, Hamlet, "To be or not to be" soliloquy.

He will not be captain of the starship for much longer: Diane Carey established April as a sort of temporary captain and as the founder of the Starship program.

The Sheliak Corporate: first introduced in Star Trek: The Next Generation "*Ensigns of Command*." It was established that the Sheliak had not had contact in over one hundred years since the Treaty of Armens was signed. The time worked out precisely for first contact with the Sheliak to be made during Captain April's command of the *Enterprise.*

Captain April's family. Daughter, brother, sister, etc.. My own creation. Because Diane Carey describes him as "fatherly," and in a scene with George Kirk in "*Best Destiny*" refers to a hypothetical situation regarding one's child in which "the score was reversed," and because of the extraordinary patience and understanding with which he treated young Jim Kirk in that work, I assumed he had a child who was not introduced in those novels.

Robert and Sarah as musicians*:* homage to Diane Carey, also a fine musician.

"Little known, seldom used reserve activation clause:" loving homage to *The Motion Picture*, my favorite of the Star Trek films.

Aenar: Enterprise: "*The Aenar*." I use "they/them" because the Andorians/Aenar have four genders and I see Lyra as non-binary.

Lyra: loving homage to Kenny Smith's fan film "*First Frontier*." Name used by permission.

Duncan McLean: inspiration for this character was drawn from Gene Stratton-Porter's "*Freckles*".

Elizabeth Blackwell: the hospital ship upon which Mary Anne April and Duncan McLean served is named for the first woman to receive a medical degree in the United States. (Look her up! She was brilliant!)

Christopher Pike as *Captain April's first officer:* established in Star Trek: Discovery *"Brother"*.

Charlie Pike: I drew inspiration and data on Chris Pike from "*Star Trek: Burning Dreams*" by Margaret Wander Bonanno (it's a great book! Read it!). We lost Margaret while I was writing this novel and this bit, amongst many others, is loving homage to her.

Captain Annie Maguire: the *Annie C. Maguire* was a British three-masted barque sailing from Buenos Aires, Argentina, on 24 December 1886, when she struck the ledge at Portland Head Light, Cape Elizabeth, Maine, not far from where I grew up.

Annie Get Your Gun: Captain Maguire's playful nickname comes from an Irving Berlin musical.

Border Patrol: all references to the Border Patrol hereafter are loving homage to Vonda McIntyre, who brought that culture to life in her excellent novel "*Star Trek: The Entropy Effect*." (It's a great book! Read it!) We lost Vonda while I was writing this book and this is meant to honor her legacy.

Commander Josephine Meier: this character was created in homage to Maine's astronaut Jessica Meier. She was one of the women who participated

in the first all-woman spacewalk. She is from Northern Maine not far from where my dad grew up and is an inspiration to Maine women.

Her first name, Josephine, is for my grandmother, the wisest and most loving and most courageous person I ever knew.

Heart of Oak: a song of the same title as Robert April's first command is the official song of the British Royal Navy.

Jose Tyler: first introduced in "The Cage."

"Right good crew": Gilbert and Sullivan "*H. M. S. Pinafore."*

Yorkshire plain speech: Diane Carey did not establish a birthplace for Sarah Poole April, so I took what she did give us... the character of a blunt, plain spoken, country woman who loved animals, and extrapolated that her character was consistent with the culture of the North of England. This choice is homage to favorite books of my childhood, "*The Secret Garden"* and the works of the Bronte sisters. I connected Sarah Poole, Veterinarian with James Harriot's "All Creatures Great and Small." Her Yorkshire dialect is homage to Sir Patrick Stewart, who speaks the dialect of North Riding, a birthplace he shares with Sarah April.

Chaplain: Diane Duane wrote the concept of a chaplain serving on the *Enterprise* in her TOS novels. The Navy employs full time chaplains and Star Trek is modeled after the Navy (both British Royal and American navies). The character of Robert April as portrayed in "Best Destiny" was very much a character doing the work of a chaplain. April as I have portrayed him is an ecumenical man of faith and therefore uniquely suited to serve in that capacity.

"Behold, I stand at the door and knock": Revelation 3:20.

Cello jokes: the cellist understands.

Tin Lizzie: an old name for the Model T Ford, this is an affectionate joke on the hospital vessel *Elizabeth Blackwell,* and the fact that hospital ships tend to focus on the medical equipment and let some of the other ships systems get a bit antiquated.

