

NOVA TREK

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Ventures:

The Life and
Times of
Shev Ta'Laren



A NOVEL BY
MADISON
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BASED ON
CONCEPTS BY
GENE
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Shev Ta'Laren**

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1

She was born Shev Ta'Laren— and this is her story.

But this story doesn't begin on Earth— or with Shev. It begins on the planet Andor with her parents and *their* families. The situation between them was not nice (to put it mildly). It could be more accurately described as aristocratic snobbery— definitely a one-sided case.

Shev's mother's name was Sallen Tal'gen and her family had more than its share of 'Blue Blood'— no pun intended. They were old school, upper-class. You could trace their line clear back to the old ruling clans of Andor.

Shev's father's name was Thorgen Ta'Laren. He ran the family scoutship dealership while his brother ran the manufacturing plant. Built by their father, it was the largest and most successful plant of its kind on Andor.

Old school aristocrats vs the self-made man.
The moment the two met, a clash was inevitable.

It all began the day Sallen wandered into Thorgen's dealership looking for a new scoutship. It was as simple as that. As soon as they met, something seemed to click between them. As they talked about scouts and what she wanted in one, other topics came into the discussion. Sallen painted in her free time— she'd had several successful gallery shows over the past several years. Thorgen wrote historical fiction and had several successful titles to his credit.

That day ended with dinner.

They never did order that scoutship.

But as soon as Sallen told her parents about Thorgen, they were shocked and repulsed. “*A scoutship salesman? Are you out of your mind?*” She was ordered never to see the man again.

Of course that only guaranteed that she would see him— and she did so several times over the

months that followed— right up to the day that Thorgen proposed.

That brought things to a head *real* fast since ancient Andorian custom— something Sallen's parents held to almost religiously— stated that the female's parents had to approve of any match before any wedding could take place.

Of course Sallen's parents didn't— never did and never would.

That left only one option.

With the help of Thorgen's older brother and his wife, Thorgen and Sallen eloped and immigrated to Earth.

Once there, they chose to settle in Chicago— a city with weather that— at least part of the time— was somewhat similar to Andor's. It also allowed the Ta'Larens to indulge in their curiosity about these humans.

Thorgen opened a dealership— the first off-world dealership for Ta'Laren Scouts.

Outraged by their daughter's inexcusable actions, Sallen's parents disowned her even as the dealership proved itself quiet successful (For those that might be wondering, the scouts, built on Andor, were flown to Earth—the flight serving the dual purpose of a shakedown cruise).

With their first summer on Earth, the Ta'Larens discovered a new passion—one few andorians would understand: Boating. The ship, named *Sol'mare* (Andorian for 'Love') was the most modern of its kind. Every safety device known to twenty-third century sailors was installed on board and the Ta'Larens knew every system inside and out. When they weren't at the dealership, or their apartment, or a gallery show or publishers', they were boating.

It was about this time—some two years after arriving on Earth, that Sallen and Thorgen came to another decision. Like most Andorians, they valued family—the Tal'gens being among the few that gave lip-service to family while valuing their station in life more.

But the Ta'Larens wanted to give their family something no Andorian ever had. They applied for Earth citizenship. They studied almost round the clock—past every test with near record high scores and as the fates would have it, they were awarded that citizenship on the anniversary of the founding of the Federal Union of Planets.

One year later, Shev Ta'Laren was born.

2

According to the law, Shev was a citizen of Earth— as much a native as any Human— and that’s how her parents chose to raise her. They never denied her, her Andorian heritage— if she had questions, they answered them. But her upbringing was definitely Earth and Human based. Language, customs, society— they allowed her to be as human as her blue skin and antennas allowed her to be.

Growing up the Human way, Shev naturally learned more about Humans than her parents. There were times when this caused confusion between parents and daughter. But disagreement? Dissention ? Dysfunctionality ? Never. The lines that had been drawn between Sallen and her parents would never take form. In that regard, the Ta’Larens remained true to their Andorian belief of Family above all else.

The day Shev entered Starfleet Academy, her parents stood proudly behind her as she took the

Starfleet Oath. Why Starfleet? There was no involved reason. Like most young people, she wanted to see what was beyond her home world, to take part in the Universe. She was fifteen when she entered the Academy— although she was small for her age and looked more like thirteen.

The following year, during school break, the Ta'Larens broke their personal vow never to return home and took their sixteen year old daughter to Andor.

Shev hated it from the moment they arrived. It lacked the colors and variety of Earth— as well as the warmer temperatures she'd grown up with. Her mother's parents didn't help matters any. As far as they were concerned, they had no daughter— so there couldn't be any granddaughter. It was the ultimate slap-in-the-face for a race that put a high value on Family.

The only highlights of the trip as far as Shev was concerned, were her aunt and uncle on her father's side (Her father's parents had died testing a new scoutship two years earlier. The crash had

been a leading headline on the Federal News Feed).

Shev nearly jumped for joy when they got back to Earth. But a year later, that joy would be momentarily dimmed.

3

History had never been Shev's strong suit. It seemed like she always had to study longer and harder on that subject than any other. At the age of seventeen, she was seated in her history class at the Academy awaiting a verdict. They'd just taken another test—one she'd spent the past week studying for.

Now, Commodore Franklin Fitzpatrick—who was both the current Academy Commandant and one of the Academy's history teachers, looked up from the results on his desk monitor screen. "Over all, it's better than I expected." There was a collective sigh of relief in the room, then he looked in her direction. "Cadet Ta'Laren would you remain after class, please?" He then dismissed the others.

He turned back to his desk as the others filed out and Shev watched nervously as he shut down his desk and work station. Only after he'd finished, did he turn his attention back to her. His attitude was not threatening or overbearing—that was not Fitzpatrick's way. He rested a hip on his desk as his brown eyes met her slate-grey ones.

Shev broke the ice first. "I failed, didn't I?"

Fitzpatrick raised an eyebrow at this. "No, actually. But your grade could have been a lot better."

"Sir, I spent a week studying for this test," Shev stated.

"Then for some reason, you must be having trouble understanding what you're reading." He held up his hand to prevent her from speaking.

"That's not unusual, Cadet. I've checked.

Mathematics, sciences— according to all of your other scores— and your other teachers— you seem to handle everything else fairly easily." He momentarily scratched a place behind one ear in thought. "So, it's either my method of teaching or

it's the way the material's formatted in the text that's giving you problems.”

He turned back to his desk for a moment, then handed her an actual piece of paper he'd taken from it. It had a name and address written on it. “That's my niece— Janet Kirk. Unlike you, she soaks up history like a sponge. She's a real wiz at it.

“Go see her, “he told the girl. “Maybe she can tutor you along enough to help you remember better.” He watched her for a moment. “Shev, the next test is the Semester Summary. You need to pass it in order to be passed on to your training flights.”

Shev looked down at the address, then up at the Commodore and nodded. “Yes, sir. I'll go see her after my last class.”

4

The address on the paper turned out to be off campus, on the South Side of San Francisco — an apartment building.

Shev hugged her PADD to her as she left the elevator and started down the tenth floor hallway. She'd never laid eyes on this person, this Janet Kirk, before and she had no idea what to expect.

When the apartment door opened, Shev found herself facing an eighteen year old redhead still in her academy uniform of light grey blouse and slacks. The academy badge on her blouse was gold and black- unlike Shev's silver and black. This redhead was an academy lieutenant.

She took in Shev's appearance in a glance.
“Yes, Cadet— ?”

“Shev Ta’Laren, Lieutenant. Commodore Fitzpatrick thought you might be able to help me out.”

“With— ?”

“Earth history.” Shev shrugged. “I’m a little weak in it and the Commodore said you’re a wiz at it.”

It was Jan’s turn to shrug. “Being from Andor, it’s not surprising you don’t know Earth history as well as a human.”

That comment irked Shev and it showed in both her expression and her tone. “Andor, hell. I was born and raised in Chicago. My parents had Earth citizenship a year before I was born.”

Jan’s eyebrows rose into her bangs at this. “Really?” Then a gentle smile came to her face. “Thought I heard a slight mid-western twang.” She stepped aside and waved her visitor in. “Come on in. Kind of hard to turn down a neighbor.”

Shev looked at her closely. “Neighbor?”

Jan nodded. “My family comes from Iowa.”

As Shev stepped into the apartment, she noted the work station in one corner, the glass walls and balcony beyond and something else as well. The music that was playing. She could hardly believe what she was hearing. “Is that...Marty Robbins you’re listening to?”

Jan turned to face her so fast, it was almost as if Shev had slapped her. “How in the *hell* did you know that? I didn’t think anyone listened to twentieth century country music except me.”

Shev shrugged. “I came across it while I was doing my thesis on classical music in high school. I’ve been hooked ever since- Marty Robbins, Hank Snow, Patsy Cline...”

Jan looked at her a little cock-eyed. “And you’re having trouble with history?” She waved a hand toward the dining room table that was positioned nearby. “Have a seat...”

And that’s how a lasting friendship began and grew between them. Jan’s tutoring got Shev through history class with an 87% average. But

while the tutoring came to an end, their friendship continued to grow as other classes and their shared interest in music branched out into other things...

It was December on this part of the planet and the snow was almost a foot thick outside. Shev had heard the arguments about how much control of the weather was enough. Should Earth be turned into a tropical paradise- or should some seasonal change be allowed?

It was finally decided that total control was not needed. Instead, the tech and procedures were directed toward reducing the severity and intensity of the weather- no more mega-storms that wiped entire cities off the map.

As such, she stood on the balcony of her dorm room and watched the snow as it fell. In some ways, it reminded her of Andor as it covered up the colors of Earth- and yet, there was something about an Earth winter with its splashes of color in the people and lights of the city that fascinated her.

The door chime called her back inside. On answering it, she found Jan in the hallway. “Hey—

wha— ?” Jan moved past her, into the room, her arms wrapped tightly around her as if she were still trying to fight off the cold outside.

Her friend stood before the balcony doors in a winter coat and slacks and didn’t say a word as she slowly rocked back and forth and continued to hug herself. Shev moved up beside her and saw Jan’s face as her jaw muscle twitched. There was also a haunted look to her eyes. “Jan? What happened? I thought you had a date with Rodger Wilson?”

“I did.” Only now, did Jan glance in Shev’s direction. “The bastard tried to rape me.”

“*What?*” Shev took her by the arm and led her over to a couch. Once they were seated, Shev watched her close. “What happened?”

Jan looked down at her hands and her eyes narrowed as she spoke. “He picked me up at my place and we got to the Academy Christmas party just a little after it started.

“Everything was going fine. Then he asked me if I wanted to go for a walk, get some air.” Jan closed her eyes and rocked for a moment before

she went on. “We were no sooner out the door, than he tried to pull me behind some bushes. I broke away from him...but he came at me.”

“So what’d you do?”

Jan glanced at her. “I kicked him in the groin as hard as I could and left him lying in the snow.”

Shev nodded in approval. “Good. The Academy choir needed a new tenor.”

Jan looked at her in shock- then a moment later, they both broke out laughing!

But, as they say, the other shoe fell three days later when Wilson was released from the hospital after undergoing reconstructive surgery. He filed charges against Jan for striking a fellow officer—a court marital offence.

The charges didn’t hold up of course. Once the Academy Board of Inquiry called up the campus security scans, it was Wilson on the receiving end instead of Jan.

Shev found herself nodding in approval as Wilson was stripped of his Academy rank and

dishonorably discharged. She'd heard later that his own father even disowned him.

As far as Shev was concerned, it couldn't have happened to a better idiot...

Earth still held to the tradition of a "Spring Break" even though its origins were no longer valid. When the time came, Jan invited Shev to the Kirk Ranch. "...It's a working horse ranch. We raise them for civilian use— riding, rescue work. In some parts of the mountains, they're still the best method of transportation."

When they arrived, it opened a whole new world for Shev— a very different one from downtown Chicago. "Do you know how to ride?" Jan asked.

Shev looked at her like she was crazy. "Are you kidding? I've never been near a horse in my life!"

Jan laughed. "You will be 'City Girl'. You will be."

And she was. Jan taught her to ride and it turned into the best week Shev ever knew.

Their relationship continued to grow as that fourth year of classes resumed. By the time they were passed onto their training flights, their relationship was more like sisters—and like sisters, they kept in contact through sub-space messages as well as shared shore leaves.

Those 3 years seemed to fly by for both of them. Before they realized it, Graduation Day arrived. As soon as the diplomas were in their hands, they became full-fledged Starfleet officers—lieutenants both.

It was the day after graduation that Shev's parents brought her to the dealership. "What's going on?" she asked.

It was her mother that replied. "You're going to be away from home most of the time now," She said. "Have you given any thought to how you're going to get home when you do have the chance?"

Shev looked from one parent to the other and shrugged. “I assumed I would just sign out one of the ship’s shuttles.”

“No need,” Her father told her. He then stepped aside and Shev’s eyes went wide.

Sitting on the lot, all white and shinning in the morning light, was a scoutship. It wasn’t any multi-deck monster with four engines and a phaser turret on top. It wasn’t a city block long with power for three ships and room for a ground force of three hundred men. It was, in fact, a little on the stubby side. One cabin, a flight deck, a head, and an engine room. Two warp nacelles- slightly smaller than the Starfleet standard- were held in position on each side, while the flight deck was topped off with a dome that allowed a 180-degree view. Finally, Shev’s gaze came to the ship’s name:

Spirit of Chicago

“He’s already registered in your name,” Thorgen told his daughter. “And he has one of the first fully functional A.I.s on board. Answers to

the name 'Chi-town'. He's been programmed with your bio-code, so he'll know you right off."

Shev glanced at her father, then her mother . Then she hugged them both before slowly approaching this new part of her life. As she drew near, there was a 'click' and a soft hum and she watched as the ship's hatch opened and turned into a boarding ramp by swinging down into position.

The twenty year old glanced back at her parents and then slowly stepped onto the ramp and made her way inside. A bunk, table with storage underneath, three chairs- one at the flight console- a single food replicator and a wardrobe unit completed the interior.

"Hello, Shev."

She looked around in surprise before she remembered what her father had said. "Chi-town, I presume?"

"Affirmative. Flight checks are complete. We can launch whenever you are ready."

Shev looked around the cabin once more and smiled.

Next day at breakfast, Shev's parents announced their intentions to take the *Sol'mare* out and spend the day on Lake Michigan. "...You know you're welcome to come along," her mother stated.

"Thanks," Shev told her. Then she smiled. "But I have a certain scoutship that still needs some provisions on board."

She did go with them to the marina, however and watched under sunny skies as the *Sol'mare* pulled away from its dock and head out onto the lake.

It was just beginning to sprinkle by the time Shev got back to the *Spirit of Chicago*— now parked at the Chicago Spaceport. Sprinkling— even though the sun was still shining brightly. Having taken stock of the ship's needs, she set about her errands even as the sky began to turn greyer. By the time she returned to the scout with packages in hand, the sky was much darker and the sprinkle had turned into an actual shower.

The wind started picking up. Seems Chi-town's ramp was no sooner closed than the shower turned into a downpour— followed soon after by thunder and some wicked lightning.

“Chi-town, do you know the communications channel for the *Sol'mare* ?”

“Yes, Shev.”

“Try to raise her.”

There was a tense moment of silence before the ship spoke again. “I am sorry, Shev. I am unable to make contact.”

“The *Sol'mare* uses a sub-space transmitter. The weather shouldn't affect it.” Shev paced the cabin as the rain continued to pour down. “Scan the emergency channels for any signal at all.”

Thunder rolled outside, sounding like the world was exploding as jagged bolts of lightning forked across the sky.

“There are no signals on the emergency channels,” Chi-town reported.

“Get us launched,” Shev ordered as she turned toward the flight deck.

They started at the marina, sensors and scanners at maximum as they worked their way out over the lake. Once notified, official search and rescue units joined in— both above and below the surface.

The *Sol'mare* was found next morning ten kilometers from shore, capsized. Of Thorgen and Sallen Ta'Laren, no traces were ever found. It was believed they were washed overboard by the first big wave even as they fought to get back to shore.

Shev brought the *Spirit of Chicago* into land at the spaceport. For a long moment, she just sat, staring at the flight console.

There was a pounding at the hatch. “Shev!?”

She activated it and watched as Jan came aboard as soon as it was low enough. “I came as soon as I heard. It was on the news.”

Shev slowly rose to her feet and one friend held the other as she cried.

5

Jan had to leave soon after the memorial for Shev's parents. While Shev's aunt and uncle came in from Andor for the service—and to deal with the dealership—the Tal'gens never showed.

Starfleet gave Shev one month emergency leave to mourn and get her family affairs in order before she had to report to her first real assignment:

The *FSS Venture*.

