

Arrived and Despatched

by Sean O'Keefe 2012©

“Who thought *this* would be a good place to put a flight school?” Amantallash grimaced as she looked out the portal at the surface of Mars. For a world that was in the process of being terraformed, it had a long way to go. Never mind that the air pressure outside wasn't high enough for a bug to breathe, the sandstorms that often gripped the planet for years at a time *still* occurred from time to time, throwing the red dust into such a maelstrom that *nothing* could navigate through it. All the same, the red canyon they were perched on the edge of was breathtaking. They had nothing like it on her home world.

Manny's eyes narrowed. Regardless of how pretty it was, the planet was still a dust bowl. How the humans thought anything could ever grow here, she could never begin to guess. She thought of her, as her man put it, “boyfriend”, Scanner, as she considered humanity. If there was one thing his people was capable of, it was optimism. After all, he *had* decided to court her, and the two of them were a study in contrasts.

Whilst Judd “Scanner” Sandage was about as average as a human being could be, Amantallash was anything but for her people. The Cait were feline in form, highly intelligent and generally leonine. The vast majority of her

people's population was tawny in colour, much like the lions of the Serengeti. She, however, was white, a rarity to say the very least.

In her society, she was a goddess, purely because she was born white. Most white Cait adored their position. Manny considered her condition a drawback. If she walked into any room on Cait she would instantly become the centre of attention, much like Marilyn Monroe would have if she walked into a bar.

Manny's whiskers bristled as she pondered the notion. She was a male Cait magnet, but the quality of Cait she tended to attract left a lot to be desired. Perhaps that was why she was so willing to look beyond her own species, a thought not only unheard of, but unthinkable, especially for a white Cait.

Right then and there, she missed Scanner. His earth humour was growing on her and he had a wonderful way of accepting her for who she was, not what she looked like.

She sighed. However, orders were orders and she was duty bound to carry them out. Captain Piper had sent her to Mars on a special errand and she was the last one to doubt her commander's wisdom. They had been through too much.

Thinking of Piper brought her back to the present and Lieutenant Amantallash of the *U.S.S. Millennium* turned and strode down the blue carpeted hallway away from the docking port. She had only just arrived on a shuttle from

Vulcan and had decided she would check in to her accommodation before running her little errand.

“Come on Ariel! You can do better than that!” In times of stress or annoyance, Lieutenant Caitlin “Ghost” Ryan tended to lose the friendlier qualities of her native Irish accent. This time, it was annoyance as Ghost's job was to help train a new batch of fighter pilot recruits for Starfleet.

Indeed, the notion of even *having* fighter pilots was something of the proverbial phoenix rising from the ashes, as there was not a lot of call for them except for home port defence as fighters rarely sported warp drive. However, a new breed or starship had been created, the *Ingram*-class, and the mammoth hangars the ships sported could house *squadrons* of fighters, not just a few shuttlecraft.

So the call had gone out for people who not only didn't mind the danger involved in flying one and two man fighters, but who relished the challenge.

All the same, drive wasn't enough. They had to have talent – and it was this trait Ghost was having the biggest problem with.

In the 20th Century, Miramar was known to naval aviators as the place where the “best of the best” trained and honed their skills. Since New Miramar had been created on Mars, they were starting to find that some of those old skills had been lost. New Miramar's mission was

to recreate the elite.

What they had were people Ghost wouldn't trust to fly a garbage scow.

Like the person Ghost was berating right now. “Ariel, if you don't pull your nose up you're going to find yourself having a chance encounter with Deimos. If you get yourself killed I'll send the bill for that fighter to your parents.”

“Yes, Lieutenant,” came the harried reply. Ariel was young and impressionable, but she had the gumption to become a pilot and that was good enough for Ghost.

To Caitlin's delight, Ariel did as she was asked and she cleared the moon by a good kilometre. “All right,” she said, doing her best to project confidence to her student. “Give me an Immelmann followed by a split S, then come home.”

She didn't miss the hesitation as Ariel confirmed she understood the order. “Cadet?” Ghost asked.

“Understood, Lieutenant,” Ariel reiterated, before carrying out the order.

Ghost let go of the tension in her body and relaxed once more into the black couch she used for teaching. She wore a headset connected directly to the cockpit of Ariel's fighter, and she had all the controls she needed under her fingers to take over the fighter at a moment's notice should the situation call for it. All she had to do was touch the override button.