"A nail fastened in a sure place:" Isaiah 22:23.

"The heart knows its own bitterness:" Proverbs 14:10.

Sarah April as medicinal herbalist: inspired by the character of Mrs. Todd in "*The Country of the Pointed Firs*" by Maine author Sarah Orne Jewett.

"*Come into the garden, Maud:" Maud (Part I.xxii),* Alfred, Lord Tennyson.

"*Bread of Heaven:"* from the great Welsh hymn "*Guide Me, O Thou Great Jehovah*," by William Williams Pantycelyn, 1745.

Bummer lamb: I am indebted to my beloved friend Joanna, upon whom the character of Mary Anne is modeled, for her knowledge of shepherding, fiber arts, and soap making.

Shuttle Sagan: homage to Carl Sagan.

Gandalf: April reminds Pike of the wise, gentle, whimsical wizard in "The Lord of the Rings" by J. R. R. Tolkien. Many of us Trekkies are also passionate Tolkien fans and I wanted to do homage to that. (I'm looking at you, Una McCormack).

Merchant Marine: I live close to the Maine Maritime Academy, hence the inspiration for the space cargo service.

"*Space is a young man's game,"* homage to Kenny Smith's "*First Frontier*." Used with permission.

"*The day may come when these qualities..."* prophecy of Picard's era of Trek. The idea is that April is a man before his time, that he is closer in

personality and command style to Picard the diplomat than Kirk the cowboy, but that isn't the command style that is needed in this era of the Federation.

Buckaroo: homage to "*The Hunt for Red October*," by Tom Clancy.

Our Bard: the quote is "some are born great, some achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrust upon them." Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* Act 2 Scene 5.

April as a highly decorated officer: established in Discovery, Season 1, "*Choose Your Pain*".

Sarah as the designer of medical equipment: established in TAS "*The Counterclock Incident*".

Chief Moves-With-Burning-Grace: homage to the Early Voyages comic "*Flesh of my Flesh*."

Yeoman Grace Fletcher: "Grace" is for our dear Grace Lee Whitney.

"Fletcher" is for Jessica Fletcher of "*Murder, She Wrote,"* who as a spunky single woman writer is a constant inspiration to me.

"My sister is old school Starfleet": Mary Anne is experiencing the struggle that a lot of old school Star Trek fans feel toward the new iterations of Star Trek. This book is meant to be a marriage of the old-fashioned Trek in flavor and characters and the sensibilities and progress of modern Trek.

"Covert from the wind and a hiding place from the tempest:" Isaiah 32:2.

Lt. Kizzmekia Corbett: named in homage to one of the designers of the COVID-19 vaccine. Her Muslim faith practices are homage to Professor Blair Imani.

Cornrows: historically, Black women have not been permitted to wear their hair in cornrows in a professional environment. On Captain April's *Enterprise,* they certainly can and welcome, as long as they are not in a position in which their hair could get caught and injure the crew member.

Pulling a Panama: homage to "Sahara", by Clive Cussler.

"Old Badger" Duncan's nickname for Robert is taken from *"The Wind in the Willows"*.

Chief Caitlin Barry: introduced in D. C. Fontana's "Vulcan's Glory." (It's a great book! Read it!).

Digging potatoes in Northern Maine: a shout out to my Northern Maine family in Fort Fairfield, who used to farm on the old homestead before it was lost to fire January 2020.

Lark Rise April: her first name is inspired by the English novel "Lark Rise to Candleford" by Flora Thompson, and "*The Lark Ascending*" by Vaughn Williams. Her character proper is inspired by the Celtic Women and renowned harpist Carol Thompson.

"It's alright to enjoy the journey:" Chris Pike will go on to say something similar to Michael Burnham in season 2 of Discovery. The idea is that under the mentorship of Captain April, we would see him transform from Jeffrey Hunter's Pike to Anson Mount's Pike.

"*You can't be afraid of the wind."* Henry Archer to his son, Jonathan Archer, "*Broken Bow*." Jonathan Archer would go on to become a father figure to April and would pass this advice on.

Engage: although this is Captain Picard's catch word, Chris Pike used it in "The Cage," and it made sense to me that he would have learned it from his Captain.