The *Venture* was something of an oddity in the fleet. She and her class-ship- the *Dakota*, were built as prototypes at the same time as the *Constitution*. The *Dakota* and the *Venture* were considered 'Next Generation' ships, building on the proven technology of the prior *Daedalus* class. The *Constitution*, on the other hand was considered a break with tradition, while at the same time, retaining the best features of the two

previous classes. Both designs were competing for the position as Starfleet's next class of ship.

In the final analysis, the *Constitution*, with its longer mission endurance and larger crew won out, but in a twist, it was decided to commission the *Dakota* and *Venture* as well, the deciding Admiral noting that he "Couldn't see moth balling two perfectly good ships."

As such, Shev soon reported aboard a ship assigned to patrol the borders of Federal space. And those borders needed patrolling. The Tholians, the Kzinti and various other races all trying for their share of Federal products- be it seed for the boarder colonies or construction material for starbases, someone was always willing to make a try for it.

Shev's first sight of the *Venture* wasn't very inspiring. At first glance it didn't seem capable of defending itself- let alone an entire sector of space. "Three tubes and a ball, "was Shev's first impression. The ship's small hangar didn't change her view any. There were a couple of times when

she thought she was going to scrap the hangar doors on the way in.

The first person she met once she'd landed and cleared the scout, was Lt. Larry Baxter. He was tall, mid-twenties, light brown skin that some branches of the Human race processed as well as raven black hair. "Welcome aboard, Lieutenant. Larry Baxter."

"Shev Ta'Laren."

"We were told you'd be bringing your own scout in. Looks like a nice little ship." He handed her a PADD. "This contract makes the *Spirit of Chicago* an auxiliary to our shuttle fleet. In exchange, it grants you full access to the repair and maintenance facilities if you should ever need them. If, by some chance a mission requires that we use him, you'll be assigned as the pilot."

"Fair deal," Shev replied as she signed the PADD and handed it back.

"Good." Larry then logged off the device and smiled. "Now, if you'll come with me, I'll show you to your quarters."

“Jack-of-all-trades, huh?” Shev asked as they left the hangar.

Larry nodded. “That’s me. A one-man welcoming committee.”

Being smaller than the *Constitution*-class—the *Venture* only carried a crew of 223, same as the earlier *Daedalus*-class—cabin space was at a premium. Only the captain and first officer had their own cabin. Everyone else shared.

Shev’s roommate was a human female — a brunette, named Catherine Duke and she ‘hailed’ — as she put it— from the hills of Tennessee and was damn proud of it. Shev never saw much of CD, as her friends called her, since the two were on different shifts. Shev’s post was that of the junior helmsman on Beta shift, while CD was one of the techs in the science section on Alpha shift.

But unless a comet or a stray asteroid happened across their path, there wasn’t a lot of science to see to. So, CD spent most of her time trying to re-create her great-grandfather’s recipe

for his moonshine. “Just to see what it was like,” She had said. “He went out of his way to make it— even when it was against the law. Must’ve been pretty good.”

Except when the chief helmsman was on leave, Shev didn’t see much of the captain that first year. Captain Michael Wells was one of those captains that kept pretty much to himself when he wasn’t on duty. Somewhat thick around the middle with a craggy kind of face, the first impression was that of a twentieth century movie gangster— till one saw his eyes and the intelligence that showed clearly from them.

Then there was Larry. Shev liked him— plain and simple. They even shared shore leave once when she and Jan couldn’t get their schedules worked out. Their relationship climbed to a different level quite by accident.

It was the first anniversary of the death of Shev’s parents. She’d been withdrawn all day.

When she got off shift, she couldn't bring herself to going back to her cabin. Without really planning it, she wandered down to the flight deck and found the *Spirit of Chicago* parked off to one side. He lowered the ramp as she approached and she boarded without hesitation.

She sat down on the edge of the bunk and just allowed the silence to envelope her.

“Permission to come aboard?”

She turned in shock to see Larry standing in the hatch. “Granted,” she replied automatically. “What...brings you down here?”

“You weren't in your cabin,” He said as he sat down beside her. “This was the next obvious place.” He watched her for a moment. “It's no secret that you've been pretty quiet all day today.

“I've been told I'm a pretty good listener.”

She glanced over at him and then away. Slowly, in a shaky voice, she told him of that day a year ago. “...their bodies were never found.”

“Shev, I...” He stopped. “I’m sorry. I know it doesn’t mean much coming from a stranger, but...”

“You’re no stranger,” she replied. “And it means a lot.”

Shev shifted position then, till she was laying down with her head in his lap. Larry made no protest to this. As she closed her eyes and the tears ran down her face, he gently petted her hair and stayed there for her.

She had no idea when she dozed off. It was Chi-town that woke her. “Shev? I’m sorry to wake you. But you have one hour before reporting for duty.”

As she sat up, she noticed that Larry was still there. He had watched over her the entire night. “You didn’t have to stay.”

“It’s all right,” he told her as he stood up and tried to get the circulation back in his legs. “You needed someone last night.”

“Thanks.”

He reached out and gently touched her arm
“Anytime.”

6

In the year that followed, ship's routine was a quiet one. There was an occasional case of 'Cops and robbers'— like the time they chased and caught a smuggler trying to slip a load of dilithium into Kzinti territory. But over all— at least in this sector— it was a quiet time for the Union.

Shev was in her quarters this day listening to some new music Jan had sent and listening to the message that came with it. The message struck home more than the music did.

“Well, Lt.Commander, it seems we have something else to celebrate. You are now listening to *Captain Janet Tamera Kirk*— and that's not all. Not only has Starfleet finally broken the glass ceiling, they gave me a cruiser.

“Shev, they gave me the *Enterprise*— the flagship! Can you believe it?! She's in spacedock right now being refurbished. I'll let you know the launch date as soon as I have it...”

Shev was still thinking about Jan a short while later when she left her cabin and headed for the ACR. One of the problems with a small crew—even for a recently promoted senior helmsman—was the fact that you had to double-up on some duties. As such, Shev had to take her turn twice a week on monitor duty in the Auxiliary Control Room. CD joined her sometimes, but the human wasn't assigned down there unless the ship was at Battle Stations. The rest of the time, CD was in the science labs, or manning an auxiliary station on the bridge.

Shev was nearing a turbo lift when she heard Larry calling out to her. “Shev!” She turned to see him running toward her. “Have you heard the news?”

She smiled. “I’ve heard a lot of news today, Larry. Could you be a little more specific?”

He stopped beside her and was still trying to catch his breath as he spoke. “It was in the morning dispatches...Starfleet’s retiring the *Dakota*- sending her to the Fleet Museum.” He waved a hand around to indicate the ship they

were on. “Venny’s going to be the only *Dakota*-class ship left on active duty.”

Shev stared back at him in shock. “Well, they’re both prototypes. I guess Starfleet’s decided to preserve a sample of the ‘path not taken’.” As they walked on, she told him about Jan’s message.

“Incredible,” he replied. “That makes her the first woman captain in Fleet history.”

Shev nodded as they reached the turbo lift. “That’s Jan. She always seems to find herself in the thick of things.”

They parted ways when they got off the turbo lift— Larry toward Engineering and Shev toward the ACR.

It was a small space; about a third of the size of the ship’s bridge. It had one free standing console with navigation and helm controls, along with a science station style viewer positioned off to one side and a small engineering section.

Off to one side of the room were two big monitoring stations like the ones in Engineering. While on the other side of the room, were consoles

for life support and computer systems. A
viewscreen took up one whole end of the room.

The crewman on duty there, turned from the
engine consoles as Shev entered. “Time up
already?”

She nodded. “As of now, you are officially
‘sprung’— at least till tomorrow.”

The crew man shook his head. “Not me.
Tomorrow, I go back to Engineering— back to the
Land of the Living.”

They both laughed and Shev watched him go
before sitting down at the main console and
logging on.

Stardate 5921.3

Seated in her cabin, Shev just stared at her viewscreen and Jan's image in shock. "...What do you mean 'mated'?"

"'Mated' as in 'Married'," Jan told her.

"To who?"

"My First Officer."

Shev's confusion was clear in both her face and her voice. "You mean that Vulcan you've been telling me about?"

"His name's 'Spock'- and yes. The Vulcan way is a little more involved than the human method, but it boils down to the same thing."

"Jan—"

"There's a lot more to him than a person who doesn't know him would think," Jan stated, cutting her friend off. "Believe me, Shev, I wouldn't want anyone else."

Shev was quiet for a moment as she studied her friend's face. She could see a difference. It was slight, but it was there. Jan was more relaxed than the last time Shev had seen her. "You really do love him, don't you?"

"Yes."

"Well, he better take damn good care of you," Shev replied. "That's all I've got to say."

The end of another year found the *Venture* patrolling the Federal side of the Orion boarder.

Shev had no desire to go to the Rec Room. She was not in the mood to sample the end result of CD's research. She had no doubt there'd be a lot of hangovers from the brunette's moonshine recreation.

At the sound of the door buzzer, she almost didn't answer. She finally decided to do so and found Larry on the other side with two glasses in his hands. "I promise this is not CD's moonshine," He said right off. "I've got a feeling a third of the crew's going to be on Sick Call in the morning."

“I don’t doubt it, “Shev replied. “Come on in.”

Larry spoke as he stepped into the cabin. “I’ve always been a firm believer that no one should be alone on New Year’s Eve.”

“Where were you last year?”

“You spent last year with your scoutship,” He answered. “I checked him before coming here.” He handed her one of the drinks. “Non-alcoholic, I promise.”

Shev accepted the glass of orange fluid and tasted it. “What is this?”

“Something your friend Captain Kirk discovered on one of her First Contacts,” Larry replied. “I think it’s called ‘Tranya’?” He shrugged. “I know its spread throughout the Service. Just about every food replicator in the Fleet’s been programed for it.”

A moment of silence settled over them before Larry spoke again. “Would you ...be offended if I did something?”

She looked at him closely as she set her glass aside. “That would depend on what you did.”

He set his own glass aside, and a moment later, kissed her.

Shev was surprised to say the least— more so by the fact that she didn’t pull away. When he ended the kiss and spoke, his voice was quiet. “Been wanting to do that for over a year now. Took me this long to work up the courage.”

Shev’s own voice was equally soft when she replied. “I’m...glad you finally did.”

He looked up in surprise— and his own eyes went wide as she kissed him.

That second kiss lasted a lot longer and grew into a lot more.

It was sometime later, as they lay beside each other, that Shev found her voice once more.

“Larry, I care for you a lot, I really do. I don’t know where this will lead—”

“Don’t worry about it,” he replied. “We’ll just take it a day at a time. What happens, happens.”

Shev had been lying on her stomach. Now, she met his gaze and smiled. “Didn’t know you were a philosopher, too.”

He shrugged. “Like you said, I’m a jack-of-all-trades.”

They leaned toward each other—

—And the Red Alert Klaxon filled the air followed by the Captain’s voice. “All hands to Battle Stations. This is no drill. Repeat, all hands to Battle Stations.”

They both grabbed for their clothes and dressing as they went, ran for the cabin door.

With Larry headed for Engineering, Shev headed straight for the Bridge. Thankfully, she caught an empty turbo lift, allowing her to arrive fully dressed.

As she headed for her post, her eyes were on the viewscreen. It was showing a convoy- three

cargo ships and two destroyers- facing off against four Orion pirates.

Captain Wells glanced at her as she relieved the crewman at the helm. “They’re a little outnumbered.”

“Yes sir, “She replied as she sat down. “Certainly looks that way.” The crewman she replaced moved to an auxiliary station as she looked over her board. “All stations show ‘green’, Sir. Ready when you are.”

“Take us in Helm. Fire as you bare.”

“Aye, sir.” Shev’s hands moved over her console.

The *Venture* dove for the convoy, making its presence known as it opened fire. Her phasers exploded against the shields of one Orion pirate, followed immediately by torpedoes.

The orange colored pirate ship shook and tumbled under the assault only to explode as one of its wingmen fired on the *Venture*.

Shev had to hang on to the helm as the ship was *slammed*.

Wells glanced at the science station. “Those aren’t standard phasers. What the hell are they using? Fire!”

As Shev did so, the science officer replied. “High intensity particle beams. They’re acting like high-grade cutting lasers.”

Wells shook his head. “And Federal shields are designed to repel energy— not particles. Fire!”

Shev fired again. Again, phaser beams of bright blue shot forth—

—and the Orion’s shields went down.

A moment later, that ship exploded.

The science officer spoke up again. “Captain, the destroyers have taken out a third Orion and the fourth has retreated back across the border.”

“Cease fire,” Wells ordered. “Cancel Battle Stations. Dismiss Beta Shift.”

The communications officer spoke up next. “The destroyer *Cochise* is signally, sir. ‘*Thanks for*

the assist’.” He turned to face the Captain. “Sir, they’re asking if we have time to accompany them. They say they’re headed for Serella.”

“How far is that, Navigator?”

“At Warp Five, a day and a half, sir.”

Wells nodded. “Call the *Cochise* and tell them we’ll be glad to tag along. Shev take up position four hundred meters above and behind the convoy.”

“Aye, sir.”

When the shift ended, Shev was glad to return to her cabin.

But she wasn’t too crazy about what she found there. CD was collapsed across her bunk— her bunk, not Shev’s— and stunk of moonshine.

The door buzzer. Shev opened it to find Larry standing there. “Came to see if you wanted to get some dinner.”

“Maybe later,” She replied. She nodded toward CD. “How much of that ‘recipe’ did she make up?”

“I don’t know.” He knelt by the bunk and checked CD’s pulse, then her eyes. He then looked to Shev. “I think you’d better call Sickbay.”

“...Alcohol poisoning?”

Shev watched as CMO Caldwell nodded. He was in his late 50’s and seemed worn down by his years. “I’ve never heard of such a thing,” Shev stated.

“That’s because, in this century, with most of our foods and drinks replicated, it rarely- if ever- happens anymore,” Caldwell replied. “But when CD set out to recreate her great-grandfather’s recipe, she was determined to be as accurate as possible. So she used natural, un-replicated ingredients.

“She would’ve died if you two hadn’t found her.”

Larry glanced over at CD as she laid in one of the Sickbay recovery beds.” Will she be all right?”

“Eventually,” Caldwell replied. “But she’s got some Detox ahead of her to get that junk out of her system.”

Shev watched her unconscious roommate as she spoke. “Was she aware of what she was doing to herself?”

The doctor shrugged as he glanced over at his patient. “I doubt it. It might have started as a sip, then drinking off and on- gradually increasing the amount each time.”

“That sounds like an addiction,” Larry noted.

Caldwell nodded. “It could lead to it— if it didn’t kill them first. Prior to the invention of food replicators, there were cases on record of people actually drinking themselves to death.”

It was over a week before Caldwell would allow CD out of Sickbay and out of his sight. When she

finally got back to her cabin, the first person she encountered was Shev. “Hey.”

Her roommate watched her for a moment. “How do you feel?”

“Like a fool,” CD replied. “A damn, drunken fool.”

Shev was seated at the cabin desk. She’d been watching another message from Jan. Now, she leaned back in her seat as she met CD’s gaze and spoke. “Well, for your sake—and my sanity—I went through your things with security present. I sent your great-grandfather’s journal to the ship’s archive due to its historical significance. Anything and everything else connected to that recipe got thrown out or *purged*— and I asked anyone on board with any left, to throw it out.”

CD nodded. “Shev...”

“Yes?”

“...Thanks for coming home when you did.”

The Andorian nodded. “You’re welcome. Just prove to me I didn’t waste my time.”

CD gave a shaky nod and her brunette hair bounded about her face. “I will— I promise.”

8

It'd been six months since CD's self-poisoning. To Shev's knowledge, she'd stayed away from *all* social drinks— both real and replicated.

Shev and Larry continued to see each other when time allowed— which actually wasn't all that often with extra duties— some of which required different shifts.

Like today for example. Larry had Monitor duty in the ACR on Alpha shift, while Shev had it on Beta. At the sound of the door opening, Larry turned from the main console and smiled at the sight of her.

“You are relieved, Lieutenant,” She stated with a smile of her own.

He stood and gave her a mock bow. “Thank you, Lt.Commander.” He waved a hand toward the console. “It's all yours.”

She tilted her head. “Joy of joys.”

“Meet you in the Mess Hall for Lunch?” He asked.

She nodded. “Okay.”

As he left, she turned to the main console, sat down and logged in. For the first half of the shift, things were quiet and Shev was convinced it would be another slow and boring day. Then the captain’s voice came over the ship’s intercom. “All hands, Yellow Alert.”

Shev turned from the engineering stations and activated the viewscreen at the end of the room. She stood straighter at the sight of two Orion ships. “Now what do they want?”

The captain’s voice was heard again as she moved back to the ACR’s main console. “This is the *FSS Venture* to Orion vessels. Identify yourselves and state your reason for being in this area.”