She watched on the domed ceiling overhead as Ariel performed the required manoeuvres. Not flawlessly, but competently. “Good, Cadet Poseidon, bring her home.”

“Roger,” Ariel responded before she locked her craft into New Miramar's locator beacon and programmed her ship to bring her home.

At this point, Caitlin could have shut down her systems and simply let Ariel fly herself home. Yet she was not the kind to let Fate rob her of another crewman. She'd had already been dealt enough bad hands by him in her lifetime and she was not going to let him win another.

“Who would have thought you'd turn into a hovering mother?”

The voice seemed to come from nowhere and Ghost turned her head to see who had spoken. At first she saw no-one and then suddenly a white, feline head popped up on the left side of her chair and gave her a cheeky smile. She started at the suddenness then laughed when she recognised Lieutenant Amantallash of the *Millennium*, her crewmate.

Caitlin gave her a mock growl and frown. “And they call *me* Ghost,” she said with a chuckle. “What brings you here?”

There were some idioms that Manny had yet to learn. “I caught the shuttle from Vulcan,” she said, matter-of-factly. Before Caitlin could question her further, she turned and looked up at the roof. “This is amazing.”

Caitlin smirked. "It is cool," she conceded before she pointed at the ceiling. "But I'd rather be out there with them."

Her friend understood. "How's your back?"

Trying not to grimace, the flight trainer simply said: "Not bad."

Manny knew better. Her ability to read the thoughts and feelings of others was improving all the time. She rolled her eyes and said sympathetically: "If I felt the way you do right now, I'd be reaching for a painkiller."

Caitlin gave her a sideways look. "I can't keep anything hidden from you these days, can I?"

Mildly embarrassed, Manny's tail started swishing from side to side. "Sorry."

"If you were human, you'd be blushing right now." She considered the question for a moment, then confided: "If I took a painkiller every time I'm in pain, I'd be a junkie in no time at all. Besides, I find they take the edge off my ability to think clearly and if there's one thing I value, it's my ability to think clearly." Caitlin leaned forward slowly to get up. "I use them as a last resort these days." She changed the subject to something a little less uncomfortable. "So, like I said, what brings you here?"

"Well...." Before she finished, something caused her to look up in alarm. Caitlin followed her gaze and immediately dropped back into the seat. Any further banter was forgotten as Ghost hit the override button and

took control of Ariel's out of control fighter which was plunging to the surface so quickly that, if this was the Earth instead of Mars, she would have already burned up.

“Don't worry, Ariel,” she quietly announced into her headset. “I've got control.”

The screen changed to a forward view from Ariel's cockpit and the relevant gauges lit up underneath. The first thing that became apparent was the ship was in a flat spin. The horizon bobbed up and down as the vessel spun anti-clockwise, the landmarks whizzing by around and around.

To her left, Manny found the sight nauseating, even though she was stationary. She could not stand to look at it for longer than a few seconds.

On the other hand, Ghost was completely calm as she applied right stick, cut back on her starboard engine and applied full thrust with her port. Within seconds, the craft began slowing its spin, but not its drop. With only three thousand feet to go, Ghost managed to stop the spin before she nosed the craft over, putting it into a dive, applied full throttle to both engines and pulled the craft out of its dive at Mach three.

The shock of the sound barrier being broken rattled the windows even five kilometres away where Ghost was applying reverse thrust, giving the craft one vertical roll in the thin atmosphere to reduce her speed before bringing Ariel's craft into the pressurised landing bay to a sedate landing.

“What the hell was that?” Manny heard someone anxiously yell down the hall. The base went on yellow alert as the Command officers scrambled to find the source of the detonation. To her right, Ghost simply sat back with a sigh, her job done.

“Give me a hand to get out of this thing, will you?” she asked as she swung her legs over the side of the couch. “I’ve got to let the brass know what happened,” she said with a grin. “I’ve always loved buzzing the tower.”

Five minutes later, the two of them found themselves in the cavernous landing bay standing next to Ariel's ship. Cadet Poseidon, a slender, twenty-odd young woman with shoulder length blonde hair and shining white teeth, remained with her fighter, red faced and clearly anxious.