Hit it: although this is Captain Pike's catch phrase in Discovery, it is also a direction from one musician to another to begin playing music. I thought how fun it would be if Pike adopted the phrase because of his time around musicians.

"Girt up the loins of my mind." 1 Peter 1:13.

"*Walking each other home:"* Ram Dass. *How Can I Help? Stories and Reflections on Service*, co-authored with Paul Gorman.

Remembrance of things past: Shakespeare's Sonnet 30. With love and homage to Sir Patrick Stewart, who helped us get through the pandemic by reading us Shakespeare's sonnets.

"*They were lovely and pleasant in their lives:"* David's lament for Saul and Jonathan, 2 Samuel 1:23.

"We are diminished." A phrase our brothers and sisters in blue often use to mourn a fallen comrade.

"The Wreck of the Hesperus." By Maine poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow.

Edmund Fitzgerald: named for the *SS Edmund Fitzgerald,* an American Great Lakes freighter that sank in Lake Superior during a storm on November 10, 1975, with the loss of the entire crew of 29 men. I was also thinking of Gordon Lightfoot's ballad of the same title that mourns that disaster.

Cable knit sweater: established in "*Final Frontier*." Details mine, in homage to the many fiber artists... myself included... in my life.

Robert and Sarah as fourteen years olds: although I wrote this scene long before it came out, when I was doing revisions and developing the backstory, I realized that the plot was similar to the Short Trek "*Children of Mars*."

Perhaps it is our faults that make us so perfect for one another: Mr. Knightley to Emma, "Emma" by Jane Austen.

"Is thy servant a dog?" 2 Kings 8:13. Used humorously and playfully.

Captain April's story about singing opera for the solar system: this scene was modeled after Jonesy's "Paganini or Pavarotti" story in "*The Hunt for Red October*," by Tom Clancy.

The Impossible Dream. The inspiration for April singing "The Impossible Dream" came from Jim Nabors as Gomer Pyle singing that song.

Mairi's Wedding. A traditional Scottish reel. My inspiration for it came from a performance by The High Kings.

Code Talkers: homage to the Navajo code talkers of WWII.

"*Returning Violence for violence...*" Martin Luther King Jr. (1967). Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?

"*The deeper that sorrow carves into your being...*" Khalil Gibran, "*The Prophet*."

Battle, murder, and sudden death: "The Book of Common Prayer."

"The moment had finally come right for them:" a response to the line from "*Best Destiny*", "perhaps the moment would never come right for them." I wanted to give that friendship healing, closure, and reconciliation.

Dulce domum: Latin for "sweetly at home."

"So fold thyself, my dearest..." Alfred, Lord Tennyson, "Now sleeps the crimson petal, now the white." "*Now sleeps the crimson petal, now the white*."

"With my body, I thee worship:" Book of Common Prayer. The sense of the word "worship" here is "worthship" and is meant to express how deeply Robert venerates and respects and cherishes Sarah and how he expresses that as he makes love to her.

"There were no stars going supernova..." this paragraph was scaffolded on a paragraph from Maine author Elisabeth Ogilvie's book "*The World of Jennie G*," the scene which describes the first time Alick and Jennie made love. Each word is my own but was inspired by the mood, the imagery, and the sentence structure of the novel.

Jane Eyre: so much more than just a romantic Gothic novel by Charlotte Bronte, this is a passionate treatise on equality for women. The fiercely

independent Jane is a literary inspiration for Sarah, from her green eyes to her indomitable spirit. It moves me to think that a woman who could not publish under her own name would later serve to inspire a woman who lived and worked in space as an equal partner to her male counterparts.

Jane Austen's Persuasion: Star Trek is deeply inspired by many male writers. C. S. Forster's "*Hornblower*" was the inspiration for Captain Kirk. Herman Melville's "*Moby Dick*" inspired TWOK. Dickens, Shakespeare, and Holmes are also tremendous inspirations. I wanted to introduce Jane Austen to Star Trek on the premise that she was as well versed in human nature as any of those writers. The sea captains who were family men and brought their wives and children to sea with them, as depicted in the underrated "*Persuasion*," were my literary inspirations for the character of Captain April. It moves me that a woman who hid her writing under her blotter would be an inspiration to Robert and Sarah in their marriage.

"Hold... in the Light:" a Quaker expression for prayer.