Shev sat down and began paying closer attention to the information on her screens—Bridge and Engineering, Life Support and Weapons.

The captain again: “Orion vessels remain on your side of the border. If you insist on crossing, you’ll be causing an interplanetary incident.”

Shev felt her hands clench into fists. She should have been on the Bridge— not stuck twenty decks away. And where was CD? She should have been there by now.

In point of fact, Catherine was on her way. She’d been in the ship’s main science lab carrying out the yearly inventory and it had taken a little bit to get things squared away. Now, she was just leaving the turbo lift at the end of the corridor.

The captain was speaking again. “Orion vessels, return to your side of—”

The *Venture* lurched violently as the Orions opened fire. CD was thrown hard against one bulkhead and then the other.

“All Decks, Battle Stations! Helm return fire!”

As CD slowly got to her feet, she heard the sound all space travelers feared— the low hissing sound of escaping atmosphere.

Running back to the turbo lift, she reached for the emergency panel next to the doors and pulled it open. Her hand punched the switch inside and emergency bulkheads slammed into place— sealing off the area—

—and cutting her off from Shev.

The battle wore on. Most space battles went one of two ways: They either ended quickly or went on for hours.

Two hours into the battle, found the *Venture* holding her own against her two attackers, but it wasn't by much.

Captain Wells sat, leaning forward in his seat. “Come to course 198, mark 2- correction, mark 3 — Fire!”

The phasers struck one of the Orions' shields, sending the pirate staggering.

“Now the other one. Course 185, mark 7— Fire!”

Before the helmsman could do so, the second Orion fired his particle beam weapon and the *Venture* seemed to howl in pain as the ship shook from the shot cutting into her!

“Sir that last shot took out the transporter,” the science officer reported. “We’ve also got a hull breach on Deck Twenty.”

CD turned from the auxiliary station she was manning, having come to the bridge when she could no longer get to the ACR. “Shev— ”

Wells turned to the science officer even as he continued to keep one eye on the viewscreen and the Orions. “Status?”

“There’s still life support in the ACR. But the rest of that deck is a vacuum— and with the transporter out, we can’t get to her.”

The helmsman spoke up then. “*Captain- !*”

Wells had seen it coming. Both Orions, both particle beams. “Hard about! Put some distance—”

Those were the last words Captain Wells ever spoke. Those were the last words anyone on that bridge ever heard.

Down in the ACR, Shev picked herself up from where the concussion of the blast had thrown her. The screen was blank. She ran to her console. “Auxiliary Control to Bridge, come in. Bridge this is the ACR, come in.” There was no response as her hands moved over the console. The viewscreen flickered, blurred and then sharpened into life.

Shev could only stare in shock. “Oh, gods.”

The image was being sent from one of the sensors on the warp nacelles. But the story was clear enough. The bridge was gone. A good six decks below that had been sliced open by an Orion particle beam. Explosive decompression had done its share as well. It looked as if someone had blown the back of the *Venture's* head off.

Debris and bodies both drifted in the void.

Shev turned back to her console. Switches were thrown and activated that she had never used.

As clicks and clatters filled the room, so did a voice over the intercom. “Engineering to ACR. What are you doing, Commander?”

Shev replied as she continued to activate systems. “The Orions have destroyed the bridge, Chief. Everyone’s dead up there. I’m switching control of the ship’s systems to the ACR and activating the Emergency Distress Beacon.”

“Understood, Shev. You’re in command.”

“Wonderful. Hang on.”

She hit a switch, the *Venture* veered to one side, the Orions fired—
—and missed.

Shev lost track of time after that. With each hit the *Venture* took, damage mounted faster than the repair crews could fix it— if they could even reach it. Ducking, diving, twisting and turning, Shev put the ship through maneuvers heavy cruisers would have had a hard time with— firing phasers and torpedoes as she did so.

Twisting, turning, climbing, diving— and firing. One Orion was down, left in a cloud of its own debris.

As Shev turned the *Venture* away, the other Orion fired— a slicing shot down the side of the lower hull, like a laser through tin. The running sound of voices over the intercom stopped. Shev dragged herself back to the console from where she'd been thrown, ignoring the debris on the floor, hoses and wires hanging down from the ceiling and burned out and blackened consoles all over the room. Her hand hit the intercom switch.

“Chief ? ACR to Engineering. Chief? This is Lt.Commander Ta'Laren to anyone on board. Please respond.” A tightening sensation began clawing at her stomach as the silence stretched on. “Larry? Lt. Baxter please respond.”

The seconds added up as Shev finally realized he wasn't going to. With a growing sense of dread, she turned toward the viewscreen and its dim image of the remaining Orion as it circled back to deliver its death strike.

Shev was numb. All she could do was watch as this bringer of death drew closer and closer.

Phaser beams— brilliant, bright blue phaser beams struck the Orion’s shields as a voice came into the ACR over the damaged comm system. “*Farragut to Venture. Farragut to Venture. Come in.*”

Shev could hardly believe it as her hand hit the intercom switch. “*Venture here. Lt. Commander Ta’Laren speaking.*”

“Hang on, Commander. We’ll be right with you.”

With that, the *Farragut* sailed in low over the *Venture*, pivoted on its central axis—

—and fired, destroying the remaining Orion with a single double-beam blast.

Shev watched her damaged viewscreen as the heavy cruiser took up position in front of the *Venture* and activated its tractor beam, taking the wounded starship in tow. The *Farragut’s* captain offered to beam Shev off the *Venture*— especially

after determining that she was the ship's only survivor.

Shev refused, saying that someone had to stay on board and monitor what was left. But that was a lie. The *Venture's* crew had been her family— and andorians didn't abandon family— even in death.

She barely remembered that nightmare trip to Starbase 15. On the second day, the *Farragut's* doctor ordered her to report to their Sickbay.

She refused. She couldn't leave. Didn't they understand that? So the doctor came to her. Lack of sleep, lack of food, borderline dehydration, shock. He relieved her of duty then and there.

But she still refused to leave the *Venture*. Didn't they understand? She couldn't leave. She couldn't leave Larry and CD and the others— not yet. Not till she was sure they'd been seen to.

Upon arriving at Starbase 15— which had been the closest starbase to the action— it was soon determined that Catherine Duke, Captain Wells and nearly sixty others were among the missing—

Lost when the bridge and other sections of the ship were sliced open by the Orions.

Larry Baxter's body was found in the ruins of Engineering.

The *Spirit of Chicago* was found in the debris of the hangar deck. It would take a week to get Chi-town back in flying condition. After which, Shev insisted on taking Larry's body home.

The starbase doctor tried to talk her out of it till the base's Andorian science officer literally told him to shut up. Science Officer Shra'Tolen went with her to the base hangar deck the next day. "An Andorian is family," he told her. "And family means many things. Never let anyone ever stop you from seeing to your family, Shev."

The trip back to Earth was uneventful—traveling deeper into the middle of the Union that was expected. Upon arriving in San Francisco, the *Spirit of Chicago* was met by six Starfleet pall bearers who carried Larry's casket to a waiting shuttle, which carried it to Starfleet's Memorial Gardens — the final resting place for those

Starfleet officers that don't wish to be buried in space.

It was after the service— almost as soon as she got back to Chi-town that she found out about the investigation into the loss of the *Venture*. The primary flight recorders were lost when the bridge was destroyed, leaving the back-up logs made by the ACR's systems as the only sources of information.

In the three months that followed, those records and the *Venture* herself were gone over with the literal 'fine tooth comb'.

Captain Wells was faulted for only having one person in the ACR on a regular basis, instead of a minimum of two at all times. And where was Lieutenant Duke? There were no surviving records of her actions. Someone activated the emergency bulkheads on Deck Twenty, but there's no record of whom.

Shev was called on to testify on two separate occasions during those three months, while at the same time, having been ordered to accept

counseling based on the medical reports of both the *Farragut's* and Starbase 15's doctors. At least, when she couldn't get out of it, they granted her request for an Andorian councilor. She knew no one else would understand.

By the time those months were over, the investigators had decided that the *Venture's* loss, while regrettable, was a loss in the best traditions of Starfleet.

Catherine Duke went into the records with a charge of 'Dereliction of Duty' against her.

As for Shev, she was promoted to full Commander and awarded the Starfleet Medal of Valor with diamond for actions above and beyond the call of duty.

Now, she just had to escape those damn counseling sessions.

9

Shev paced the floor of Councilor Tegal'en's office. The older Andorian female sat at her desk and watched her.

Shev hadn't said a word since she arrived twenty minutes ago. "If I had known this was going to be an exercise session, I would have brought my sweat suit," Tegal'en stated at the thirty minute mark.

"What?" Shev asked. Then she glanced at a nearby wall clock and sighed. "Another thirty minutes yet."

"Do you have an appointment somewhere?"

"No- I have thirty more minutes of Hell right here."

Tegal'en watched her for a moment. "And where would you be if you weren't here?"

Shev leaned over the desk as she answered. "I'd be aboard Chi-town on my way to my next

assignment. I'd be getting on with my life— and I sure as hell wouldn't be *here* telling you for the millionth time that I don't want to talk about the *Venture* !" She turned away in disgust. "Between you and that damn investigating committee, you're driving me crazy. Why can't you let the dead rest in peace?"

"And which one are you, Shev?" the councilor asked in a quiet tone. "Do you count yourself among the living or the dead?"

Shev turned to look at her and after a moment, she closed her eyes and turned away. When she spoke, her voice was a whisper. "I don't know any more."

Tegal'en reached for a data disk reader that had been lying on the desk as she spoke. "At least you gave me an honest answer." She held the reader out to Shev. "Here."

Shev made no attempt to take the device at first. "What's that?"

"Your orders," the councilor replied. "Delivery was dependent on my evaluation of your mental

state.” She watched as Shev slowly took the reader in hand. “You were right to request an Andorian councilor. A human would never have released you.”

Shev activated the reader and gasped when she saw the orders. “The *Enterprise*.” She looked up. “Jan’s ship.”

“You know Captain Kirk?”

Shev nodded and shrugged. “She’s my best friend.”

Tegal’en stood up. “Go to her, Shev. If you need anything right now, it’s your best friend.”

Shev had the *Spirit of Chicago* launched next morning—refusing to stay for the induction ceremony that would see the *Venture* added to the Gallery of Honor. “There’s no way I can go to that,” she stated when the invitation arrived. Once on her way, she double checked her course. “Looks like Jan’s either headed for Starbase 98 or the Romulan Neutral Zone. Chi-town, who in command of Starbase 98?”

“Admiral Franklin Fitzpatrick, Shev.”

Shev’s eyebrows rose slightly. “Sounds like Old Home Week.”

As the days passed and Shev traveled further from her problems, she could feel the tension between her shoulder blades ease. Her back muscles had been tied in so many knots for so long, she’d almost forgotten what it felt like to relax.

Her first view of the *Enterprise* was far more promising than her first view of the *Venture* had been. “Big, sleek and clean,” were the words that came to her mind.

“This is the *SS Spirit of Chicago* to the *FSS Enterprise*, requesting permission to dock, over.”

“*Enterprise to Spirit of Chicago*, permission granted. The captain wishes to know if you will require tractor beam assistance?”

Shev couldn't suppress the eyebrow that rose at that. “Tell her to keep the tractor beam for the rookies and duck her head.”

A moment later, a song blasted from the ship's speakers. “It's *the Little ol' Lady from Pasadena!*”

Shev laughed and it felt good.

Being with Jan again was like having a large weight lifted off of Shev's chest. She was able to relax and breathe again. She was a little in awe of how big *Enterprise* was— and the cabin Jan led her to, only reinforced that feel. It was twice the size of the one she'd shared with CD on the *Venture*. They talked about a lot of things that evening— Jan's marriage, the Academy, and what might be waiting for them at Starbase 98.

The real surprise came next morning when Shev stopped by the Command Suite to see if Jan was free for breakfast— and found her there twice over.

Eighteen year old Tamera took some explaining. The two redheads told her the truth of the matter— knowing Shev was one of the few people they *could* tell. When they were done, the Andorian shook her head. “I can see life around you won't be dull.”

Still there was no denying that Shev was a little nervous around this younger version of her best friend. But that nervousness faded over breakfast as they accepted each other as easily as Shev and Jan had sixteen years earlier.

It was later on, while Shev was down in the *Enterprise* hangar storage area, checking on the *Spirit of Chicago*, that she was summoned to the Command Suite.

The Command Suite was an un-official space located where the Captain and First Officer's cabins normally were. When Jan and Spock got married almost nine months earlier, they combined the two cabins' living and sleeping areas. The basic bulkheads were still in place of course, but it was the furnishings that made the difference.

Jan rose from her desk and Shev followed her into the living area. A couch, chair, coffee table, plants, some of Jan's paintings, two viewports.
“What's up?”

Jan replied as she stepped up to one of the viewports. “A change in plans. Our chief helmsman won’t be back till who knows when. With the Romulan Neutral Zone staring us in the face, I need someone with experience in that post.”

Shev could feel a sense of dread building in the pit of her stomach as Jan turned toward her and spoke. “I know you were assigned as Chief Navigator, but starting tomorrow morning, I’m moving you to the helm.”

Shev moved away as a gnawing fear seemed to crawl through her. Her voice was a whisper. “Isn’t there anyone else?”

“Not with your level of experience.”

The Andorian’s gaze went to the holographic globe of Earth and for a moment, that’s where Shev wanted to be. “You know it’s been over five years since I’ve been home? These last 3 months wasn’t really what I’d call being home- I never even got a chance to lay eyes on Chicago...”

“Shev— ”

“I was Chief Helmsman on the *Venture!*” She snapped as her emotions came exploding out of her. “And where was I when I should have been on the Bridge?”

“Stuck in Auxiliary Control like some damn ensign!” She looked away, her whole body trembling. “All I could do was sit and listen as orders came over the intercom— orders for *my* station! And I couldn’t do a damn thing!”

Jan stepped toward her. “That won’t happen here. On the *Enterprise*, you’ll have one job— the helm.”

Shev turned to look at her and the need to believe her was clear on her face. “Can you promise that? Can you promise I’ll be on the Bridge doing my job? Doing what I can to protect my fa— my crew?”

Jan took another step toward her. “Yes. Shev, you’re not alone. Between me and Uncle Frank, you never have been— and you still have your aunt and uncle on Andor.”

Shev met her gaze for a long moment, then she looked away and closed her eyes as tears tried to form. Her fists went to her mouth to stifle a cry as the tears broke free and ran down her face. Then she dropped to her knees.

A moment later, Jan was there, holding her as she sobbed, speaking to her gently like any best friend...or sister would.

Neither would be able to say later, how long they stayed in that position, Shev with her head on Jan's shoulder and Jan just holding her as long as she needed to be held.

Shev told her about the *Venture* and the people on her— Captain Wells, CD...and Larry.

Larry. Just the way she said his name, allowed Jan to read between the lines. She said nothing though until Shev finally cried and talked herself out.

They never referred to that moment afterwards, there was no need to. Councilor Tegal'en had been

right, though. Shev had needed someone she could talk with- and collapse with if need be.

Someone who could—and would— help her pick up the pieces.

Of course, none of this prevented their confrontation on the bridge next morning.

They arrived at Starbase 98 and Admirals Fitzpatrick and T’Pel had no sooner arrived on board, than the base was attacked by four Romulan ships. It was then that Jan shocked them all by ordering Shev to release the port and starboard dorsal phasers to the control of the ship’s new A.I.

Then and there, on the morning of her first day on duty, with two admirals on the bridge, Shev looked to her friend and new commanding officer and said, “Are you serious?”

Jan met her gaze with a shocked one of her own. “Are you questioning my orders?”

“With all due respect, considering this ship’s infamous history with computer control— *Yes.*”

Even Fitzpatrick got into it by pointing out that no computer had been given that kind of control since the ill-fated M-5 program.

Jan immediately faced her uncle down. “I am well aware of that, Admiral. I’m also aware that we’re in the middle of a battle— after which, I’ll be taking this ship into a potential war-zone. I have to know how far I can trust her.”

She then turned back to Shev. “Now release those phasers, Commander— or I’ll find someone who will.” This wasn’t a simple disagreement between friends. This was a commanding officer telling her subordinate to obey orders or else.

Their gazes met for a long moment they couldn’t afford, then Shev obeyed.

The A.I. was told to target plasma energy bursts only- and it did as ordered.

The Romulans were defeated and Computer quickly and easily restored phaser control to the helm when ordered.

Shev sat in silence as her captain stepped down beside her chair and spoke in a whisper. “Are you going to be all right?”

She replied in the same way. “I questioned your orders, on your bridge, in front of two admirals, on the morning of my first day.” The Andorian shook her head. “I’m on a roll.”