Manny's nose wrinkled as she could detect the smell of vomit from the woman's uniform. No surprise to her that the nausea she had felt just watching the action would have been much worse for the Cadet as she was slammed against the side of the cockpit during the craft's spin.

“What happened, Cadet?” Lieutenant Ryan, all business, asked, her arms crossed and in no mood for excuses.

“I don't know,” Poseidon said simply. “One minute I was locked on to the beacon, the next, my right thruster went into overdrive and I was in a spin.”

Before Ryan could continue they were joined by four

other cadets. Each seemed genuinely concerned for Poseidon, and Manny marvelled at the mix of cultures. There was a Tellarite female, an Andorian male, a Xindi primate male and, of all things, an Orion male! Starfleet seemed to be taking people from all species and walks of life these days, she thought.

Each one voiced their concern for Ariel's health. "Are you all right?" being the most oft asked question.

Ryan silenced them all with a look. "She's alive," she said. "That's what counts. What's important is what we learn from today's mishap."

At that, Ariel put up her finger. She was beginning to get her nerve back. "Lieutenant, it wasn't my fault. My hands were nowhere near the throttle controls when the thruster fired."

Her teacher's first reaction was doubt. "Thrusters don't just fire by themselves, Cadet!" she snapped. As the words were coming out of her mouth, she remembered she was herself a victim of a malfunction that had grounded her. It *was* possible.

She felt a tap on her back and realised Lieutenant Amantallash had was trying to get her attention surreptitiously. She glanced at her and saw all she needed to. Manny's eyes were telling her the Cadet was being truthful. She gave her a faint nod and turned back to the Cadet. "Perhaps we should get your fighter checked out."

As Ariel sighed with relief, Caitlin turned and

beckoned to the Chief of the Deck, who began sauntering over.

All the while, Amantallash was bothered. As she had opened herself to Ariel's thoughts and emotions, she had felt something else nearby. She couldn't put a name to it at first, until she realised what it was she was picking up: deceit. Upon the mention of the fighter being examined the feeling changed to panic. Something was definitely wrong here. She decided to take a chance and flush out the individual responsible. "Lieutenant Ryan," she said loudly enough for all to hear. "I never got a chance to tell you why I'm here. Captain Piper got word that the Duras family has put out a bounty on any *Millennium* crew members as payback for their loss of face at Galorndon Core. She wanted you to know that you might be a target as well."

Caitlin turned to her in surprise, her eyes wide open. She had plenty of enemies already as a successful fighter pilot with more victories than most. "Now, that's a compliment, if I've ever heard one!" she said with a smile.

Now the emotions were broadcasting themselves loud and clear. The fear of being discovered was practically overwhelming and the sender was now easily identifiable to Amantallash. Both she and Caitlin instinctively looked at the Orion, Cadet Seelin.

"Do you have something to add?" Caitlin asked, suddenly very much aware that she was not carrying a

weapon.

Seelin narrowed his eyes, revealing the cruel personality underneath the thin shell he had created. “So, you found me,” he said with not a trace of remorse. His cover blown, he now had no need for subterfuge. His hand went for his jacket pocket but Amantallash beat him to it, knocking the mini phaser out of his hand with her tail as he withdrew it.

Thinking quickly, he stepped to the side and grabbed the Tellarite female around the throat. “Try anything, and I'll snap her neck like a twig!” Before she could recover, Seelin began dragging her backwards towards his fighter, with Caitlin, Manny and the rest of the cadets following.

“I said get back!” he snarled once more.

By this stage, his Tellarite prisoner had had enough fun. There was no way this skinny Orion was ever going to break *her* thick neck. She drove her elbow into his ribs and sent him flying backwards. Unfortunately, he fell into the open cockpit of his practice fighter, and before they could stop him he toggled the cover closed.

“Get back!” Caitlin called as she saw him begin to rapidly flick switches, bringing the small vessel's engines online.

“Is there any way we can stop him?” Manny yelled as the craft's engines began to roar.

Ryan shook her head. “No! The only thing we should be doing is....*RUN!*” At that, she turned and ran,

looking for cover, her suspicions confirmed as she heard the fighter's weapons begin to charge.