"The shelter of a great rock in a weary land:" Isaiah 32:2.

"*Love is always patient and kind..." 1 Corinthians 13.*

"The readiness is all..." Hamlet, William Shakespeare.. (This is a sly jab at Diane Carey, who hates Hamlet).

"Now abides faith, hope, and love..." 1 Corinthians 13.

"Breaker one-nine..." this scene is homage to "Smokey and the Bandit."

Captain Eri Snow: named for the Twentieth Century Cape Cod novel "*Captain Eri*" by Joseph C. Lincoln

"*For this relief, much thanks:" Hamlet*, by William Shakespeare.

"The October Winds." Also known as "*The Castle of Dromore*." Ancient Irish/Scotch lullaby.

"Will ye no come back again?" A Scots poem by Carolina Oliphant, set to a traditional Scottish folk tune. As in several of the author's poems, its theme is the aftermath of the Jacobite Rising of 1745, which ended at the Battle of Culloden.

"How Can I Keep From Singing?" An 1868 folk hymn by Baptist minister Robert Lowry which found great popularity amongst the Quakers and Shakers.

"*Is this the face that launched a thousand ships…"* from Dr. Faustus, by Christopher Marlowe

Veronica is not expected to recover: this isn't an attempt to kill off a female character just for the fun of killing off a female character. This is an exploration of a line from "*Best Destiny*": "No hope? But no responsibility to try? To try to save her under these conditions, only to have her die later because of these conditions?" The crew made the decision to try to save Veronica based on what Sarah would have done had she been there. The aftermath explores the consequences of that decision.

Kevin Riley: according to TOS "*The Conscience of the King*," a survivor and eye witness of the atrocities of Tarsus IV. I wanted to give him a backstory as to what happened to him after Tarsus.

Tarsus IV: Both Greg Cox's short story "*Though Hell Should Bar the Way*" and Dayton Ward's "*Drastic Measures*" place Captain April at Tarsus IV at the time of the massacre, and this bit was my way of paying loving homage to both those stories, and adding my own layers.

"*So many little hands I should still be holding."* This line is homage and love to our marginally famous Maine cop and author of *Detective in the*

Dooryard Lt. Tim Cotton. He was reflecting on some of the darker aspects of working as a police officer and described what it felt like to have to walk away from little children in terrible circumstances, letting go of those little hands, and I took that feeling to heart to help me understand what Captain April would have felt to have to leave those orphaned children behind on Tarsus IV.

"*I could give all to Time."* Robert Frost, from *A Witness Tree, 1942.*

"A mute, inglorious Milton:" Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard by Thomas Gray. Robert is using the phrase self-deprecatingly, as he has been described by both George and Sarah as a poet.

Quotations from "*The Fellowship of the Ring*" by J. R. R. Tolkien. The idea was that Jim Kirk's love of books would be sparked by this gift from his Godfather and that the wisdom in this book would guide his decisions once he became a starship captain. This is Robert's way of passing wisdom on down, because he knew he wouldn't always be at Jim's side.

"*Will the Circle Be Unbroken*" is a traditional Christian funeral hymn written in 1907 by Ada R. Habershon and Charles H. Gabriel.

The gracious star that guides our moving: Shakespeare Sonnet 26.

"*Shameful? To weep for a dying child?"* Sarah calls Robert out on his shyness to let anyone see him weeping openly for the loss of a crew member, because my vision of the 23rd century would be one in which anyone who needed to weep and express grief openly would be free to do so with no shame and no stigma. The concept of male weeping being unmanly and shameful is a very modern one. For many hundreds of years it would have been considered a shameful thing in most cultures for a man *not* to weep. The freedom the characters in Discovery have to show their emotions backs this up.

"I will not say, Do not weep:" Gandalf to the Company. "*The Return of the King*." J. R. R. Tolkien. Permission needed.

"The man sets his face as flint..." Isaiah 50:7. Sarah is saying that Robert is unwavering and determined when it comes to performing his duty, often at great personal cost to himself.

Quarlo Kabreigny: borrowed from Judith and Garfield Reeves-Stevens excellent book "*Federation."* (It's a great book! Read it!).

"You represent the best of Starfleet..." Admiral Cornwell would later go on to tell Pike the same thing, as April passed that mantle on to him.