Jan shrugged. “Don’t worry about it.” As she moved off, that crooked smile came to her face. “The day’s just getting started.”

After that, as far as Shev was concerned, things got crazy for a while.

The whole nightmare began when they arrived at the Romulan Neutral Zone and found a spatial distortion which they later found was an actual gateway to another plain of existence. It was created by the Romulans and one invader *did* make use of it— although Shev would allow that it was by accident the first time— and out of necessity the second.

Captain James T. Kirk of the United Federation of Planets. Shev had never met Jan's brother before he died on Cestus III— maybe that gave her the perspective. This man was *not* Jan's brother returned to her— he was *not* family. He was from another reality and he didn't— couldn't— know thing one about theirs.

But Jan accepted him— something about a mind meld with Spock. Shev didn't put much faith in Vulcan mind techniques— never having experienced them first hand. She remained skeptical of him even after Jan put him charge

while she ran off with a Romulan officer she'd just met to retrieve information that could stop an impending invasion.

Shev would give that other Kirk one thing: He didn't expect the Romulan Commander's crew to play nice—and he was right on that. They attacked as soon as the Romulan Commander and Jan were out of range—even as Spock and a boarding party beamed over to carry out the other Kirk's order to steal their cloaking device. They got the cloak and defeated the Romulan ship. But not before one crewman was killed and Spock was severely wounded—leaving Shev as Acting- First Officer.

Having used the cloak to get Jan and the Romulan Commander back, Shev was finally able to admit that the other Kirk might actually know what he was doing. Still, she was glad when he went home.

What she *wasn't* glad about, was Jan's decision to remain at the 'Zone in an attempt to slow up the invasion they all now knew was coming. When the invasion fleet did arrive and Jan

challenged their admiral to *not* carry out the operation, Shev felt that tightening in her stomach and found herself back in the *Venture's* ACR listening to Captain Wells challenge the Orions.

It took Jan's grip on her arm to bring her out of it.

Then the Romulans made their move— and the Klingons made their presence known as Commander Kang and the *KIC Cho'Mar* joined the battle on the *Enterprise's* side.

After that, it was a free-for-all.

Shev lost track of how many enemy ships came at them and how many they beat off. Both ships took a beating— especially the *Cho'Mar*. Kang had dove right into the heart of the invasion fleet, firing as he went and taking fire from all sides. As Shev manned her station and continued firing, she only caught snatches of what was being said around her.

Jan's voice: "How many still alive aboard the *Cho'Mar*?"

Kyle from the transporter Room: “We’re only reading three still alive, Captain.”

Shev closed her eyes at that— it was the *Venture* all over again.

Jan again: “...Be ready to beam them aboard on my order. Shev, let’s give the *Cho’Mar* what help we can.”

But it was already too late. A moment later, a plasma energy burst tore the *Cho’Mar* open.

Jan’s shout: “Transporter Room- *NOW!*”

Three forms began to materialize in front of the main viewscreen:

Commander Kang, Lt. Katz, Lt. Kuntz.

As quickly as that, the *KIC Cho’Mar* was no more.

It seemed like only an instant later that plasma energy bursts struck from all sides, taking out the shields and the Intruder Defense System. Then computer was announcing Romulan boarding parties arriving all over the ship.

At Jan's call, Kang ran to join her at the turbo lift—they were going where the fight was. But Jan stopped and turned back. "Shev, you have the Bridge. The ship will *not* be taken. As the Acting First Officer, you're authorized to blow her up if you have to. Clear?"

For a split second, the Andorian didn't answer. Then she nodded. "Clear." But could she give the order? As Jan left, Shev looked to one side where a door led to the ship's head. There was an emergency escape hatch in there, too. On the *Venture*, Captain Wells had stored a few cases of hand phasers in there — just in case. Shev went to the head, looked around—and smiled.

Jan had had the same idea.

Soon everyone on the bridge was armed. Lt. Kuntz had managed to hold on to his disruptor. Katz wasn't so fortunate. Shev offered him a phaser. At first he looked at her like she was crazy. A Union officer offering a weapon to a Klingon?

"We're all in this together," She told him. At that, he nodded and accepted the weapon.

It seemed he no sooner had it in his hand, than computer began yelling about intruders and the entire bridge crew found themselves facing off against a never-ending Romulan boarding party.

Phaser beams and disruptor blasts shot back and forth in and around a never ending arrival of Romulans. No matter how many they took out, more beamed in.

“They just keep coming!” Shev shouted as she took out another one.

Kuntz was high on adrenaline. Battle was what Klingons lived for. “Then we keep fighting— and die like warriors born!”

It looked like they would end up doing just that. Out of the corner of her eye, Shev saw Katz as he grabbed a Romulan by his throat— only to get a disruptor blast in his stomach in return. Katz’s final effort crushed the Romulan’s throat as they fell dead to the deck together.

Then she heard it— the sound of the Bridge Intruder Defense Module coming online. A

moment later, every remaining Romulan fell stunned to the deck.

Shev took a deep breath and looked up. “*Now* it works. Computer, what’s the captain’s status?”

“Beaming onto the Bridge now.”

She and Kang did so, bringing this round to an end— but the battle was far from over.

It would rage for thirteen non-stop hours before Jan found herself with only one option left: Destroy the ship and take as many of the enemy with them as possible.

The countdown was nearing zero, the Romulan fleet was closing in, Jan was ready to give the order— the words were on her lips.

Computer announced a spatial distortion— another gateway was opening.

Shev could only shake her head in disbelief. It was the other Kirk with his *Enterprise* and three other ships.

They no sooner joined the fight— took it to the Romulans in fact— When Kyle, now manning the science station— had another piece of news. “Captain, short-range sensors are picking up additional ships entering the area.”

“Who?”

Then it came— over the bridge speakers: “*Lydia to Enterprise. Lydia to Enterprise!*”

Shev wanted to cry in relief.

The Cavalry had arrived.

In that same moment, Shev knew the answer to Councilor Tegal’en’s question: “*Who are you, Shev? Do you count yourself among the living or the dead?*”

Shev found herself taking in a deep breath and nodding. Yes, she was alive— and she knew now, that she planned to stay alive for a long time to come. Maybe she’d see Larry again someday.

But not today.

Of course, the Romulan Admiral tried to have his say in the matter when he rammed the *Enterprise*.

But Jan out-foxed him one last time. She cut power to the saucer except for the Bridge, Sickbay, Main Engineering and the computer core. This created a buffer of dead metal around the edge of the saucer. With no power running through those areas of the ship, there was nothing to explode or detonate when the two ships collided.

The Romulan Command Ship was annihilated.

Enterprise lost a quarter of her saucer.

The Battle of Starbase 98 would go down in history as a Federal victory.

Once the dust settled and Alpha Shift was allowed to stand down, Shev went to her cabin, locked the door, turned off the intercom and lay down on her bed.

The reaction hit soon after—the trembling, the shaking, nightmares of both the *Venture* and the *Enterprise*. She cried out.

A hand on her shoulder. “Shev! Shev, wake up!”

She fought to get her eyes open and found Jan leaning over her. She’d used the door over-ride to get in. “Computer called me and told me what was going on.” She watched as Shev slowly sat up. “You’re *not* all right, are you?”

For a moment, the Andorian didn’t answer as she sat on the edge of her bed and stared at the deck. “When I was on the bridge— after that one moment, I was fine, “she finally whispered. “So much was happening so quickly, there was no time

to think about it or worry. But as soon as I lay down, my mind just seemed to kick into over-drive.”

“I want you to go see Dr. McCoy,” Jan told her. “He’s the closest thing we have on board to a counselor.”

Shev rose to her feet and stepped away, a near growl in her throat. “*NO!* No more damn counselors!”

Jan watched her for a moment and when she spoke, her voice was firm. “You either go see McCoy or I relieve you of duty here and now.”

Silence settled over them for a long moment. When Shev spoke, she did so without looking at Jan. “Will you let me continue my duties if I go see him?”

Jan nodded. “If you’ll promise me you’ll go see him and talk with him, you can continue your duties.” The captain then headed for the door. “I’ll tell him to expect you at the end of Alpha Shift.”

Shev found that Dr. Leonard McCoy was not just a Chief Medical Officer. Meaning he didn't always hold to the prescribed routine in medical treatment, be it body or mind.

Their first session was rocky to put it mildly, as Shev tried to decide how far she could trust him. He didn't meet her expectations of a human counselor.

Granted he wore more than one hat on the *Enterprise*, but he was fully capable of 'shifting gears' and being what his patients needed him to be. He didn't try to analyze her every word or movement. In fact, they just talked. If it wasn't for the fact that they were alone in the doctor's office, the conversation could have easily taken place in the Rec Room.

Gradually, as *Enterprise* dragged herself home at just under Warp Three, Shev found herself opening up more and more to McCoy. At first, she talked around the *Venture*— anything and everything else that came to mind. Then, when she finally did bring herself round to it, the words and memories just flowed out of her.

McCoy never interrupted her with those foolish psychoanalytical questions that most counselors threw at their patients. He just listened and let her talk. Occasionally, he asked about CD or Larry or about the battle in general. For the most part, he let Shev set the pace and take the conversation wherever she wanted to go with it.

It may have been an old fashion way of doing things, but then, that was Leonard E. McCoy.

They were two days from Earth and McCoy was watching her closely. “What?” Shev asked. “Did I suddenly change color?”

“No, of course not. How are you sleepin’?”

She shrugged. “A lot better.”

The Doctor nodded. “I can tell.” He shifted in his chair and laid his PADD on his desk. “Let me tell you something. When I was in Med-school, I took my share of Andorian medical classes— took a few more when I joined Starfleet. So I can understand your views toward family and how hard the loss can hit you.

“And I’ll tell you, Humans, Andorians— hell even Vulcans, though they won’t admit it— all take the loss of family the same way. Some of us just don’t have it worded as well as your folks do.

“The nightmares may never go away entirely. But they will pop up less often and be less severe as the years go by. They’re so strong in your mind now because they’re drawin’ on recent memories.

“When we get back to Earth, you need to ditch the uniform— go home to Chicago or take Chitown for an old fashion joy-ride. Do something or go somewhere that’ll remind you that there’s more life in this damn universe than death.”

He nodded at the ceiling by way of meaning the ship. “It’s going to take a while to get this bucket of bolts re-built. Go off somewhere for a couple of months— someplace full of life and color— and I think you’ll come back feeling a lot better.”

When they got home, Shev took the doctor's advice and applied for a month's leave. But it was delayed by the inquiry into the battle and *Enterprise's* damage.

So, while she waited, Shev decided it was time to do something else.

She stood in front of those glass doors for several moments with Jan and Tam by her side. They all had the new uniforms on — for her and Jan that meant red jackets and black skirts, while in Tam's case, it meant a red jumpsuit with a beige yolk — the current cadet uniform.

The doors led into the Gallery of Honor. This place— alone in the Union— was a place for remembering and honoring not only the crews that had died in space defending the Union, but the

ships as well— that combined entity that forms between the two.

“Are you sure you want to do this?” Jan asked her.

“I’ve put it off long enough.”

Leaving Jan to explain the place to Tamera, Shev pushed the door with the stenciled Starfleet emblem on it to one side and step through. A quiet lay upon the place unlike any found anywhere else. Not quite a tomb, or a temple, the place actually contained elements of both. The air of reverence was almost overwhelming.

The first chamber was fifty meters long and two levels high. At the far end, were glass doors like the ones she came through, that opened onto a second chamber like the first. On each side of her were narrow alcoves done in black marble like the floor, each containing a detailed model of a starship lost in the line of duty. Gold plaques mounted above the models told the ships’ names and when they were commissioned and lost. A second plaque posted below the models, told the

story of what happened to each ship and their crews.

Shev's gaze traveled from one model to another till she spotted it. Three models from the doors to the inner chamber— there on the left hand side.

The Venture.

It was all she could do to walk over to it. For a moment, she could only stare at it. She reached out to it— but that's where her nerve failed her. She couldn't bring herself to touch it. Touching it would make what it represented real.

She withdrew her hand.

A throat was cleared. "It's never easy to...lose good friends."

They all turned to find Grand Admiral Nathan Stryker standing behind them with something under one arm. They'd met him when the *Enterprise* docked. Six feet tall if he was an inch, the man had the proportions of a classic hero. Broad shoulders, narrow waist, rugged looking face. Put him in a leather vest and a pair of

ridding chaps and he'd be right at home in the American Wild West. "An ensign sent word you were here," he noted.

Tam had the question. "Why, sir?"

Stryker nodded toward Shev. "The Commander didn't know that part of the induction ceremony for the *Venture* required her presence." He then handed her the object he'd been carrying and Shev's eyes went wide as she took it.

"Oh, gods. The *Venture's* dedication plaque."

The man nodded. "By tradition, it goes to the senior surviving officer."

Shev looked up at him in puzzlement. "But the *Venture's* bridge was destroyed." She knew that for a fact. The image on the ACR's viewscreen was forever burned in her memory.

Stryker nodded once more. "Yes, it was. I had that one made from one of the hull plates. It's just as much a part of the *Venture* as the original."

Shev looked down at the plaque in her hands, then she hugged it to her chest. "I'm sorry, sir..."

The Grand Admiral's voice was firm, yet gentle. "There's no need to apologize for...surviving, Commander. I'm sure your...crewmates and friends aboard the *Venture* would want you to...survive and live your life."

The Andorian looked up from the plaque, her brow furled in confusion and maybe a touch of pain. "How do—?"

"How do I know?" Stryker asked, cutting her off. "I've been in Starfleet a long time. Had more than a few ships shot out from under me- lost more than a few good friends.

"I have to believe they'd want me to go on, or else...I'd have gone mad with the grief and...survivor's guilt a long time ago." His eyes met Shev's square on as he said that last. "You won't be doing their memory any good if you...give in to that."

Shev would remember the admiral's words long after that day. Maybe they were what helped her pull things together— maybe Stryker's words combined with the words of everyone else.

They'd gone back to the *Spirit of Chicago* after that, intending to go out to the Kirk ranch for lunch.

But lunch would be delayed. The board of inquiry had called. They had one hour to report.

The board was made up of seven officers; 3 commodores, three admirals with Grand Admiral Stryker presiding. As the three entered the room, Tam moved to the back of the room and sat down— Jan allowed her to come if she did just that.

Shev traded glances with her friends as she and Jan seated themselves at a table positioned before the Board's raised bench. As Acting First Officer at the time of the battle, her fate was on the line as well as Jan's.

Stryker picked up a small mallet and gently tapped the bell in front of him three times. "This Board of Inquiry into the Battle of Starbase 98 is now called to order. All of the records, logs, scans— the *Enterprise* herself— have all been

carefully reviewed. Your affidavits have been received and reviewed as well.

“Commodore Moxon, I believe you had a question?”

Moxon was thin— so much so, he’d been described by others as a walking skeleton with a layer of skin stretched over the bones. He was a strict officer— so much so, he once put a cadet on report for being out of uniform.

The cadet had just come from the Academy gymnasium and was still in his work out seats.

For this reason, cadets referred to him behind his back as “Sweat suit Moxon”.

Now, he leaned forward and glared at Jan with an intensity that had pinned more than one cadet to the floor in fear. “I just want to ask the *Commodore* what the *Hell* she was thinking.”

Jan’s face showed her confusion. “I don’t understand.”

“Instead of facing some thousand enemy ships, why didn’t you fall back?” Moxon demanded.

“Why didn’t you fall back to Starbase 98 where you would have had the firepower of the Starbase to support you? “ He met her gaze with half a leer. “Were you even thinking of your ship and crew—or were you thinking of the growing ‘Legend of Captain Kirk’?”

Shev’s eyes went wide at that and then narrowed in anger. That pompous ass. She watched as Jan slowly rose to her feet— her own eyes narrowed in anger. Then a slow smile came to Shev’s face and she settled back in her seat with every intention of enjoying what was to come.

“I did the job I was trained to do,” Jan began. “I was trained to defend and protect the Union—and that’s what I did. Do you even remember how it goes, Commodore? ...*To defend and bring justice to the farthest reaches of the Federal Union of Planets...*

“Some of us in this room give more than *lip service* to those words. Others in this room only care about the prestige of a Starfleet uniform—rules and regulations.”

Jan paced away from the bench and then turned back. “I know all about *your* career, Commodore. You’ve spent it in administration. I’ve spent *mine* aboard starships— destroyers and heavy cruisers. I’ve faced my share of crisis while you’ve sat behind a *desk*.”

She looked away from the man as silence hung over the chamber like a fog. “You’re saying, if you had been in my place, you would have turned tail and ran? *You* would have left the border unprotected and allowed the Romulans to pour across the Neutral Zone unopposed.

“How many inhabited worlds are on our side of the ‘Zone? How many lives does that add up to? Several Billions? The *Enterprise* holds four hundred and thirty.