The cadets scattered in all directions, each one looking for an exit. Manny, however, realised that Seelin was still going to try to fulfil his mission. She pushed Caitlin behind a large, metal crate on the floor where, out of sight of the fighter, she hit the secret panel only Engineers know to look for – that Scanner had shown her – and opened a maintenance hatch in the floor. Together, they dropped down into the cavity, the hatch closing over them as the crate exploded over their heads.

On the floor, Caitlin squirmed in agony. The fall had practically paralysed her with pain as her injury had been abused. A part of her brain registered she should be happy to be still alive, but right now it wasn't the winning argument.

Concerned, Manny reached out to help her in the dim light from the machinery next to them. Caitlin reached up and batted her paw away. “No, no! I need to sit still for a moment!”

The security officer understood. If Seelin's fear earlier had been calling out to her as if from a distance, next to her Caitlin's mind was virtually screaming in pain. She sat back on her haunches and turned her ears to listen as Seelin wreaked destruction on the landing bay overhead. She could only surmise that he was destroying the rest of the fighters to prevent them from following.

As she waited, she noticed Caitlin reach down and take a small hypospray from a pocket in her slacks. Without preamble, she injected herself in the neck then tried to relax as the painkiller went to work. She gave Manny an embarrassed look. “Last resort time,” she muttered.

Amantallash simply nodded. She sympathised. She was finding it hard to block her friend's pain out, even though it was quickly subsiding. Instead, she turned her attention to the deck above and listened. Within moments, the sounds of destruction ended, followed by the roar of an engine as Seelin blasted out of the landing bay at high speed.

Caitlin rolled over and grabbed Manny's arm. “Open the hatch,” she said. “I've got to go after that bastard.”

“Are you sure you're up to it?” The Security Officer's duty warred with her concern for her friend.

“No, but like hell I'm just letting him go scot free.” She rolled painfully onto her knees. “And besides, he's stolen a Federation fighter and that's enough reason for me.”

“Good point,” Manny said with a slight smile. She reached up and touched the lock, opening the hatch to a scene of utter chaos.

Whilst the fire suppression systems had already put out the majority of the flames, pockets of destruction were still burning. Manny immediately started coughing, as did

Caitlin, even though she had pulled her sleeve over her mouth.

Around them, there was nothing left to fly. Every craft in the bay had been totalled. Manny wanted to ask Caitlin what she was planning on going after him in but couldn't over her own continuous coughing. Overhead she could hear the computer announcement: "Please leave the area."

"Duh!" Caitlin said between gasps. She towed Manny over to a side blast door and hit the release. The door shot up to reveal the sleek, matt black form of Caitlin's private fighter – the *Spectre*. With its aerofoil wings, torpedoes, phasers and enormous engines, it seemed more like a futuristic hotrod than a ship of war. Even the paint seemed to absorb the light that touched it, making it appear like a flying black hole. "Come on!"

Both females stepped into the twin-seats of the craft, Caitlin taking the front. They donned their helmets – Manny hated hers as it flattened out her ears – and strapped themselves in. Without asking for clearance, Caitlin fired up the engines, raised the craft off the floor then gunned her engines.

Amantallash watched the fires pass by in a dizzy blur, quickly replaced by a red one as the Martian landscape whizzed by. Day quickly became night as the fighter passed through the planet's thin atmosphere and out into space.

“Keep your eyes forward,” Ghost suggested. “It’ll keep you from bringing up your lunch.”

Manny grimaced. She was already beginning to feel nauseous. “Thanks for that.”

All business, Ghost asked: “Check the scanners. Find him for me.”

Amantallash's training kicked in and she keyed in the query. “He's headed for the Asteroid Belt.”

Ghost nodded to herself – gently so she wouldn't exacerbate her back injury. “That's exactly where I'd hide a ship if I were a bounty hunter.”

Manny understood the implied statement. The fighter was restricted to sublight speeds. To effect an escape, Seelin would need a warp-capable vessel.

“I'm right about him, aren't I?” Caitlin added, curious.

At that, Manny rolled her eyes. She found it incongruous that the people who were so often uneasy about her abilities could so readily call upon them. She had noticed some people would actually shy away from her for fear of having their mind read, when, truth be told, the most she got from the majority of people was the odd impression. Their thoughts could usually only be heard as nothing more than background noise. For Ghost's sake, she simply said: “Yes.”