"*I must go down to the sea again."* John Masefield, *Sea Fever*. Whilst the first verse of this poem is well known in Star Trek, the second two are not, and I wanted to weave those in here.

"You are a man greatly beloved... don't be afraid... be strong and of good courage." The Organians were speaking the archangel Gabriel's words to Daniel. Daniel 10:11.

Robert's homecoming: this scene is scaffolded on Caroline's homecoming in "Pilgrim's Inn" by Elizabeth Goudge.

"*Dawn Treader":* The Voyage of the Dawn Treader by C. S. Lewis.

"Our friend Captain Georgiou..." Dayton Ward's "Drastic Measures" established that Georgiou and April met on Tarsus IV.

"*He is a Kelpian..."* a loving shout out to my favorite Kelpian, Saru!

"*Sweet silent thought... if the while I think on thee..." Shakespeare's sonnet 30.*

"Greater love has no man..." John 15:13.

God bless us, every one: Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol*.

Sarah had never been able to get Robert to try horseback riding with her: we have three captains, Pike, Kirk, and Picard, who are horsemen, and so I wanted April to be a contrast to them, his own person, and to be a man who was good with small animals and small children.

Spotted dick: it is possible that my love for the Great British Baking Show is... showing.

ka'a'thyra: the author is indebted to Margaret Wander Bonanno for her descriptions of the construction and musical capabilities of the Vulcan lute.

True Believer: a shout out to Discovery Season 3.

If you were the only girl in the world: WW era popular song. This bit is homage to Downton Abbey.

Sickbay coverall... this was introduced in Vonda McIntyre's "*Enterprise: The First Adventure*".

Dr. Phlox... ethnic or cultural mores: Denobulan males are uncomfortable disrobing before others, established in Enterprise: *Bounty*.

All those years you were a veterinarian: it was established in *Final Frontier* that Sarah was a practicing veterinarian at the time she was assigned to *Enterprise.* The book seemed to make that fact a cheap punchline, a joke, but we do learn later on in the book that she was a brilliant physician, graduated top fifteen in her class of medical school. I thought about the levels of PTSD we are seeing in physicians who worked on the front lines of the pandemic, and this informed Sarah's backstory. Her career change was the result of trauma and not a mere fickle casual choice. We also see in Discovery Season 3 that Dr. Pollard, in addition to being an excellent physician, was also skilled in caring for animals (Grudge!)

"I saw you and Tad dancing in the rec room..." this scene was inspired by a similar scenario in Elizabeth Ogilvie's "*An Answer in the Tide*," a conversation between Joanna Sorensen and daughter Linnie.

Alpha Centauran Captain: the red squares in the coloration of the face were established by Judith and Gar Reeves Stevens in "*Prime Directive*."

Wrestling wild beasts at Ephesus: 1 Corinthians 15:32.

If thine enemy be hungry: Romans 12:20.

Hoshi Sato: supplementary biographical material was prepared for Star Trek: Enterprise "In A Mirror, Darkly," that stated that Hoshi Sato had lost her life in the Tarsus IV massacre, but because it never was shown on screen, it is not considered canon. Therefore it is apocrypha. I wanted to give Hoshi, my favorite Enterprise character, a chance to be someone's role model and hero, a chance to make a difference one last time, and a gentler end of life.

"For such a time as this:" Esther 4:14. Robert is reminding himself of Queen Esther, who was made Queen just in time to save her people from annihilation, and feeling that he too may be in a position as captain of the *Enterprise* to make peace with these beings.

Sarek and Amanda: my characterization of these characters is based on the matchless performances of Mark Lenard and Jane Wyatt, who are both so loved and so missed, and by their excellent depictions in Diane Duane's novel "*Spock's World*," Jean Lorrah's novel "*The Vulcan Academy Murders*," and Ann Crispin's "*Sarek*" (great books! Read them!).

From all adversities... Book of Common Prayer.

"*Something there is that doesn't love a wall:"* Mending Wall, Robert Frost.

"They never saw the faces of their murderers..." this was Commander Data's line, in "*Ensigns of Command*," when explaining to the colonists what

their fate would be. I took that episode and worked backwards to tell this story.

Mary Anne's recovery story: very much influenced by Raffi's story. Raffi is my favorite character in Picard.