“The needs of the many outweighed any idea of retreating.

“The Union wasn’t ready for an invasion- there were no other ships in the area. The only option that would save the most lives was to hold the

line— block the Romulans as best I could for as long as I could till reinforcements arrived.”

She turned and met Moxon’s glare with one just as strong. “And given the same circumstances, I’d do it again.”

Their gazes remained locked for several seconds before Moxon turned away and directed his glare at Shev, thinking that here was an easier target. “And you, Commander? Who gave you the authority to arm the enemy?”

Shev glanced around the room in confusion. “What enemy?”

“Did you or did you not willingly give a phaser to a Klingon officer?”

Shev stared back at this man in shock. Then she laughed. “What they say about you is true: You really *are* an ass.”

Stryker called a recess at that point. He had to get out of there before *he* started laughing himself.

Needless to say any charges that Moxon tried to bring were voted down by the rest of the board. Jan and Shev were cleared of any wrong doing in regards to the handling of the battle or the damage *Enterprise* sustained.

Shev left on her month's leave the next day.

Shev's first stop was Chicago. But she didn't land. There was no family waiting for her now—even the dealership was being managed by a stranger. But just seeing the city of her birth was enough. Knowing it would be there, waiting, made her feel better.

Next stop was Andor to see her aunt and uncle. While she was there, her uncle pointed out that the *Spirit of Chicago* was getting on in years. He offered her any scout she wanted— off the showroom floor or built to order.

Shev thanked him— then turned him down. Yes, the *Spirit of Chicago* was a machine, but Chitown was family. He'd been with her through hell and back.

There was no way she was giving him up.

Seeing that she meant that, her uncle accepted her decision and offered to give the *Spirit of Chicago* an overhaul— update his systems, take

out the few dents and scraps he'd picked up over the years.

That, Shev accepted. Starfleet maintenance was good— but nothing could beat the factory where the ship was designed and built. By the time that week of repairs and upgrades was over, the *Spirit of Chicago* looked just as he had the day Shev first laid eyes on him at her father's dealership.

Still, there was no denying Shev was eager to leave. She simply was not comfortable on Andor— and never would be.

In the three weeks that followed, she took Dr. McCoy's advice and took Chi-town on a 'joy-ride'— planet hopping all over the Union, including a short stop on Logal 15, where she was almost arrested for prostitution just because she walked down the wrong street at the wrong time of day!

The nightmares only returned once— and as Dr. McCoy had told her, they were nowhere near as bad as they'd been. As Shev took in the life the

Universe had to show her, she felt...renewed, ready to live herself.

Ready to face life once more.

It was while she was entering Earth orbit near the end of her R&R, that Shev saw Jan's news interview about the Oversight Committee's stupid decision regarding the *Enterprise's* bridge. A viewport that big on the Bridge?! What were those idiots thinking?!

Then Tam called her and Shev knew where she had to be. She landed Chi-town at the Kirk ranch and once she stepped in the door, she found Admiral T'Pel there and got an antenna full.

She got a kick out of watching Jan expose one of the Committee's own as a Romulan spy— and she thought she'd die laughing when Tam tossed him back in time a few million years!

The months that followed were quiet as everyone watched and followed and assisted in the *Enterprise's* repair work.

Then came the day Shev knew Jan was almost hoping would never come:

Tam had received her orders.

Shev had stopped by the ranch to visit. As she and Jan had done years ago, they took a couple of horses out for a ride. Shev had no problem seeing that something was bothering her friend. When Jan finally told her what was going on, she asked, “Don’t you want her to go?”

“Of course I do,” Jan replied. “I want her to have her own life. She has a right to that. But-“

“You also want her close by so you can watch over her and protect her,” Shev noted gently. “My mother said the same thing the day I left on my first training flight. “A gentle smile came to her face. “Didn’t yours?”

Jan met her gaze for a moment, then sighed. “I wish mine had had the chance.”

Shev looked at her in confusion. “You never told me how your mother died.”

Jan glanced at her as they rode. “It was a week after the *Kobayshi Maru*. She’d taken some of her paintings to a show in Santi Diego. She used a passenger shuttle service she’d used a dozen times. She was on her way home—the shuttle was about a kilometer from the spaceport. The engines cut out and it crashed.” She looked over at Shev. “Hell of it is, she didn’t die in the crash.”

“What happened then?”

“The engines were old. When the shuttle crashed, they started throwing off Berthold Rays.”

“Oh gods...”

Jan nodded. “By the time the rescue crews arrived, Mom and several other passengers had received lethal doses. She died a few days later.”

The trip to Serella had been a very last minute idea. Shev had contacted Tam aboard the *Georgetown* and the two had gotten their heads together.

Jan had been buried in last minute details concerning the *Enterprise*. A lot of materials and supplies needed for a heavy cruiser had not been available at Starbase One- forcing her and Engineer Scott to wheel and deal in order to get what was needed.

By taking advantage of Starfleet's mandate to repair or rebuild the ship, Scotty had managed to gain access to the supplies intended for the new experimental re-fit program. As a result, while the exterior of the *Enterprise* still looked— somewhat— like the ship they knew, the interior was another story.

Engineering, the corridors, Sickbay, the hangar deck- the Bridge of course- all were more or less

pirated from the re-fit program while the cabins were repaired using materials from the last *Constitution* upgrade.

As a result, *Enterprise* became a hybrid—caught between old and new. But she worked—Scotty and the Corps of Engineers made sure of that.

Shev shook her head as she walked through the ship, looking things over as work went on around her. Finding the Command Suite still on Deck Six, she pressed the door buzzer and stepped in to find Jan seated at the new combined desk trying to read and reference four PADDs at one time.

That was all Shev needed to see to know that she and Tam had had the right idea— and having gotten with Dr. McCoy first, Shev didn't hesitate to lay it on the line. "...If you don't take some time off, starting right now, Dr. McCoy's ready to relieve you of duty till the re-launch."

Jan looked up at her, then down at the PADDs. "He *would*, too."

“Come on,” Shev urged. “Tam and I have it all figured out. We’ll take Chi-town and join up with her and the *Georgetown* at Starbase Ten. Then the three of us are headed for Serella.”

“Serella?” Jan’s tone of disapproval was not in the least faked. “Why in God’s name would you want to go to Serella?”

Shev shrugged. “I’ve only been as close as the outer edge of the system. Never actually been there.”

“You’ve never slept on a bed of nails either,” Jan stated. “But I don’t see you eager to try that.”

“Come on,” Shev pleaded.

Jan met her gaze for a long moment. “I’m going to regret this,” She muttered as she stacked her PADDs to one side.

As she stood up, Shev continued. “There is one other thing.”

Jan watched her closely. “Do I dare ask?”

“Tam and I decided no Starfleet- we go strictly as civilians.”

“Have you two lost your minds?!”

“No,” Shev replied. “And no Starfleet.”

“Now I *know* I’m going to regret this,” Jan muttered as they left the cabin. “We all are.”

Unfortunately, Jan was proven correct. No sooner had they landed than they ran into Robert Wilson and his slave dealing crew. They kidnapped Tam, but Jan and Shev got Wilson in the bargain. Shev had to admit she enjoyed playing ‘Good cop- Bad cop’ to get Wilson to tell them where Tam was.

They got her back with just a bump on the ensign’s head. It was then that Jan declared their trip to Serella over.

Shev still thought it was too bad she nixed the idea of going on to Qo’noS though.

They dropped Tam off at Starbase 10 and headed back to Earth. There was still a lot to be done before the re-launch.

Fine-tuning and checking systems, a dozen different supplies to be checked— both personal and for the crew. Crew rosters to be finalized— Everyone and their cousin had applied for the slots *Enterprise* had to fill.

That was one thing Shev knew Jan was proud of. Between her and the *Enterprise*, they had the kind of reputation that drew crewmen like a magnet— allowing Jan to choose the best. Everyone that wasn't already attached to a ship, wanted to serve on *Enterprise*— and those that were attached, did their best to get transfers.

As the countdown to re-launch continued, Shev watched as Jan went from one last minute meeting to another and was glad that all *she* had to deal with was flying the ship.

Still when the time finally came, the re-launch wasn't the celebration it should have been. How could it be with the Romulans destroying the civilian medical outpost Zeta-Hope 9 and the

Federal Congress officially declaring war as a result?

Shev could only shake her head as they left the docking berth and joined up with the newly created Task Force 98. She couldn't help thinking they were really in for it now.

But the war seemed to go into suspended animation. For almost ten months, Task Force 98's section of the Neutral Zone was so quiet, you'd almost think there was no war going on. In fact, Shev became so bored with it, she asked for time off and went to visit her aunt and uncle.

Jan had the next shock waiting for her when she got back. Spock had stepped down as First Officer and she dropped the post in Shev's lap. "...Don't tell me you're afraid of the job?"

Shev gave her a sharp nod in return. "You're damn right I am."

But Jan wouldn't be talked out of it.

When they found the *Sundown* a short while later, Shev still wasn't convinced she wanted the post. But when Jan beamed over to find her father and the Tholians showed up, Shev had her hands full whether she wanted it or not.

Yet, she found herself strangely calm. Unlike the *Venture* two years earlier, this time, she was on the bridge, doing what she could to protect and save the crew- people who had become her new family.

And this time...this time, she was able to save them. Of course she had a little help, but still, after their side-trip through Other Space, and missing Starbase 98 by half a meter, Shev was content to simply watch the main screen as the *Sundown* assumed orbit alongside them.

Later, after all the shouting was over and reports were filed, Shev managed to escape to her cabin—

—where she managed to sleep through the night.

Of course, they no sooner got home, than Grand Admiral Stryker told them about the attack on Betiter Nine and ordered both the *Enterprise* and the *Sundown* to Romulus along with the *Lydia* and the *KIC Mara*.

They were ordered to use any means necessary to end the war.

To Shev, it seemed like they couldn't catch a break. By her way of thinking, they should have gotten at least a week's shore leave to rest up after bringing the *Sundown* home. But no. She was serving on the *Enterprise* and the *Enterprise* always got the short end of the deal when it came to shore leave.

On the other hand, how many Federal starships get sent to Romulus? Of course it wasn't an easy trip there or back- especially when Jan informed everyone that they were dealing with Romulan rebels- militants- not the legitimate Romulan government. Still one of the most tense times of Shev's life had to be those minutes orbiting Romulus while Jan gave their Praetor a good talking to!

It was a nerve-racking time. Shev found herself almost grateful when the militants attacked on the way back to Federal space. It was touch and go till the Imperial Fleet showed up and chased the militants off.

After that, the formal peace talks were icing on the cake. For a week, all Shev had to do, was make sure the ship didn't fall out of the sky while Jan—now *Admiral* Kirk—took part in all the talking.

It was after the formal peace treaty was signed, sealed and delivered and the *Enterprise* was on its way to Vulcan to drop off Ambassador Sarek and his assistant, that Jan called Shev to the Command Suite.

“What's up?” Shev asked as she entered the cabin.

Jan held up a data disc as she spoke. “A private message for you. It's from your uncle.”

Shev glanced at Jan, then took the disc and placed it in the desktop viewer. It started playing automatically. “Shev, your grandmother came to see me. Orlen is dying. He's asking to see you. Shallen said she'd understand if you refuse to come- “

Shev stopped the tape and stood in silence for a moment.

Jan's voice was the only sound in the cabin.
“Shev?”

“My grandfather on my mother's side,” the Andorian replied. “My grandparents disowned my mother when she and my father married. All my life they refused to acknowledge me—to even see me. They didn't even come to Mom and Dad's memorial.”

Jan stepped up beside her. “So you go home and show them you're more Andorian than they are.”

Shev turned to face her. “Don't suppose you could come with me?”

“I would if I could,” her friend replied. “But Stryker will want a report as soon as we reach Earth.”

Shev nodded. “Guess I'd better get going then. The sooner I get there, the sooner I can leave.”

“Computer will give you launch clearance when you're ready.”

Jan watched as her friend nodded and left the cabin without another word.

There were no problems during the flight to Andor. The *Spirit of Chicago* operated fine on all systems. Yet, Shev couldn't help feeling uneasy about the whole thing. When she landed at the capital city spaceport, she was met by her uncle. "Uncle Thal'en."

"Shev." He indicated her civilian blouse and slacks. "No uniform?"

She shrugged. "Since this trip is about family— however it turns out— I didn't think I'd need it." They started walking toward the spaceport's exit. "Is Orlen still alive?"

Her uncle nodded. "At least last I heard. Shallen hasn't said a word to me since the day she came looking for you."

"Why didn't she contact me directly?" Shev asked as they cleared the exit gate.

Thal'en shrugged. "She didn't know how." They reached his ground vehicle and he spoke as

they got in. “Do you want Chi-town to have his usual upgrades while you’re here?”

“Let’s wait and see how long I’m going to be here, first,” his niece replied.

The Tal’gen Estate was located on the edge of the capital city. It went against the modern standard for most residents- it was three stories high instead of the more modern single story. Shev could only shake her head as they got out of the vehicle. “Talk about ‘Old School’.”

Her uncle nodded. “The house dates back generations. Not too different from what you’ve told me about your friend’s ranch.”

“The Kirk ranch is only two stories high,” Shev replied as they approached the front door. “You could put it inside this place with room to spare.” She pressed the door buzzer and had to assume it went off somewhere inside— she never heard it.

A moment later, the door was opened by an Andorian male in his mid-sixties dressed in what could only be described as a uniform. “Yes?”

“I’m Shev Ta’laren. The Tal’gens are expecting— ”

“Yes, Madam Shev. Madam Shallen told me to watch for you. Come in.” The male stood aside for them. “I’m not surprised you don’t remember me. We only met once— when you were sixteen.”

Shev racked her memory— and then nodded. “To’gen.”

He nodded in turn. “Yes, Ma’am. I’ll tell Madam Shallen you’re here.”

“No need, To’gen.”

All three turned to see the female herself coming from a flight of stairs at the far end of the room. “Thank you, To’gen.”

As the servant withdrew, the older female took in the sight of the younger. “You have a lot of your mother in you.”

“*And* my father,” Shev stated.

Shallen nodded. For a long moment, she said nothing. “This is not easy for me. Orlen and I did what we thought was right. We stood by Tradition.”

“Is this why you called me here?” Shev asked. “To justify yourself? ‘Family comes first’— that’s the only tradition that matters— a tradition you and Orlen seem to have forgotten about.”

“The Tal’gen Family line can be traced back to the Ruling Clans of Old Andor,” Shallen declared.

Shev nodded. “And it’s a history to be proud of. That doesn’t mean you beat people over the head with it till you drive them away.”

The two stood their ground and locked gazes for a long moment. Finally, Shallen turned away. “Orlen is waiting for you.”

Shev shook her head in frustration as she and Thal’en followed the older female to the stairs and up them to the second floor. Shallen led them down a corridor to a room at the far end. As they entered, Shev’s eyes went to the bed and the monitors positioned around it. “What happened?”

“A stroke,” Shallen replied. “Severe enough that the doctors say he has very little time left.”

Shev glanced at her, then stepped closer to the bed. As she did so, Orlen slowly opened his eyes and looked up at her. “You came.”

“Family is Family,” Shev replied. “The rest doesn’t matter.”

“Yes, it does,” Orlen stated. “I won’t give you a deathbed apology...But if I had to do it over again, I might have given it a great deal more thought.

“It was never my intention to push Sallen away...We thought the idea of being disowned would shame her into coming home- back to her family.”

“Then my mother had more back bone than you gave her credit for,” Shev replied. “When she refused— when she chose to stay with the man she loved— you had no choice but to go through with your threat.”

“It created a...barrier between us,” Orlen whispered. “One that could not be undone.”

“Yes, it could have,” Shev told him. “If you could have set your precious family history aside long enough. But then, that’s something no descendant of a ruling clan could do.” The sarcasm in Shev’s voice was clear to everyone in the room.

“Why did you call me here, Orlen? To get my approval? For twenty years, all I’ve wanted was for my grandparents to acknowledge me—to accept me. But now, after listening to you two, I have to wonder why? Why would I want to claim *either* of you as family? Even now, on your own death bed, you still insist on putting station and history above family.”

She turned from the bed. “We’re through here.”

As she headed for the door, Orlen cried out. “Wait! Please, Shev!”

She stopped at the door. “You are all that’s left of the Tal’gen line,” Orlen said with a gasp. “When we are gone, all we have will be yours.”

Shev slowly turned to face him. “Give it to charity. I don’t want anything from strangers.”

Then she walked out.

The entire trip from Andor to Earth, Shev found it hard to tear her thoughts away from that encounter. What in the name of all the gods did those two want from her? To put status above all?

She wasn’t made that way.

