

Changing Course

by Sean O'Keefe 2013©

“Tell me what happened.”

The woman down the end of the bed wore Captain's bars, but aside from that Caitlin didn't know the stranger from a bar of soap. She searched those impossibly green eyes for some kind of ulterior motive but found nothing. She seemed sincere in her request. It baffled her.

She wanted to shift to scratch her spine but she was still restrained. It was still too soon after her accident. Her hands were pinned to her sides, her head in a brace. Her legs were strapped to the device that could flip her over like a pancake.

The Stryker frame hadn't changed much in the centuries since it had been designed. It was designed to not only keep the patient immobile but to prevent bed sores. It was also excellent for doctors to be able to flip the patient to minister to either side of their body.

All it felt like to Caitlin was a gallows. A torture device that wouldn't even let her scratch her nose.

Why it irked her so much was that Caitlin Ryan was a pilot. *Was* being the operative term. Now, in her mind, she wasn't good for much.

All the same she was a damn good pilot. She had more talent in her little finger than the rest of her squadron combined. Her instructor was a man who didn't mince words, nor did he exaggerate.

She still heard him in her ears. “Just don't let

yourself get over confident,” he had warned her in his gruff voice. “The Universe is cluttered with the corpses of fools who thought they were indestructible.”

The memory was like an ice cold stab in the heart. She had come damn close to becoming one of them.

Her visitor seemed to pick up on her discomfort. She stepped forward and around the frame, out of Caitlin's view. Then she miraculously found just the right spot and scratched for a good ten seconds before stopping and returning to her previous position two feet from the end of her bed which was, at present, at forty-five degrees with Caitlin's head high.

Although she was Curious about how the Captain could possibly have known about not only her discomfort but where it was she was not about to ask. She had spent her career pulling off miracles and knowing that people expected her to be able to perform them and have the confidence that she could and would do the job no matter how impossible the task might be. She suddenly realised she was in the presence of someone like herself. Someone who didn't believe in the impossible.

The Captain's question came back to her thoughts. Her respect for the woman with no name urged her to respond. “They had to peel me off an asteroid,” she said succinctly. She wasn't sure she wanted to relive it and let her annoyance show.

The woman's eyes narrowed ever so slightly. Just enough to tell Caitlin she was annoyed. She said nothing and didn't need to.

“OK then,” she said. She thought back. “Where do I start?”

“The beginning is a good place, but you don't have to go all the way back to Event One.”

Caitlin chuckled a little at the unexpected mirth. “All right,” she said quietly.

Most fighters gleam. They are looked after with pride by their pilots who usually groom them to perfection. They even often add touches of artwork to their nose cones.

Not the *Spectre*. Caitlin Ryan had spent years perfecting her personal fighter. A tweak here, an adjustment there, an oversized engine later....

The fighter had started out life as a type 15 shuttle, but only an expert could divine that now. It was about twenty feet long with a pointed nose, bubble canopy, huge engines, phaser cannons on the tips of its aerofoil wings and even the tip of it's tail. Unlike the other fighters, the *Spectre* lived up to its name by being painted not only matt black, but its coating actually *absorbed* light. It was like looking into a small black hole. No matter how hard you looked at it it didn't quite seem to be there. Even the canopy sported a non-reflective coating.

One of the few things you *could* actually focus on was its name, painted in red, just before the cockpit.

Caitlin walked up to her ship and patted the nose, allowing her fingers to run along the metal, looking for defects. Naturally, there were none.

The sound of a clattering spanner drew her attention aft. A cursing muttering was heard but it was enough for her to recognise its owner. Lt. Commander "Mutt" Sprong was the chief engineer who watched over the maintenance of all Mars' Outpost's fighters.

Caitlin gave the older mechanic a grin. It had been a good day and she wanted to share the joy around. "How's it going, Mutt?" she asked, her Irish accent thicker than usual, which was the case when she was relaxed.

The engineer smiled back at her. "All fine here, Ghost," he replied. "Are you planning on taking the *Spectre* up today?"

Caitlin nodded. "Just you try and keep me out of the sky!" she said, her mind already in space.

Mutt slapped the wing next to him lightly. "Lieutenant Snapper had a look at your scanner earlier and gave the software an upgrade. He says you can see another parsec in front of you now."