The pilot shifted in her seat, suddenly uncomfortable, and it wasn't about her spine. “I'm going to push the

Spectre to the limits to get this bloke, Lieutenant, because I've got about five minutes before the drug takes full effect and knocks me out.”

“What?!” Manny was stunned.

Matter-of-factly, Caitlin stated: “You'll have to fly us home when I pass out.”

“Great.” Amantallash remembered back to her Starfleet training, which included a basic flying class that was known among the cadets as: *The Beginner's Guide to Not Crashing*. “Please tell me this thing has a big red button labelled “fly home”.”

Ghost gave a little laugh. “Nothing so simple, I'm sorry. What you *can* do is simply fly us back to Mars and the base will tractor the *Spectre* home.”

That at least gave her friend a little hope. Whatever happened, Amantallash was a warrior and pragmatic. The job had to be done and there were no other choices. “Let's do it.”

With that said, Caitlin pushed the fighter to its limits. The increased g-forces pushed them back in their seats as the inertial dampeners could not quite keep up with Ghost's demands.

As Ghost moaned, Manny watched their scanners. “You know, if we go any faster, we're going to have time dilation problems.”

Caitlin shrugged. “Better we catch him *before* he gets to the asteroids, don't you think?”

Manny shivered. She had little confidence when it came to navigating through them. “Agreed.” A moment later, she announced: “He’s nearly in firing range. We have him.”

“I don’t think so,” Ghost wasn’t so certain. “If we can see him, he can see *us*.”

As soon as the computers registered a target lock Seelin entered the outer edge of the asteroid field. To break the lock he swung around a huge rock and brought his phasers to bear on the *Spectre*. Before he could squeeze off a shot he swung away blindly, doing his best to avoid the photon torpedo Ghost had launched at the asteroid.

Seelin’s fighter was jostled as the oversized boulder disintegrated behind him, showering his shields with debris, dropping them fifty percent.

“You missed,” Seelin hissed over subspace as he sought refuge amongst the asteroids.

A little more chipper, Ghost replied: “Actually, I didn’t.” More deadly, she added: “You’re next.” She switched to internal comms and said: “Manny, look for his ship. We could get lost in this mess, but he *has* to take us to it sooner or later.”

Amantallash nodded and set to work as Ghost pushed her fighter, dodging floating rock after rock in her mad chase to hunt Seelin down. After a few moments, she began to realise she was starting to lose her reflexes. The

drug was taking effect.

“Got it!” Manny said victoriously. “I’m feeding you the co-ordinates now.”

Ghost looked down and saw it and formed a plan. She fired at an asteroid Seelin was passing – for all the bounty hunter's poor flying back at the base she found he was actually good – blasting it into dust and obscuring both craft's sensors momentarily.

When Seelin looked behind him he found he was alone. Suspicious, he took a circuitous, but quick, route back to his ship, to find a black shadow falling over it in the shape of the *Spectre*.

“Hello, Seelin,” Ghost said, almost cheerfully. “Say goodbye to your ship.”

Before he could utter a word, Ghost fired her remaining photon torpedo into the engines of the modest-sized interstellar ship. It exploded spectacularly, leaving the bounty hunter with no escape.

“Now, Seelin,” Ghost said quietly, “you can either be escorted back to Mars by us, or take your chances trying to fly to Proxima Centauri. It’ll take you about four years to get there. I hope you packed a cut lunch.”

Caitlin's mirth was entirely lost on the Orion. The only thing he saw right then and there was red. The human pilot had destroyed not only his escape plan, but his favourite ship as well. To top it off, there was no way he was going to spend the rest of his life in a Federation penal

colony. He wasn't going to let his wife spend all the hard earned currency he had spent his life building while he rotted away in a place where money had no significance. His finger tightened on the firing button.

In the *Spectre*, things were not going too smoothly. The drug was coming into full effect, and all Ghost had a chance to say was: "Manny, take overrrrrr" before her head lolled back and she passed out.

Amantallash had two choices. Panic and get killed, or try to remember as much as she could and use it. She took option two.

She quickly found the button to transfer control to her seat then reached out with her mind to scan her enemy. In the emptiness of space, and with Caitlin out cold, the only mind that registered was Seelin's. She immediately realised he was out for blood.