When her uncle called next day, with news of Orlen’s death, Shev felt nothing. He might as well have been talking about a stranger.

When she rejoined the *Enterprise* in Earth orbit, she went looking for Dr. McCoy. Luckily, he had just returned from checking on Lt. Commander Rand at Starfleet Medical. Shev found him in his office and asked about Rand. She listened in shock at the news: Nerve damage. Maybe years before she could move. Shev shook her head. “...Makes my problems seems kind of small by comparison,” she noted.

“And what problem’s that?” he asked.

Shev told him about her trip home, her encounter with her grandparents and how she’d walked out. “...What was I supposed to do, Doctor? Throw away everything I believe in and become their replacement daughter? I think that’s what they actually expected me to do.”

“Well, all I can say is, you have to be yourself,” the older human said. “Not allow someone to try to re-make you as they see fit. You’re a caring, intelligent individual with a mind of your own— and that’s how it should be.

“It sounds like your grandparents wanted a puppet— or a robot of some kind they could program with their views and opinions. That’s not you.”

“That’s not anyone with any sense,” Shev replied. She then nodded to the doctor and he watched as she turned and left Sickbay.

19

Minor maintenance, upgrades, personnel transfers— all had to be seen to and dealt with before *Enterprise* could leave orbit again. As such, it was almost a month later, when they passed Pluto and headed back to the Romulan Neutral Zone.

Once there, things settled into a new routine. As one month slowly merged with the next and Task Force 98 continued to do their job, the only Romulan ships they saw was a new breed they'd never seen before:

Diplomatic couriers.

The militant ships seemed to have disappeared— but everyone, Union, Klingon and Romulan knew they were still out there, somewhere regrouping and licking their wounds. No one doubted the fact that they would surface again someday.

It was eight months after the formal peace treaty— known as the Cestus III Accords— was signed, that orders to survey a free space asteroid field came in.

Of course, Admiral George Kirk had no idea what his oldest daughter's crew would find. Really, what were the chances of finding a two hundred year old ship crashed on an asteroid you're assigned to survey? And what are the chances of that ship being the *SS Botany Bay*- the very ship Khan Noonian Singh and four hundred of his followers had used to escape Earth's Eugenics Wars?

Shev only laid eyes on the man twice. Once when he tried to use the Plasma Matrix Chamber to kill Spock (don't ask— long story) and the second time was after he'd hijacked the *Reliant* and slaughtered her crew.

He tried to fight it out with the *Enterprise* only to have Jan out maneuver him and turn *Reliant* into a flying junk heap. When Jan called him and his image came up on the main viewscreen, it was clear he'd gone mad.

Standing there in the center of his burning bridge, the bodies of his followers strung everywhere, all he could do, was go on about the grand empire he was going to create.

Even with blood running down his own face, he was determined to continue the fight. His attempt to ram the *Enterprise*, was the last straw. Jan ordered them to fire—destroying *Reliant* and Khan with it.

Jan stared at the screen for a moment, then leaving Shev in charge, she left the bridge. A short while later, she called the bridge and ordered Lt. Keys to call Colonel Kang. Soon after that, the announcement was made.

They were going home. The tour was over.

At the end of the shift, Shev returned to her cabin and just stood in the center of the room in shock. She couldn't believe the tour was done. Granted she'd only been on board for a little over two years, but somehow it didn't feel right for things to end like this.

But, like Jan, Shev was a ‘Lifer’, unlike some of the others on board, who had signed up for only one tour. She knew there’d be some R&R- maybe a month if she was lucky. Then orders— a new ship and crew.

Did she want that? She’d started over twice now. Did she really want to start over a third time?

She shrugged. What else was there? Joining her aunt and uncle in the scoutship business? On Andor?? She shuddered at the thought. No. She’d take whatever Starfleet handed her. That seemed to be her life story— Starting over.

It was four days later that the Sol system came into short-range scan. It was during Shev’s shift. She was at her helm station and glanced over to where Tam was seated at the navigator’s post. They’d celebrated Tam and Jan’s birthday last night- Tam’s twenty-first and Jan’s thirty-seventh.

Of course, looking at Tam, those that didn’t know her time-crossed story, would still take her for an eighteen year old. “So, “Shev asked,

“What’s the first thing you’re going to do when you get home?”

“Probably take one of the horses out for a long, lazy ride and just soak in the place,” Tam answered. “You?”

Shev smiled. “Save me a saddle.”

Jan arrived on the bridge at that point in her sweater and vest and Shev nodded to her as Spock spoke from his station. “There are numerous ships ahead of us. Some Starfleet, some civilian.”

Jan stepped down beside her chair as she spoke. “On screen.”

Tam had the next bit of news. “They’re taking up positions on each side of our best course for orbit.”

Shev nodded and looked to Jan. “A ‘Welcome Home’ escort.”

The Admiral slowly sat down in her chair. “Damn.” She sighed. “Well, let’s not disappoint them. Hold your course, Tam— steady as she goes.”

Shev glanced over to see Tamera carrying out her orders. Then she left her station and stepped back beside Jan's chair—facing the back wall of the bridge as she spoke in a whisper. “You ok?”

Jan looked up at her, then back at the screen. “Guess it's just the reaction setting in.” She wouldn't say any more.

FNF news satellites tracked *Enterprise* all the way to orbit. Their news crews were already gathered and standing by when the command crew beamed down to Starfleet Command.

It took ten minutes to escape them.

Final debriefings on the Khan business took almost a week since they also included a board of inquiry into the loss of the *Reliant*. Jan and Shev submitted the *Enterprise* logs and their affidavits. Both of them and Captain Terrell—the only survivor of *Reliant's* crew—gave testimony on how Khan escaped his cell, suffocated *Reliant's* crew and sent Terrell off in a life pod as bait for the *Enterprise*.

It was decided that *Reliant's* security guards were at fault for entering Khan's cell after he broke free of his restraints, in an attempt to subdue the prisoner. If they had remained outside the cell and summoned additional guards...

It was decided that a revamping of security measures and training would be taken under advisement for future implementation.

Jan was still shaking her head as she and Shev left the court room a short while later. "Nothing will change," the Admiral stated. "Khan was genetically engineered. They'll say he was an isolated case and no changes will be needed." She looked over at Shev. "So where are you off to?"

The Andorian shrugged. "R&R till Starfleet finds something else for me to do. You?"

"I got orders this morning," Jan replied. "I'm the new Head of Starfleet Operations for the Vulcan Sector."

Shev nearly cringed. "Ouch. A desk job."

Jan shrugged. "It might work out. We'll see."

In the days and weeks that followed, Shev basically bummed around the Union in the *Spirit of Chicago*. First Earth, then Vulcan to see the house Jan and Spock purchased. Then on to Andor for a short visit with her aunt and uncle. But these were all short-term methods of passing the time.

It was four months after they'd brought *Enterprise* home. The ship herself was now docked at the Fleet Museum— right next to the *Sundown* in fact— and Shev saw on the FNF that the *Enterprise-A* had just been launched.

As for Shev, she and Chi-town were just leaving Risa- yeah, Risa- when the comm system bleeped and Jan's image formed on the screen. "Hey," Shev greeted.

"Where in the galaxy are you?!" Jan demanded. "I've been calling everywhere."

"We're just leaving Risa."

Jan's eyebrows shot straight up. "You hate Risa. Get your rear-end to Vulcan. *Now.*"

"Why?"

"Because you're taking me to Mars. Kirk out."

As the screen went dark, Shev did a double take. "Mars?"

The *Spirit of Chicago* had no sooner landed at the Skikar Spaceport, than Jan was on board. "You took long enough. We've got just enough time. Get us launched. You've got clearance."

"What's the hurry?" Shev asked.

"You'll find out soon enough," Jan told her. "Now launch and set course for Mars— maximum speed."

"At maximum speed, we'll be at Mars in about five hours," Shev noted as she got Chi-town launched.

"Good. That's good," Jan replied. "Once you get this beast underway, change into your

uniform.” Jan was already in hers- jacket, skirt, admiral’s pin and all.

As the *Spirit of Chicago* headed for orbit, Shev turned to face the Human. “Jan, what’s going on?”

“You’ll find out soon enough,” Jan told her.

And for the next four hours and fifteen minutes, that’s all the Admiral would say about the trip— although she was willing to talk about everything else. “...So why can’t Tam have a boyfriend?” Shev asked at one point in response to Jan’s news.

The Human’s eyebrows rose. “In *1980*? From what she’s said, he’s your typical teenager— three years younger than she is.”

“Mentally,” Shev pointed out. “Physically, she’s still eighteen— a teenager. And she’s going to attract teenagers.”

“And what happens when she’s thirty or forty?” Jan asked as she paced the deck. “She’ll be lucky if her physical puts her at *nineteen*. Is she

supposed to spend the next century dating teenagers?”

“Tam’s caught in a bind,” Shev noted. “Hell, twenty years from now, people are *still* going to see the teenager first. Every adult she meets, she’s going to have to force them to give her the respect she deserves as an adult.

“By going back in time and dating teenagers, she can escape that for a while.”

Jan sighed as she stood by the ship’s wardrobe unit. “Maybe you’re right. When I look at her, *I* see the teenager.” She looked toward the forward viewport. “Maybe I can do better with my own child.”

Shev looked at her closely for a moment. Then she slowly rose from her seat at the flight console. Her back was to the forward viewport as she spoke. “What are you trying *not* to say?”

Jan met her gaze as a slow smile came to her face. “I’m pregnant, Shev.”

The Andorian’s eyes went wide in shock. “*Pregnant?!?*”

She took a step toward the redhead. “Then what the hell are we doing out here? Why aren’t you back on Vulcan over-seeing operations?”

Jan raised her hands to calm her friend down. “Relax. I still have six months yet.” Her smile grew. “Besides, it’s not good for prospective godmothers to get their blood pressure worked up.”

“Prospec—” Shev tilted her head to one side with a skeptical expression on her face. “You’re kidding.”

Jan shook her head as she stood in the middle of Chi-town’s cabin. “Nope. Job’s yours if you want it.”

Shev folded her arms across her chest and eyed Jan closely. “Who’s going to be the *godfather*?”

Jan turned away slightly, keeping Shev’s attention away from the forward viewport. “I’d rather not say just yet. I still have to talk Spock into that one.” Then she turned to look at her friend. “So, you in?”

Shev slowly smiled and held her hands out to her. “Of course I am!”

The two shared a hug as Chi-town spoke up. “Shev, Admiral, we are approaching Utopia Planitia Shipyards.”

Shev stepped back and studied Jan’s face. “You didn’t have me bring us all the way to Utopia Planitia just to ask me this?”

Jan shook her head. “No.”

The confusion was clear on Shev’s face as she shrugged. “Then what?”

Her friend looked toward the forward viewport and smiled as she pointed. “That.”

Now, Shev turned and in that moment, all she saw was a new *Constitution*-class heavy cruiser built along the lines of the re-fit program.

In the next moment, she registered the name. “Oh, gods...”

FSS VENTURE

NCC-156-A

Jan gently stepped up beside her, her own gaze going to the brand new starship. “Everyone that knows about her, knows who she’s named after. The moment I found out about her, I went straight to Grand Admiral Stryker and told him only one person had earned the right to be her captain.”

Shev slowly turned to face her as Jan reached into her jacket and pulled out an envelope. “I think he was expecting me to show up sooner or later,” the redhead said. “He already had the orders ready and waiting.” She looked down at the envelope for a moment, then she looked up and smiled as she held it out to her friend. “Congratulations ...*Captain* Ta’Laren.”

Shev’s eyes went wide as she slowly, almost reluctantly, took the envelope in hand. She looked down at it for a long moment in silence.

“Oh,” Jan said suddenly. “Almost forgot.” She reached into her jacket again and a moment later, was swapping Shev’s Commander’s pin for a Captain’s pin. “There. Can’t have you going aboard your first command out of uniform.”

Then she stepped back and nodded toward the waiting starship. “Now, you think you can put this beast in the hangar or will you need help?”

That brought Shev’s head up with a snap and she gave Jan a dirty look. “Grab a seat, *Admiral*.”

Jan laughed as Shev resumed the pilot’s seat and guided the *Spirit of Chicago* around the spacedock and toward the *Venture*’s hangar deck. The doors stood open as if the ship was waiting for her captain.

The small scout touched down gently, within the exact center of the deck markings without a single scrape as the huge hangar doors slid shut.

As the ramp lowered, the command crew—having gathered and assembled on the deck as soon as the hanger doors were closed, snapped to attention at the first officer’s command.

Having reached the hatchway, Shev froze in her tracks till Jan came up behind her and whispered, “Don’t just stand there.”

The new captain glanced back at her and then slowly stepped clear of Chi-town. Jan came down

behind her and led her over to where a podium had been set up. The Admiral then looked up.

“Computer?”

“Yes, Admiral?”

“Address Intercraft.”

“Intercraft open.”

Jan nodded as she spoke. “This is Admiral Janet Kirk. Stand by for a special announcement.” She then looked to Shev as she stepped aside for her.

With a mouth that felt like it was full of cotton, Shev stepped up to the podium and opened the envelope. She soon had her orders out and in hand. “This is...Captain Shev Ta’Laren. I...will now read the following orders into the ship’s log.

“From Grand Admiral Nathan Stryker to Captain Shev Ta’Laren. You will proceed to Utopia Planitia Shipyards. Once there, you will assume command of the *FSS...Venture*, NCC-156-A for the duration of its first five-year mission as it carries out the Starfleet mandate:

“To seek out new life and new civilizations, to defend and bring justice to the farthest reaches of the Federal Union of Planets— and above all else, to boldly go where none have gone before.”

She then folded her orders and returned them to the envelope as she spoke. “Computer?”

“Yes, ma’am?”

“Note in the ship’s log, that on this date, at this hour, I do hereby, legally assume command of this vessel.”

“Yes, Ma’am. Noted and Logged. Welcome aboard, Captain.”

“Thank you.”

Jan stepped up to her friend again. “Let me introduce you to your command crew. I think you know everyone.

“Mr. Therran. He’s still Head of Security, but now he’s also your First Officer.

“Commander Barker- your Chief Engineer. Scotty recommended him.

“Dr. M’Benga- your Chief Medical Officer.”

At this point, Jan's smile grew and softened. "And our lost lamb returns to the fold. Lt Commander M'ress- your Chief Communications Officer."

Shev reached out and took M'ress' hand. "Welcome back."

The Caitian nodded and smiled as her tail swung about behind her. "Thank you, Captain. It's good to be back."

Jan indicated the human male standing beside her. "Lt. Commander John Kyle- your science officer."

Shev smiled. "Got tired of the Transporter Room, Mr. Kyle?"

"Just thought it would be nice to see the rest of the ship, Ma'am."

Jan then indicated a certain redhead standing at the end of the line and the gleam in her eyes was hard to miss. "And your Chief Helmsman, Lt. Tamera Kirk."

Shev took Tam's hand. "Glad to have you."

Tam's smile was as wide as Jan's. "Glad to be here, Cap'n."

The Andorian then turned to the Admiral. "Is there anyone left on the *Enterprise*?"

Jan shrugged. "Will Decker had his own ideas about who he wanted for a command crew. So while his back was turned, I grabbed all of *our* command crew that was still available." She placed her hand on Shev's arm. "Just to make sure you get started off on the right foot."

Then the redhead nodded toward the hangar ceiling. "Now, what do you say we get up to the Bridge and get this hunk of tin moving?"

Shev gave her a look of mock outrage. "Hey! That's *my* ship you're talking about!"

The Bridge crew went on ahead and was already at their stations when Shev and Jan arrived. Shev moved slowly out of the turbo lift and onto the Bridge— a slightly modified version of the last one Jan's *Enterprise* had had.

They stepped down beside the command chair and Shev gently placed her hand on its back.

Jan's smile grew gentle as she watched her and remembered her own first time. "You *can* sit down in it," She said. "It won't break."

Shev glanced at her and then, slowly, sat down. It didn't feel real to her— more like a dream in fact. She looked at the viewscreen, then to her first officer. "Status, Mr. Therran?"

He glanced around the bridge, then looked to his captain. "All boards show green, all systems are nominal."

Shev nodded. "Open a channel."

"Channel open," M'ress reported.

"Space Dock Central, this is the... *Venture* requesting permission to depart."

"Space Dock Central to *Venture*. Permission granted and Godspeed."

Shev shifted her gaze to the redhead at the helm. "Take us out, Tam—.4 sublight till we clear the dock."

“Yes, Ma’am. Course afterwards?”

Shev looked to Jan. “Vulcan,” the Admiral stated. Then she shrugged. “Have to get home somehow. That’ll also serve as your shakedown cruise. You’ll receive further orders when we arrive.”