"Yeah, right!" Snapper had a bad habit of exaggerating his repairs. "Just as long as I can see where I'm going."

Mutt nodded sagely. He had known too many young pilots who came to grief when their scanners failed. "Just make sure you come back alive," he grumbled.

"Ghost" Ryan stepped over to the cockpit, put her foot in the first rung and swung her small frame up and into the seat. She brushed back her short, black hair and pulled her helmet onto her head, making sure the strap was secure. "Today is a good day to fly," she said with a smile,

paraphrasing the Klingon proverb.

She glanced to the left at Mutt who was looking up at her almost sadly. He only admitted later that he had a bad feeling about her flying today. He was embarrassed to say it, but he was never wrong about such things.

Ghost got the necessary clearance from the tower while she warmed up the ship's thrusters. She looked over to the other side of the hangar deck and noted her students were almost ready to fly. She took hold of her helmet mic and said: "Hurry up people. I want to be back in time for dinner." She couldn't help but add a touch of sarcasm as she had found this small band of recruits were quite lazy. It was as if they had no real idea of the job they were supposed to be doing or the legacy they shared with some of the galaxy's greatest heroes - pilots who had reached for the envelope then shredded it just to prove it could be done.

Not willing to wait any longer, Ghost took the yoke and applied two percent thrust. It was enough for the *Spectre* to slide out the door and into the red dawn that shone on the barren planet of Mars.

The canyons and mounts of the Red Planet, most of which dwarfed those of Earth, held little interest to Ghost. All she wanted to see was the stars.

"Hurry up, you lot," she said, not bothering to mask her annoyance. "We've got some asteroids to blow up."

Her students were far along in their course to be able to make orbit without assistance and Caitlin was not the type to coddle them. If they screwed up and crashed on the

surface the auto eject would whisk them to safety and Caitlin would be happy to fail them. No second chances with that kind of error. You only got to crash your ship once in her class.

Within a minute she was sharing her space with four other craft. All of them standard Starfleet fighters, stripped down to the essentials. There was no point on wasting new fighters on recruits. One in four of them wound up in pieces, one way or the other.

"Ensign Soroyan," she announced in her formal, no-nonsense teacher tone. "Form up on my wing." She glanced over her shoulder at the others. "You lot, try to keep up." With a smile she opened up the throttles on the *Spectre* and quickly left them in her wake. She didn't push her craft to it's limits, otherwise her students would have had no chance of catching her.

She felt a gentle g-force as her ship accelerated. It was a modification to the inertial dampeners she had made herself. She was a seat-of-the-pants flyer and she firmly believed she couldn't do it right if she couldn't *feel* herself fly. She needed the sensation of being pulled in different directions. It helped her to orient herself. To know she wasn't in a fancy simulator shooting at computer generated boogie men.

It took thirty seconds (she checked) for her class to form up on her wings. She didn't need to turn her head. Her peripheral vision was excellent. Not to mention their blips showed up on the scanner.

She had been training this batch for weeks. They had

tried simulated strafing runs on Mars' surface. They had taken pot-shots at a Starfleet hulk that was in a high orbit of the planet. Now, it was time for some fun.

“As I said in class,” her accent changed to a clear and formal one that professors used in dusty lecture halls. “Your scanner is your best friend, but you can't trust everything it tells you. There are some things it'll miss.”

“Like what?” The voice was Mister Soroyan's. Curious as ever. Caitlin liked that.

“For the sake of weight and space, your scanner's only geared to look for solid mineral objects. Iron, copper, granite, rocks, other fighters. They won't pick up a warp field wake that, if you're close enough, can tear your ship to shreds.”

“Ouch.” Ensign Chapman this time. He was the baby of the group. English and proud of it.

Caitlin gave a rueful smile the others would have been glad not to see. “If that happened to you I'm not sure you'd have enough time to get even that out.” She noticed they were nearing the Asteroid Field. “Okay, people. Keep it tight. I'll take the lead. Keep a two second gap between each fighter.”

With glee, Caitlin gave the *Spectre* a roll on its central axis and dove into the field. Her view of the scanner had led her to quickly plot a path through this, one of the densest fields that existed in the Trojan Lagrange point areas that encroached on Jupiter's orbit. Here it was dense enough to be considered a hazard to shipping. Most interstellar vessels avoided it.