Taking the stick in her right paw, she pushed the phaser trigger and sent two bolts towards Seelin's fighter. They just missed.

However, they did have the positive effect of rattling Seelin. Instead of shooting back, he ran. Manny throttled up and began to give chase, firing again. Her confidence grew with each shot as her aim began improving.

A glancing blow destroyed Seelin's sensor pod and suddenly he found himself flying blind with only the light from the distant sun to reveal the asteroids. He felt confident he could avoid them and still evade the *Spectre*.

He was wrong. He ran into a rock that was made mostly of carbon and iron that had all the reflectivity of a dead sun. It smashed straight into the cockpit bubble, venting Seelin's air to space and instantly freezing him as he wasn't wearing a spacesuit. The fighter began spinning and fell straight towards the minor planet Vesta, which was anything but forgiving to tumbling spacecraft. The tiny craft shattered on impact.

A smile played over her lips at the thought the killer was dead, but it departed when she realised that real culprit was still well and truly alive. Duras. He would have his day, she thought coldly. The Klingon had messed with her life twice already. She had no intention of letting him have a third try.

Her job done, she watched the scanner with a keen eye and turned the *Spectre* for home. She kept the fighter at one quarter impulse and managed to miss every asteroid in the belt until she cleared it. Once free, she had some fun and found out what the custom-made fighter could do.

Caitlin Ryan woke up in a sickbay bed, wondering for a moment how she got there. Her head was still buzzing from the medication and she quickly realised her back was numb.

She panicked as the notion came to her that she had been paralysed and would never fly again. A fluffy hand caught hers as she gripped the sheets in terror.

“You're all right,” Amantallash said gently. She had been waiting for hours for the Lieutenant to wake up. “The doctors numbed your back for you for a while to give you some relief. It's temporary.”

The words came as a ray of sunlight to the darkened Ghost. She forced a tight smile and said: “Thanks.” Suddenly, the day came back to her. “What happened after I....”

Manny purred in jest. “Passed out?” she finished with a grin. “Seelin put a new crater in Vesta,” she said. “Then I flew us home.”

Caitlin's eyes widened in surprise. She had no idea the Security Officer had any flying skills. “I'm impressed,” she said honestly. “When I'm out of here I will give you some lessons.”

Manny's whiskers bristled in delight at the notion. “I'll take you up on that.”

Some of the humour left her friend. “I'm afraid the doctor said you'll be with them for a little while and you'll need some more rehab before you return to the *Millennium*.”

The pilot didn't know whether to laugh or cry. The last thing she wanted was some more physiotherapy. In her opinion, its practitioners were all sadists.

Her friend had also revealed that she would soon be returning to her primary role as fighter co-ordinator on the fleet flagship. It was a career builder, that was certain, but

it would once again rob her of opportunities to fly.

She let out *most* of her feelings with a heart-felt sigh. “At least I can look forward to exploring space again with the rest of the family.”

Amantallash nodded. There were a few more things she needed to share. “While you're still here a security guard will be posted to watch over you. Duras will probably try again.”

Ryan shot her an angry look. “I don't need a babysitter.”

Manny returned the look with one of her own. “Don't be foolish, Caitlin. If I hadn't been there you would have been “toast”, as you humans put it.”

Her remark hit the mark, but her feelings were still singed. Caitlin let the heat leave her eyes then said: “Where is my babysitter, then?” She looked towards the door and saw no-one.

Her friend put up her paw. “I am, until my shuttle leaves in an hour. Captain Piper needs me back ASAP. I hear we may be going to my homeworld.”

The comment stirred a memory. Caitlin looked up and caught Manny's eye. “Tell the Captain this: I know what happened to the *Ingram* and I suggest she look into Drishtagoth.”

Manny was startled. Only a handful of people were read into the file, and as far as she knew, Caitlin wasn't one of them. Instead of questioning her about it, she simply

nodded.

The mention of a name from Cait, her home, was disturbing. The idea that her people could be involved was appalling.

She changed the subject as she thought of returning to her home in the stars: the *U.S.S. Millennium*. “You know, I heard a rumour that you may get your bars back for what you did today Commander?”

Ryan laughed and shook her head. She realised the promotion back to her old job didn't interest her as much as being in the company of good friends. She also realised that she, too, was looking forward to returning to their ship.