The captain met the Admiral’s gaze for a moment more. Then spoke to Tam. “Set course for Vulcan. Warp Five once we’re clear of Mars.”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

It was then that Shev realized what had been missing since the ceremony. “Where’s the navigator?”

“Don’t need one, “Jan replied. She nodded toward the helm. “That new console is consolidated to such an extent, that Tam can handle it by herself.”

Shev looked up at Jan- but now wasn’t the time to say anything.

Tam’s voice was heard again. “Course plotted and engaged.”

Outside, technicians in EVA suits watched as the *Venture* came to life. Spotlights lit up her name and registry even as the grills of the warp nacelles began glowing blue- alongside the red glow of the impulse drive.

Then the *Venture* took her first step as she slowly, almost gracefully slid out of the Spacedock and glided away from the shipyard.

On the bridge, Tam glanced back at Shev. “We’ve cleared Spacedock.”

“Continue as ordered.”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

Shev then stood up and looked to Jan. “Can I talk to you in the Officers’ Lounge? Provided we have one?” She then headed for the turbo lift.

The sisters traded glances, then Jan turned and followed.

Venture did have an Officers' Lounge, located in the same position as the *Enterprise*'s. Shev stood before the viewports with her arms folded. For several minutes she didn't say anything as Jan stood nearby.

Finally, the Andorian looked to the Human. "What the hell's going on?" Then she turned to fully face her. "No one assumes command 'Cold Turkey' like this. I'm given no time to prepare—not even time to study the damn *deck plans*. I get no chance to pick my own Bridge crew..." Shev stopped and shook her head. Then she went on. "And you know as well as I do that orders are *not* cut in advance on the off-chance that someone *might* come by and pick them up!"

Jan stepped away, her silence settling over the lounge. "I didn't want to do this way, but I wasn't given any choice. It was necessary to get you aboard the *Venture* and get it launched as quickly and quietly as possible."

Shev stepped after her. “Why?”

Jan turned to face her and held up her hands in a sign of helplessness. “All I know, is that *both* Stryker *and* Aunt T’Pel showed up on Vulcan four days ago wanting me to find you and get you aboard your ship. Taking me home is the public excuse for getting you to Vulcan where they’re both waiting.”

The Admiral shrugged. “Whatever’s going on, those two didn’t want to allow time for the normal niceties. Whatever’s going on, you’re the center piece- *Captain.*”

Shev met her gaze for a moment, then she shook her head. “Then it sounds like I need to learn this ship inside and out fast— *Tutor.*”

Jan sighed and nodded. “I hope you’re still a quick study.”

Over the next five hours, Shev and Jan were all over the *Venture* from bow to stern, top to bottom, seeing and finding what they could where they

could. Fortunately, the only real change was Tam's helm console.

"...Good," Shev noted later aboard the *Spirit of Chicago*. "No more surprises."

Jan checked the time. "We'll reach Vulcan in about twenty minutes. Then maybe we'll find out what's going on." She looked to Shev. "You going to check out your cabin?"

Chi-town's communication system bleeped and Shev reached for it from the pilot's chair. "Ta'Laren here."

"Tam, Ma'am. Vulcan's just entered short range scan."

"Assume standard orbit, Tam. We're on our way."

"Yes, Ma'am. Kirk out."

Shev looked to Jan as they headed for the hatch. "You were saying?"

As the two arrived on the bridge a few minutes later, Shev's eyes went to the viewscreen and the object it was showing. "What the hell-?"

"The *Excelsior*," Jan replied. "The first of her class— just as the *Venture*'s the last of hers."

Shev turned to look at the Admiral in shock. "What?"

Jan nodded as they neared the command chair. "Starfleet has ended construction of the *Constitution*-class. They'll maintain the ones we have, but as they're retired, they'll be replaced with the *Excelsior*-class."

M'ress looked up from her console. "Captain, Grand Admiral Stryker is requesting that you and the Admiral beam over immediately."

Shev nodded. "Tell him we're on our way." As the two headed for the turbo lift, Shev said to Jan, "I don't remember you running around this much."

"You only saw me on my good days," the Admiral replied as the doors slid shut.

The *Excelsior* was larger than the *Venture* in much the same way as a sperm whale was larger than an orca. This was reflected throughout the ship as Shev and Jan were led from the Transporter Room to the Main Briefing Room where Admirals Stryker and T’Pel were waiting.

“I’m glad you came so quickly,” Stryker stated.

“A little *too* quickly if I may be allowed to say so, sir,” Shev replied.

Stryker raised an almost Vulcan eyebrow at this, and then nodded. “Agreed— but I’m afraid there wasn’t time to do things the normal way.” He indicated the room’s one table. “Be seated.”

As the two did so, he activated the room’s viewscreen. “Do you recognize this planet?”

Shev leaned forward. “That looks like Serella.”

“It is,” Stryker replied. “The past six months were supposed to be their growing season. But this year, they’ve suffered the worst drought in their Fifty-three year history. As things stand right now, they don’t have enough stockpiles on hand to get them through to next year’s season.”

“The *Venture* will escort two robot cargo ships filled with food and grain and other supplies to Serella to help relieve the situation.”

“Union meteorologists and weather controllers are already on site trying to seed the clouds in order to end the drought, but it’s too late for this season.”

Jan spoke up next. “With all due respect, sir, *any* ship could have done that. Why rush the *Venture* into service?”

Stryker met her gaze as he replied. “When we were planning this mission, T’Pel brought additional information to our attention.” He looked to the Vulcan Admiral as he finished.

Jan looked to her aunt as well as the Head of Starfleet Intelligence spoke. “As you are aware,

Serella is only three parsecs from Orion territory. Our agent there has been hearing rumors of possible Orion expansion— with Serella being their first target.”

Shev looked at the Vulcan in shock. “So we’re talking invasion?”

T’Pel nodded. “Possibly— Their intent being to strike now while Serella is weak.”

Stryker spoke up then. “You’re not aware of this, Captain, but the story of the first *Venture* and her battle with two Orion pirates is well known in their territory. We’re counting on the presence of you and the *Venture-A* having the same effect on the Orions that Jan and the *Enterprise*’s return had on the Romulan militants.”

“Plus there’s the fact that I’ve fought the Orions,” Shev noted.

The Grand Admiral nodded. “That is a factor, yes.”

Shev glanced at Jan, then down at the table. She closed her eyes. She didn’t want it- She didn’t want to face the Orions again. But other than

resigning, what choice did she have? "...And of course there's no one else available," she said. "There never is."

She could feel that tightening in her stomach at the thought of it. Then she swallowed and looked to Stryker. "So...where are these robot ships?"

Venture's log; Stardate 6608.14

Captain Shev Ta'Laren recording.

We've been given control of the two Sherman-class cargo ships and are preparing to leave orbit.

I can only shake my head at the way Starfleet's handling this situation. It's very possible, that by only sending the Venture to deal with the Orions, they're sending four hundred and thirty people to their deaths...

End entry

In the *Venture's* transporter room, Jan stepped toward the platform, then she turned back to face Shev. "I know you've been through a lot. Tell

Stryker you don't want the mission. It strikes too close to home for you."

"I can't," Shev told her with a shake of her head. "Any more than you could." She indicated Jan's form. "Try not to have my godchild till I get back, okay?"

A weak smile came to Jan's face as she reached out to Shev's arm. "Just make sure you *do* come back." She then stepped onto the platform and in a chime and a sparkle, the Admiral was gone.

Shev walked over and into the control booth and reached for the intercom. "Ta'Laren to Bridge."

"Therran here."

"Break orbit, Mr. Therran. Set course for Serella. Set our top speed at the best the cargo ships can handle. Then meet me in the Main Briefing Room- and bring Tam with you."

"Yes, Ma'am."

"Ta'Laren out."

Once Therran and Tamera arrived, Shev laid it all out for both of them. By the time she was done, Therran was thoughtful and Tam was looking at her captain in shock. "...That's crazy sending only one ship," the lieutenant declared.

Shev nodded and shrugged. "*Venture* was the only one available. You're going to see a lot of that in the years to come, so you might as well start getting used to it."

Tam looked from one Andorian to another. "Then there's something you need to decide."

Shev watched her close. "What's that?"

"This has the potential of becoming another 'Battle of Starbase 98'," Tam said. "If you're hurt and Mr. Therran has to assume command, who takes over as First Officer? Who's third in command? I know it's not me- I don't have the seniority."

Shev and Therran traded glances. "She's got a point," He noted. "It is something we need to

address. There's only one other officer on the bridge with the rank and seniority for the post..."

"...Me?"

M'ress looked from Shev to Therran and back. They were on the bridge with Tam back at her station.

"There's no one else on the bridge with your rank and seniority," Shev told her. "We're just trying to cover all the possibilities."

"But I've never even taken the *Kobayashi Maru*."

Shev tilted her head to one side in surprise. "How did you avoid it?"

M'ress shrugged. "It's not required for non-command positions."

Shev closed her eyes, shook her head and sighed. "Well, if worse comes to worse, just do the best you can."

"Yes, Ma'am."

Shev then turned to her First Officer. “Therran, you have the Bridge. I’m going to get my things from Chi-town and try to find my cabin.”

He nodded. “Yes, Ma’am.

Finding her cabin on Deck Five, Shev tossed her bags in the floor, then her jacket on top of them before she lay down on the bed. She was tired and the muscles between her shoulder blades were tied in a dozen knots.

Everything had happened so quickly, it still didn’t feel real to her...

... With a growing sense of dread, she turned toward the viewscreen and its dim image of the remaining Orion as it circled back to deliver its death strike.

Shev was numb. All she could do was watch as this bringer of death drew closer and closer...

...Shev shot to a sitting position, unaware that she'd dozed off. She swung her legs off the bed and sat for a moment, trembling. Then she looked up and around the cabin. "No. Not again," she vowed. "I'm not losing another *Venture* to the Orions." Then she was on her feet and out of her cabin.

Her first stop was the bridge, where she corralled Therran. "...I want two people stationed in the ACR every shift from now on- and if you can figure out how to upgrade the log recorders down there to match the bridge recorders, do that too."

Stop Number Two was Engineering, where she cornered Mr. Barker. "... Orions don't use standard phasers. They use high intensity particle beams- beams that slice right through a ship's shields and its hull like a laser through tin.

"Your first act as the *Venture's* miracle worker is to find a way to block those particle beams."

The man nodded. "Yes Ma'am. We'll get right on it."

Sickbay was next and Shev found M'Benga in his office."...I want you to set up emergency treatment centers on every deck— fore, aft and the mid-sections of both the saucer and the lower hull. If you don't have enough personnel have Mr. Kyle pull staff from Bio-sciences."

For the rest of shift, Shev was everywhere, checking everything she could. She knew the Orions wouldn't play nice— and she knew she couldn't afford to, either.

With the end of Alpha Shift, Shev returned to her cabin. But she couldn't rest. With the sliding doors between the work area and the sleep area open, there was just enough room to pace.

And that's what she did, till finally, she reached for the intercom located on her desk. "This is the Captain. Lt. Kirk, please report to my cabin."

Shev was still standing by her desk when the door buzzer sounded. "Come."

It opened to allow Tam to enter. "You wanted to see me?"

"Yes, Tam." The Captain indicated the chairs positioned along the cabin wall under the storage units. "Have a seat." As the redhead sat down, Shev told her about that day aboard the first *Venture* almost three years ago. "...When we went to Yellow Alert, my roommate, CD, was supposed to join me in the ACR— but she never

showed up and the Board of Inquiry charged her — posthumously— with Dereliction of Duty.

“I don’t want to change history” the Andorian said. “I know that’s not right— besides, too much time has passed.” She met Tam’s gaze. “But with everything else going on right now, I have to know what happened— why she never showed up.”

Tam nodded and stood up. “Ok.” She looked up. “Computer?”

“Yes, Lieutenant?”

“In a moment, there will be a temporal disturbance in this cabin. It will not be a threat to the ship. You will not report it to the Bridge.”

“Captain?” the computer asked.

Shev nodded. “Do as Lieutenant Kirk says.”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

Tam concentrated and her portal formed at the end of the cabin where the work station was located. Inside, they could see the *Dakota*-class *Venture* come under attack by the Orion pirates. They could hear Captain Wells call for Yellow

Alert. They could see Catherine Duke leave the turbo lift as the ship was slammed. They could hear the sound of escaping atmosphere and see the girl run to and reach for the emergency panel. They saw her hit the switch- and the emergency bulkheads slam into place.

“My god,” Shev whispered.

Tam’s voice was also soft. “She was cut off by the emergency bulkheads.” She turned to face her captain and friend. “Shev, as much as we want to, we can’t—”

Shev squeezed her arm and nodded. “I know.”

Tam stepped away in thought. “Wait a minute.” She turned back and activated a new portal on a different time and place. It was a guest cabin aboard Jan’s *Enterprise*. Tam, Jan, Admiral T’Pel and Admiral Fitzpatrick were present. T’Pel was speaking. “...It is a shame, however, that such a resource will never be used to its full potential. There are numerous historical mysteries that she alone now has the ability to solve.*”

* NT book 4: Another Step toward War

Tam let the portal close and looked to Shev. “I would say that Lieutenant Duke’s last actions qualify as a historical mystery, wouldn’t you?”

“We can’t change the past, but a letter to Aunt T’Pel can straighten out its legacy.”

Shev smiled and nodded.

The intercom bleeped and Tam watched as she reached for it. “Ta’Laren here.”

“Therran, Captain. We have three ships closing on our position. They’re Orion, Ma’am.”

The two females traded glances, then the Captain replied, “Call Battles Stations. I’m on my way. Ta’Laren out.”

The two ran from the cabin as the Klaxon filled the air.

As they reached the Bridge a few moments later, both Therran and the Beta Shift helmsman vacated their seats. Shev’s voice sliced the air as she sat down. “Status.”

“All systems are nominal except the shields,” her first officer reported.

Shev reached for the intercom on her chair. “Ta’Laren to Engineering. Mr. Barker, Shield status?”

“I need five more minutes, Captain.”

The two Andorians traded glances as Shev replied. “I hope we have them to give you. Bridge out.” Shev then looked to the helm. “Tam, weapons status?”

“Phasers are primed and torpedoes are loaded.”

The Captain leaned forward in her seat. “Tactical on screen.”

The main viewscreen changed from an image of a star field, to a star chart, showing the positions of the *Venture*, the cargo ships and the three Orion ships. “have the cargo ships drop back- *No!* Head them off away from us- one to port and one to starboard. Be ready to increase their speed on my order.”

Tam glanced back at her in confusion, then turned to her console. “Cargo ships are moving off as ordered.”

Kyle had the next bit of news. “The Orions are splitting up. Two are going for the cargo ships and the center one is coming right at us.”

“Stand by, “Shev ordered. “Now, have the cargo ships turn around and head back toward us. Increase their speed by fifteen percent.”

“The central Orion is still closing, “Kyle reported. “He’ll be in weapons range in one minute.”

The ensign at the engineering station spoke up then. “Captain, the shields are on-line.”

Shev nodded. “Evasive maneuvers. Z-minus thirty degrees, level off, then come to Z-plus thirty degrees and hard about.”

Even as Shev spoke, even as the *Venture* ducked and dove, the cargo ships continued to close.

The central Orion passed through where the *Venture* had been— and the other Orions opened fire on her. But if they were expecting their particle beams to pass through *Venture*'s shields and tear into her hull...they were mistaken.

Their beams *splashed* against the starship's shields— nothing else.

“Picking up some strange readings in the shields, Captain,” Kyle reported. “There are particle emissions mixed in among the energy fields.”

A slow smile came to Shev's face.” I think Mr. Scott would be very proud of his protégé.” She looked to Tam. “Return fire- Now!”

For the first time, the *Venture* showed her bright red teeth as phasers shot forth, striking one Orion's shields while the others and the cargo ships continued to converge.

Venture came up and around and toward the cargo ships as they began to pass each other. Two of the Orions maneuvered for the best positions to port and starboard, then both fired.

“Course 15, mark 1!” Shev shouted. Tam’s hands flew across her helm—and the *Venture* practically ‘stalled out’, allowing the Orion particle beams to pass in front of her. “Return fire,” Shev ordered. “All phasers- Now!”

Beams of red shot forth to port and starboard, striking and overloading the Orions’ shields. Those two Orions were annihilated as the cargo ships passed each other and started pulling away.

The remaining Orion headed toward them, aiming for the moment when the cargo ships would be far enough apart, that he could open fire on *Venture*-

-He didn’t count on Shev having the same idea. The Andorian nodded to herself as she spoke. “All weapons- fire!”

Venture’s viewscreen lit up as the beams of phaser energy and a full spread of torpedoes shot forth— between the cargo ships, to destroy the remaining Orion.

Shev slumped back in her chair. “Stand down from Battle Stations. Dismiss Beta and Gamma Shifts. Damages?”