“Yahoo!” she gleefully cried as she began dodging rocks that varied in size from a golf ball to a starship. There were times when she forgot she was supposed to be an instructor and just became a mad keen pilot like barn stormer from the 1920s. This was one of them.

Ghost banked, swerved, ducked and spun whilst loving every minute of it. An asteroid field was her notion of a playground.

Behind her her students were finding it hard to keep up. They began falling behind. However, they had taken Ghost's instructions to heart and were keeping track of her course on their 3-D Head's Up display between them and the glass of the canopy. Her track appeared as a red line that, in Soroyan's display, had just disappeared behind a larger rock.

Ghost followed her 3D display whilst looking beyond it at the real world. She was going so fast she found she had no time to avoid what the scanner had missed. Behind the asteroid was a comet in the making made mostly of ice. As such, it failed the computer's notice.

Her eyes wide, suddenly terrified and knowing there was *nothing* she could do about it she said: “God....”

Then the lights went out.

Going over it once more brought back the feelings she had done a lousy job of trying to suppress. The Federation's most decorated fighter pilot sobbed once and began to cry. It wasn't the first time today, that was certain.

The Captain realised that as well. Caitlin was obviously oblivious to the tear stains she couldn't wipe away.

“Well, Dad was right,” she said bitterly. “He always said I go at everything like a bull at a gate and he was right.” She raised her voice and shouted at the roof. “That's right, Dad! YOU WERE RIGHT!”

The Captain got the impression that Caitlin's father had passed on. Ghost seemed to be shouting into Heaven. She waited patiently for the broken form before her to continue.

Her silent presence was beginning to get on Caitlin's nerves. “What?!” she snapped.

The corner of the Captain's mouth quirked up just a little. “I was waiting for the rest of the story,” she said amiably.

Caitlin had the sudden notion that the woman before her was deranged. “What story!” she cried. Behind her the lifesigns readouts began rising. “My back is stuffed! That's what the doctor said! Broken in *three* places!” The tears kept flowing, but so did the anger. “He told me I'll never fly again!”

The Captain kept her gaze, her tone even. “And you're OK with that?”

For a moment the pain in Caitlin's back faded in comparison the the angst in her heart. “NO I'M BLOODY NOT!” she cried from the depths of her tormented soul. “All I've ever wanted to do is fly and serve the Federation. Now I can't do either.” The last came out through a throat

that was so tight the last word came out in a squeak. Her tears left tracks down her face which she could care less about this strange Captain seeing. She wished she could free herself from the bed so she could smash something, anything.

The Captain gently nodded to herself. Caitlin was angry and broken but she clearly hadn't given up. There was still a lot of fight in her.

“Do you know what happened to you after the accident?” she offered.

Curiosity overwhelmed the anguish and Caitlin managed to reign in her feelings. Through gritted teeth she said: “No. Nobody's told me anythin'.”

“I see.” The Captain gave her a brief smile. “I was on my way to Mars to see you when I heard the distress call from your students – they're fine by the way. It was my ship that picked you up. We tractored your ship into the hangar bay and took your students on board. The doctor quickly told me your injuries were beyond her resources to heal so we brought you home to Earth. You're at Starfleet HQ's Medical Centre in San Francisco.”

Caitlin squeezed her eyes shut for a moment. She was glad to know her students were all right, but there were some things the Captain had said that intrigued her. Damn the drugs, she thought. They were fogging her thinking.

It took a moment, but once the information was assimilated Caitlin took another look at her visitor. The Captain was tall, about six feet. Honey blonde hair in a

pony-tail – not quite regulation – and green eyes. Neither could be natural but the combination made her striking. To top it off, she was clearly very fit.

The one thing that caught her attention was that the Captain referred to her ship as having a *hangar* deck – not a shuttle bay. That meant she could be only one person.

“Captain Piper, I presume. Your ship's the *Millennium*. *Ingram*-class. I was training up some pilots for you.” She tried to sound friendly but the bitterness she felt overpowered her better graces.

“Well done, Commander,” Piper said. “I thought I'd given you enough clues.” She gave her a smile as a reward.