Dear Lord and Father of Mankind: by American Quaker poet John Greenleaf Whittier. My grandmother used to say this whenever she was exasperated.

Butterscotch candy: inspired by Jett Reno's licorice.

Sarah's envy: I was reflecting on the very different relationships each girl had with her parents in "*Children of Mars*" and thinking what that might look like down the road, as the two grew into womanhood and began to come to terms with their grief.

Keep calm and carry on: the words that carried Britain through the Blitz.

Volcano imagery: at the time of this writing, my six-year-old had a volcano obsession and we watched a good many videos of those events.

The heart of her husband safely trusts in her: Proverbs 31:11.

Within Our Darkest Night" (French: *Dans nos obscurités*) is a contemplative chant originating from the Taizé Community in Burgundy, France. Composed by Jacques Berthier.

Archer... Surak's katra: Enterprise: "*The Forge," "The Awakening," "Kir'Shara*."

Sarek, Robert relationship: A line from TNG: Sarek struck me. Picard, speaking Sarek's thoughts after the mind meld, mourns "dry bones and dead friends." And I thought, we don't see Sarek with friends. We see him as a great Ambassador, wife of Amanda, and a father to Spock, Sybok, and Michael, but not so much friendships. So, I thought about the many Vulcan/human friendships we have in Star Trek, both in Alpha and Beta canon. T'Pol and

Archer. Spock and McCoy. Tuvok and Janeway. Piper and Sarda in Diane Carey's "*Battlestations!*" And "*Dreadnought!*" Yoshi and Sorahl in "*Strangers from the Sky*." Cleante and T'Shael in "*Dwellers in the Crucible*." Daniel Carrigan and Sorel in "*The Vulcan Academy Murders*." And Robert and Sarek seemed just another one of those Vulcan/human friendship stories whose story was longing to be told.

A mind meld is a terrible intimacy: Sarek to Picard, in "*Sarek*".

Kaiidth: what is, is. A Vulcan word coined by Margaret Wander Bonanno for "*Dwellers*."

"Ridges of grim war..." John Milton, *Paradise Lost.*

Remember Munich. Sarek is referring to the Munich Agreement of 1938 which Prime Minister Chamberlain declared ushered in "Peace in our time." This penchant of the Vulcans to quote well-known Human proverbs is continued in Star Trek VI, when Spock declared "Only Nixon could go to China."

"*Trusty, dusky, vivid, true:"* Robert Lewis Stevenson's poem "*My Wife*." Collected Poems.

"No coward soul... what thou art may never be destroyed." Emily Brontë's last great poem "*No Coward Soul*."

"*And the blood shall flow from the wine press*." Sarah is quoting Revelation 14:20.

"*Noblest Roman of them all." Julius Caesar,* Act Five, Scene Five.

Gates of Dawn. This scene has several inspirations. The first as is obvious by the title is the transcendent scene "Piper at the Gates of Dawn" from *The Wind in the Willows* by Kenneth Grahame. I replaced the god Pan with the second century AD Christian imagery of the white stag with the cross for horns. The second inspiration was Lucilla Eliot's dream from *The Bird in the*

Tree by Elizabeth Goudge. (It's a great book! Read it!) I further layered in St. Paul's earnest longing to be absent from the body and to be present with the Lord because to be with Christ was far better.

"*A running that could not be seen of skipping beasts:"* Book of Wisdom 17:19.

"*They need no candle, neither light of the sun:"* Revelation 22:5.

"Our systems are too hot to touch": the power of the Organians to prevent violence was first introduced in "Errand of Mercy."

"Moses wist not that his face shone." Exodus 34:29.

"Entertain angels unawares." Hebrews 13:2.

"*The grave's a fine and private place:"* "*A Coy Lover to His Mistress*" by Andrew Marvell.

T'hy'la. Much ink has been spilled, much discourse has been had, and much fan fiction has been written that has treated this word derived from Gene Roddenberry's most famous footnote in his novelization of *The Motion Picture.* I strongly and passionately disagree with the characterization of the word as carrying sexual connotation and have used it here to refer strictly to Platonic friendship.

"*Covenant with death, agreement with hell:"* Isaiah 28.

John Gill: references TOS "*Patterns of Force*."

"*Did my heart love e'er this?" Romeo and Juliet*, William Shakespeare.

"Is it well with the child?" 2 Kings 4:26.