Therran shrugged. “A few minor burn-outs in the shield emitters. Other than that...”

“Have Mr. Barker give those repairs priority,” Shev ordered. “Who knows how soon we’ll need shields again.” She then turned her attention to the helm. “Tam, bring us and the cargo ships back to our original course and speed.”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

Kyle had been watching his console monitors. Now he looked to Shev. “Captain, we’re picking up what looks like a life pod- with a *Human* reading on board.”

Shev stood as she spoke. “Lock onto it with the tractor beam and bring it to the hangar deck. M’ress, alert Dr. M’Benga and Mr. Barker. Have them meet me there. Therran, you have the Bridge.”

With that, she headed for the turbo lift.

After the Rec Room, the Hangar Deck was the largest space on board the *Venture*. Shev glanced around as she stepped out, onto the deck and spotted the Orion life pod, Mr. Barker and Dr. M'Benga. "Report."

"I'm scanning one Human life form," the doctor reported. "Female."

"The pod's taken some damage, Captain," Barker added. "The hatch release refuses to operate."

Shev nodded toward the exit. "Then get a crew in here and get it open."

Barker gave the hatch another look. "Don't think we'll need a crew, Ma'am." He then punched his right hand *through* the hatch and proceeded to tear it open.

Shev's eyes went wide at this—till she remembered that Barker lost his right arm to Romulan militant disruptor shots during the Battle of Starbase 98. Starfleet Medical fitted him with a bionic arm as a replacement.

Then Shev saw the pod's occupant. "Doctor, I thought you said she was Human?"

M'Benga scanned the female and then looked to Shev. "Despite the fact that she *looks* like an Orion, she is."

"Notify me the moment she can talk," Shev ordered as the doctor called for a medical team.

That call came a half hour later and Shev arrived in Sickbay to find the stranger sitting up in bed. "Well, you look a lot better than when we found you."

"Who—?" Then the female tilted her head. "Who are you?"

"Captain Shev Ta'Laren."

The new comer's head came up slightly at that. "Then this is the *Venture*? Is Tamera Kirk on board?"

Shev's confusion was growing by the second. "You know Lt. Kirk?"

The stranger nodded.

Tam arrived a few moments later in response to Shev's summons. The Captain met her outside the recovery ward. "Cap'n?"

Shev watched her closely. "Is there something you'd like to tell me?"

It was Tam's turn to be confused. "What are you talking about?"

"The female we fished out of that Orion life pod claims to know you."

"What?"

Tam stepped past her, toward the recovery ward and into the room as the doors slid aside. Her eyes went wide the moment she saw the green female. "Amanda? Why are you made up like an Orion?"

Shev looked from one to the other. "Would someone care to fill me in?"

Tam nodded. "Her name's Amanda Stevens-Lt.Commander Amanda Stevens. We were at the Academy back before..." She let the rest trail off.

“We met up again aboard the *Lydia* during the Battle of Starbase 98.”

It was Amanda’s turn to speak up then. “When I’m not serving as Chief Helmsman aboard the *Lydia*, I take on assignments for Admiral T’Pel in Starfleet Intelligence.”

Shev nodded in understanding. “The Admiral said she had an agent inside Orion territory.”

Amanda looked from one to the other. “Did you destroy all three pirates?” Shev nodded and Amanda sighed in relief. “Good. Then everyone on Orion will think I’m dead.” She looked to Shev. “Captain as soon as I can...get back to normal, we need to talk.”

Shev nodded. “Agreed.” She looked to Tam. “Stay with her and bring her to the Main Briefing Room when she’s ready.”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

Following Amanda's directions, Dr. M'Benga soon had her back to her normal, raven haired self. Tam got her a uniform from Quartermaster and soon they were entering the Main Briefing Room to find Shev and Therran waiting for them.

Shev waved a hand toward Therran. "Lt. Commander Stevens, my First Officer, Commander Therran."

As they gathered round the room's one table, Amanda looked to Shev. "First, Captain, how much do you know about what's going on out here?"

"Grand Admiral Stryker and Admiral T'Pel both said that it was a strong possibility that the Orions may try to invade Serella while the colony's fighting their drought."

Amanda nodded. "You can consider that possibility a certainty. The Orion Syndicate's decided that Serella's ripe for the picking. Plans

are already in motion to swoop in, knock out the colony's defenses and claim the planet."

Tam couldn't stay quiet any longer. "But they couldn't keep Serella. The Union would push them off."

Amanda shrugged. "Don't count on it. We've only been at peace with the Romulans for little over a year. The Union's not going to be too eager to jump into another war so soon." She looked to Shev. "The quicker we can stop this, the better."

"Details?" the Captain asked.

The older of the two Humans nodded. "It's a small strike force- only twenty ships. With you destroyed by your three sparring partners and only the one colony to worry about, they didn't think they needed any more than that. What's our position?"

Tam worked the table top panel in front of her and the room's viewscreen lit up with a star chart showing the locations of Serella, the *Venture* and her two charges.

Amanda studied the chart for a moment and then nodded. “You’re about five hours ahead of them.”

“But how can one ship-?” Tam broke off and shook her head. “Never mind— forget I said that.”

“No, you’re right, “Shev told her. “When Jan faced off against the Romulan militants, she used every trick she could think of.” She looked around the table, taking in all three of them.

“And we’re going to have to do the same.”

Serella’s parent star was never given a proper name on the Union charts like Earth’s Sol or Vulcan’s 40 Eridani A. The star was known as H684AB. Other than Serella, the system boasted an asteroid belt and two comets.

With the cargo ships safely parked in a polar orbit, Shev sat in her cabin studying a chart of the system on the viewscreen that took up one end of the room.

It was actually a small system. Comparing it to the Sol system, the asteroid belt would fall between Mars and Jupiter.

She reached for the work station's intercom.
“Ta'Laren to Mr. Barker.”

“Barker here.”

“Mr. Barker, other than the *Spirit of Chicago*, how many armed shuttles do we have on board?”

Personal log; Stardate 6608.15

Captain Shev Ta'Laren recording.

I've made what plans I can. I'm counting a lot on the element of surprise—keeping the Orion strike force off guard, rattled so they can't think straight. If they do see through what we're doing, the whole scheme will fall apart...

On the bridge, Shev was seated in her command chair as Therran stepped up beside her.
“All the crews have been assigned and briefed.”

“Send them on their way.”

He watched her for a moment. “You sure you don’t want to assign a crew to the *Spirit of Chicago*- just in case?”

Shev shook her head. “Chi-town’s fully capable of looking after himself.” Her eyes were on the screen. “All we can do now, is set our pieces in place and wait. We have to get the Orions inside the asteroid belt. If they sense anything before then, none of this will work.”

“Well, they don’t know we’re here,” Therran noted. “That’s one thing in our favor.”

Shev sighed. “That’s about the *only* thing.”

The hours seem to drag— like a rainy Sunday— as everyone watched and waited for the Orions to show up.

Tam glanced back at Shev. “Maybe they changed their minds.”

A weak smile came to Shev’s face. “Not likely.”

Kyle had the news. “Captain, motion sensors show twenty objects approaching the system.”

Motion sensors were passive devices; no beam for someone to pick up on.

The starboard turbo lift doors opened allowing Amanda to enter the bridge. Shev nodded to her. “Lt. Commander.”

“Captain. Hope you don’t mind,” Amanda replied. “Just like to see how it all ends.”

“Then you can give Tam some back-up on the auxiliary helm station.”

Amanda nodded. “You got it.”

Kyle spoke up again. “We have twenty objects entering the system. They’re maintaining formation.”

Shev nodded. “Good. That means they don’t suspect anything yet. Let me know when they reach the half-way point between the asteroid belt and Serella.”

Kyle looked over from his screens. “Now.”

Her hand came down on the arm controls of her chair. “This is the Captain— Now.”

From selected asteroids in the belt, phaser beams lashed out— blasting against Orion shields and crippling some of their ships.

But their enemy didn’t show themselves. As the strike force turned to face this unseen foe, Shev switched channels and spoke again— and new phaser beams from different locations in the belt lashed out— taking out the crippled ships and striking others.

Now, the Orion force was in total disarray as ships turned in every direction looking for this enemy that refused to show themselves. Scans showed nothing— no propulsion residue, no energy signatures. Nothing.

Shev switched channels once again. “Now, Chi-town.”

From where he’d been hiding in one of the comets’ tails, the *Spirit of Chicago* changed course and charged at full speed into the remaining strike force, firing as he came.

Under his stronger fire power, ships exploded left and right and then he was through them and flying away at top speed with the remaining fifteen Orion pirates coming right behind him.

Shev opened all the channels. “Now— round them up.”

Abandoning their positions in the asteroid belt, the *Venture’s* armed shuttles took flight chasing after the strike force and firing as they formed up. The Orions returned fire as they continued to chase after the *Spirit of Chicago*, but the shuttles were

small enough to duck and dive as the chase continued.

Occupied with these smaller ships, the Orions paid no attention to where Chi-town was leading them until they noticed the increase in radiation. Then they realized they were approaching the star's corona. But still, the *Spirit of Chicago* flew on and the ten remaining Orions gave chase as the shuttles closed in behind.

Something began to show up on the Orion screens. Something bigger than these pesky shuttles.

Venture came clear of the corona and opened fire with all the phasers and torpedoes that could be brought to bear.

With their strike force decimated, the remaining six Orion ships had two options left: Surrender or run.

They ran.

“Ta'Laren to shuttle force. Chase them out of the asteroid belt, then return to the ship. Out.”

Shev leaned back in her chair and sighed. The entire operation could have gone very differently— and very wrong— if just one crewman aboard those shuttles had jumped the gun. It was then that she noticed that Amanda was watching her.

The Human smiled and nodded as she turned back to the auxiliary station.

Ship's log; Stardate 6608.16

Captain Shev Ta'Laren recording.

The crippled Orion ships have been gathered up and turned over to the Serellan government. The Union has already filed a formal protest with the Orion consulate back on Earth and I have no doubt the political fallout for the Orions is going to stick around for a good long while.

Note commendation for Commander Barker and his engineers for adapting our shields to resist Orion particle beams and for the crews of the shuttle task force. Their names are hereby appended...

Shev was in her cabin when she turned off the log recorder. It was a moment later, that the door buzzer went off. "Come." She watched as Tam came in. "Yes, Tam?"

"Mr. Therran sent me to tell you that they've finished unloading the cargo ships," the redhead said. "The Colony's Governor said to thank you. He said that between these supplies and the rain the meteorologists are creating, he's pretty sure the colony can make it to next year's growing season now."

Shev nodded. "Good. Then we can be heading home soon. Have you seen Lt.Commander Stevens?"

"Yes, in the mess hall," Tam replied. "She wanted me to ask if it would be okay for her to catch a ride home with us."

"Sure," Shev replied. "As long as she continues to man the auxiliary helm station."

Tam nodded. "I'll tell her." Then she tilted her head to one side and smiled. "You know you did

good, right? You stopped an invasion without the loss of any Union or Starfleet lives.

“You can’t do better than that.”

Shev smiled softly in return and nodded toward the door in dismissal.

As Tam left, the Captain looked around the cabin. Then she stood up from her chair and walked over to where her bags still lay in the floor.

After a moment, she began to unpack.

Six months later

Vulcan- the capital city of Shikar

The Vulcan Science Academy Medical Annex

In the Birthing Wing, one Human female's cries could be heard even through the building's sound proofing as Admiral Janet Kirk gave birth.

Beyond the sterile force field she and the doctor were surrounded by, Spock, Rayannah and Kang all watched and waited. The door to the Birthing Chamber opened and both Tam and Shev came running in. "We didn't know she'd gone into labor till we beamed down," Tam stated. "They told us at the reception desk."

Jan called out again and everyone turned toward her and the doctor. "I have the head," the older male announced. A moment later, he was lifting a small form clear of its mother's body.

"So what is it?" Shev asked.

“A child,” the doctor replied with a Vulcan-straight face. “If the anatomy is correct, a male one.”

Jan had to smile as the doctor placed the boy in his mother’s arms after cleaning him off. He then turned the force field off. “Sarek James Kirk,” Jan greeted as she looked down at the boy.

“Why ‘Kirk’?” Tam asked as the others gathered round. “Why not Spock’s family name?”

Jan gave her husband a cock-eyed look and a crooked smile. “We decide on a name people could pronounce!” She then looked down at the small life form she was holding. “Then too, I wanted Dad’s name to continue somehow.”

“As it should.” At the sound of the voice, everyone looked to the chamber entrance to see T’Pau herself with an aide standing behind her.

An almost revered silence filled the room as the Family Matriarch moved carefully into the room, leaning upon the staff she’d always used. She looked around the room, taking them all in.

“Human, Vulcan, Andorian, Klingon,” She then nodded to Rayannah. “Romulan. Diversity indeed.

“The child will become a living symbol of IDIC in more ways than just the flesh. He will grow to respect *all* life.”

She turned to Jan and repeated the words she’d first spoken to her nearly four years ago. “Spock choice his wife well.”

T’Pau looked to each of them again. It was a gathering, the likes of which she had never seen before—and knew she would never see again. She nodded to herself in satisfaction and then met Jan’s gaze. “As it was in the Beginning, as it shall be through all tomorrows, the choice is made.” She then leaned the Staff by Jan’s birthing chair and accepted a plainer one her aide handed her. “Only a female member of the family can lead the House.”

Jan looked to Spock in shock as the others traded surprised glances. Then she turned to T’Pau. “T’Pau, I’m honored, but I must ask:

Shouldn't the Staff go to a *Vulcan* female of the House?"

The aged female met her gaze as she replied. "This is a new time we live in. A new age of unity unheard of. It will take one who understands that to lead the House through it.

"You have both the vision and the intelligence needed to lead our House through these changing times. There is no other." She looked around the room once more before her gaze settled on the newest member of her House.

Then she nodded again and turned to leave. "So it shall be."

Sarek James Kirk would be the last child of her house, T'Pau would live to see. Three weeks later, she passed away in her sleep.

One year later, Amanda Maureen Kirk was born.

Epilogue: Five years later

The *Venture* sailed smoothly in its orbit around Mars as repairs and resupplies were completed. Personnel were coming and going, too as one tour ended and another began.

Shev was seated at her desk in the work area of her cabin. Over the last five years, the place had slowly taken on the appearance and feel of a home. A few knick knacks here and there combined with reproductions of some of her mother's paintings helped bring that to pass.

For a moment, her gaze settled on a singular item mounted above the desk:

The original *Venture's* dedication plaque. She gently reached out and ran her fingers along its side edge.

The door buzzer went off. "Come." The Andorian watched as a certain red headed lieutenant entered. "Hey, what's up?"

Tam stood just inside the sliding doors as she spoke. "I've just received orders to report to the *Lexington* as their new Chief Helmsman."

“Congratulations.”

“Shev- “

“No,” the captain said, cutting her off. “You’re not tying your career to mine— I won’t allow it.” She nodded toward the outer hull. “Somewhere out there, in the not-too-distant future, is a ship waiting for her captain.

“If you don’t keep moving, you’ll miss her.”

“Well what about you?” Tam asked. She waved a hand toward her friend. “I know you were offered the *Ambassador*— the first of her class— and you turned it down.”

Shev nodded. “Yes, I did, and I have my reasons. Reasons you wouldn’t understand just yet.” The Captain rose slowly to her feet. “You’ll like the *Lexington*, those *Excelsior-class* ships are almost twice the size of the *Venture*— and there’s a lot more chances to move up.”

Tam met her gaze with a level one of her own. “Shev, don’t let yourself get buried in the past.”

“I won’t,” her older friend replied. “But you can’t ignore the past, either. You of all people should understand that.”

What happened nine years ago, will always have a bearing on the here and now whether we want it to or not. It’s all in how we learn to deal with it.”

She led Tam toward the cabin door. “Are you stopping by Vulcan on your way to join the *Lexington*?”

Tam sighed. “I have a month to report. She’s undergoing some updates herself. So I probably will.”

Shev nodded. “Tell Jan I’ll stop by in a week or so to see how my god kids are doing.”

The redhead sighed once more. “Yes, Ma’am. You take care, okay?”

“You, too.”

They shared a hug and Shev watched as Tam left the cabin. As the door slid shut, Shev looked around and nodded to herself. It had taken awhile,

but it was finally real to her- and she hoped it
always would be.

Afterwards:

Captain Shev Ta'Laren would remain in command of the *Venture-A* throughout its twenty years of service, turning down offers to command bigger and better ships.

By the time the *Venture* was retired from service, she would go on to earn six battle stars for the Fleet Registry: One for fleet action and the remaining five for single ship-to-ship actions.

Shev Ta'Laren would eventually retire from Starfleet with the rank of Admiral.

As of this publication, no death notice has been issued.

END