Caitlin looked away and out the window. All she could see from this angle was sky. It was where she wanted to be more than anything. “I'm sorry I'm not much good to you now,” she said sadly. She was finding it difficult to find some light – any light – in a world that had plunged into darkness. Her career prospects were gone. The only future she saw was as an invalid, living with her parents back in Belfast.

Piper pursed her lips. “I'm not so sure about that. You know, I wasn't going to ask you to fly for me.”

Caitlin shot the Captain a look that was a mixture of bewilderment and incredulity. “What else would you have me doin', then?”

“Commander, you have the experience to be the leader of pilots I need on my ship.”

At Caitlin's continued look of confusion she added:

“I need someone to run the “control tower” on the *Millennium*. I wanted that person to be a pilot and someone they would respect. I wanted that person to be *you*, and believe it or not, I still do.”

“Are you serious?” Caitlin said in amazement. “I’m a broken bloody rag doll. I can’t even stand up.”

“That’s true for now. However, I’m a friend of the director here, Christine Chapel, and she has it on good report that your spinal cord’s intact. You’ll walk again after some rehabilitation. Your problem is that your system rejects most modern healing techniques. Your bones are going to have to mend the old fashioned way.”

Ghost didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. “So, why did they say I can’t fly?”

Piper shrugged. “I’m not sure. Christine just told me that your bones are not going to heal perfectly and there’s a lot of soft tissue damage. You’ll be able to walk, but you’ll have to wear a brace and take it easy.”

With a sniff, Caitlin gave the Captain a gallows laugh. “Then I’m done in the service. No way Starfleet’ll let me stay.”

Piper gave her a smile that told her she was capable of practically anything. Caitlin suddenly remembered she was talking to the flagship’s captain. She was not someone to be trifled with. “Not if I have my way. When you’re out of here you’ll continue your rehab on the *Millennium* under Doctor AndrusTaurus’ care. She told me a good part of that will be fixing up your fighter.”

The comment made Caitlin stiffen. “The *Spectre’s*

okay?”

“Ah, no,” Piper said. “The *Spectre's* ready for the scrap heap. You really did a number on it. However, my Chief Engineer tells me she's not beyond hope.” A thought came to her that she had forgotten. “By the way. Your scanner didn't pick up the proto-comet because your new scanner software had bugs. The subroutine that governed water was *missing*. Scanner's pretty sure it was still in the beta-testing stage.”

Caitlin saw red. “How can that little bastard do that to me? Snapper's got to pay!”

“He will, Commander. He's under investigation, as is his commander, Sprong. The rumour has it they were using the squadron to make some money for the weapons companies. Beta-testing in the real world.” At the sight of Caitlin's ever more reddening face she changed the subject. “Now, when you're up to it I want you to come and work for me.”

Caitlin thought about that for a moment before nodding her agreement. Ten minutes ago the future seemed extremely bleak. Now, there was a light on the horizon. “There's just one thing I have to do first.”

Piper raised a curious brow. “What's that?” she asked.

Ghost looked her square in the eye. “I have to break the nose of my mechanic first.”

The Captain did her best to appear disapproving, but that mischievous look was still in her eye. “Well, then. I should get used to calling you *Lieutenant* Ryan then. Call

me after you've been busted and I'll get you out.”

A smile spread across Caitlin's face. “For that I'll owe you a pint of Guinness, Captain,” she said, knowing she was going to like working for this woman. She had a sense of humour she appreciated.

A painful twinge got through her numbing raft of drugs that was keeping her pain submerged and she sucked in an agonised breath. She felt like revisiting her lunch.

Piper stepped forward and put out a hand, wanting to help. “Is there something I can do? Should I call a nurse?”

Ghost simply grimaced. “No, Captain, thanks. I'll see you in a month or two.”

Piper nodded. She heard her cue and could see the fighter jock was tiring. Her body still had a lot of healing to do. She gave her the “thumbs up”. “I'll see you then.”

The Captain turned and exited the room, allowing Caitlin to reach for her break-through medication – a controller she held in her left hand. She hadn't wanted to appear weak in front of her new boss. She squeezed the button while muttering to herself: “Hurry up body and heal. I want to get out of here.” As her mind raced she thought: Things to do. Things to do.