

Fractured

Book 2: Shock Wave

by Sean O'Keefe 2014©

*for Loren,
one of the most creative people I know*

Chapter One

As forest worlds went, there were few as beautiful as Cait. Its inhabitants, named for their planet, had such a deep reverence for nature that they built their homes either underground, or in the slow-growing trees that practically covered the land masses of their world. There were few deserts, and their oceans only took up fifty-seven percent of the globe.

Their trees were sturdy, and sometimes supported large homes, similarly made out of wood – mostly replicated or imported.

Rivers flowed through most of the population centres, including the Capital, where the few open spaces remained. One of them was famous for an oration given there by the people's greatest hero, a being simply known as the “Teacher”. He had guided their culture from one based on confrontation and aggression to one based on mutual respect, love and hospitality.

In the middle of this grassy space was a small mound that was revered for the simple fact that he had once stood there.

It was a place that brought one Manny Sandage to consider her world. She was a being who most gave deference to – just because of her colouring. The people of Cait were feline – leonine in form – and they came in three basic colours: Tawny, White and Black. The vast majority were tawny, whilst Manny, as her friends called her as her real Caitian name, Amantasandage, was quite a mouthful,

was white. Her people had long judged one another on their colouring and, as she belonged to the favoured Whites, hers had been a life of privilege.

It was a lifestyle that had *almost* spoiled her. It was only in the realisation that colour had no bearing to a being's worth that she woke up to herself, and the terrible way she had treated her black brother. Her eyes had been opened when she had witnessed not only her brother's tactical excellence, but also his willingness to put his life on the line to rescue *her*, even after she had treated him shamefully.

All of this came back to her thoughts as she gazed at the mound. She had recently been immersing herself in the lore of their Teacher, and it had opened her eyes to just how prejudiced she had been. One of his principle notions was respect and love for *all* beings, regardless of race, colour or species.

It was one she had not only embraced, but had helped her open her heart to a *human*, rather than one of her own kind. Her husband, a fellow Starfleet officer, was an Engineer temporarily assigned to this world's starship – the *U.S.S. Jolly Roger*, which was attached to the *U.S.S. Millennium* – the flagship. Manny, herself, was a security specialist.

All of this was far from her mind as she gazed at the mound. She had to admire how a natural feature so simple, could still instil such a sense of reverence.

Her attention was diverted by a cracking sound from nearby. She got up from her relaxed position (she

had been curled up on the grass) and turned her gaze to the tree she knew her children were playing in. Although adopted, Drallah and Lila were as dear to her as her own offspring. Both black, they had taken them as their own after a recent crisis on their world had left them without parents who were *willing* to raise them. The choice had only seemed natural to Manny and her husband, Scanner.

Manny focussed her gaze and found it hard to find her children through the foliage. She turned her ears, but she could not find them. Just before she decided to run over and check on them, she chose instead to practice her sixth sense and look for them in her mind. It took only a moment to locate them, high in the branches.

That got her to her feet. Fearfully, Manny ran over to the base of the tree before bounding up through its branches, quickly scaling the tree. She had seen one of them fall in her mind. She knew it was only a possible future, but there was no way she was going to sit by and give it a chance to become reality.

As she neared the top, she heard her children teasing each other. “Mother loves me more than *you!*” she heard Drallah say.

Unfortunately, little Lila was too young and still too insecure not to believe the possibility. “She does not!” the young female retaliated against her slightly older brother.

Just below them now, Manny decided to squash this argument. “Your mother loves you both equally,” she said in that strict, authoritarian manner that only mothers possess.

Startled, Lila turned to look at her mother and missed gripping the branch she had aimed for with her right paw. The young claws of her left paw slipped on the bark and she lost her hold altogether, tumbling off the branch she had been sitting on – and straight into her mother's outstretched arm.

“Got you!” Manny said as she pulled Lila to her chest. Unfazed, her daughter clawed herself up and over onto her back.

“Thanks, Mama,” Lila said, lovingly, purring loudly. She rubbed her cheek against the back of Manny's head in gratitude.

Whilst she was tempted to carry Lila down to the ground, Manny realised she needed her daughter to learn the finer arts of tree climbing. Reaching around, she picked her up by the scruff of her neck and lowered her down onto the branch below, one decidedly thicker than the one she had slipped from.

Without preamble, Lila started making her way down. Satisfied that she was okay, Manny turned to check on her son.

As she did so, her perception shifted dramatically. Instead of Drallah, branches and leaves, she suddenly saw only the ruined landscape of a destroyed world. It was as if God Himself had reached down and reduced the land to nothing more than scorched earth and erupting volcanoes as far as the eye could see.

The scene seemed so realistic that the scent of sulphur burned her sensitive nasal passages. The heat dried

her eyes and forced her to blink.

Shocked at the level of devastation, Manny recoiled. As she did so, the vision disappeared and she found herself staring into the concerned eyes of her son.

“What’s the matter, Mum?” he asked, worried.

Not wanting to scare her son with the peculiar vision, she dodged the question. “Nothing, Drallah,” she said, trying to sound unconcerned and failing dismally.

Her adopted son was far too perceptive to believe her, but he respected her too much to pry. He leaned forward and rubbed the bottom of her chin with his head. As he did so, he found something peculiar. “What is that smell?” he asked, perplexed.

Manny’s eyes widened in amazement, and she sucked in a gentle breath through her nose. She could still smell sulphur.

Lieutenant Commander Judd “Scanner” Sandage beamed back into the living room of his mother-in-law’s home. There was no way he was going to try climbing the tree this home was perched in. He didn’t have the nails, or the patience for it. In the early days he used to gain entry by using anti-grav boots. These days he had gotten a little lazy and simply programmed the *Jolly Roger* to beam him home at the end of his shift.

As Cait was nestled in a quiet corner of the Federation near the outer edge of the Milky Way’s spiral arm, there wasn’t a whole lot for the pocket starship to do. It regularly made milk runs to Cait’s moon where starship

repairs were often conducted in a vast cavern that had been hollowed out to house the *Millennium's* former sister-ship, the *Ingram*. As the foremost engineer in the system, Judd's expertise was often called upon.

Today, Judd was simply tired because a problem that kept coming up had him baffled and he didn't know what to do about it.

Glad that he was home, he forced himself to relax and leave work behind him. Whatever it was, it could wait for tomorrow, he told himself.

He looked about him and found, to his surprise, that he was alone. Pashtallash, his wife's mother, was usually pottering around, playing the doting grandmother role to the nth degree. She often amazed him with her imagination and resourcefulness. She seemed to have no end of energy reserves.

He wished he could tap into them at that moment. In his mid-forties, Judd was beginning to feel the aging process taking its toll on his body. He worked out regularly, keeping himself fit not only for the health benefits, but simply for the fact that Starfleet required him to do so.

If there was one thing that was guaranteed to keep him fit, it was keeping up with his children. Drallah and Lila were like feline wildfires. While it had taken some time for them to get used to their new Dad being an offworlder, a few short words from their grandmother sorted them out.

Unlike his wife, who was of Cait, Judd was a

southern gentleman from the former United States on Earth. His brown hair was beginning to show signs of grey at the temples, and he was noticing a few more wrinkles these days. It was either that, or they needed a new mirror.

Judd sighed. It was a rare moment of peace in the busy days of running a family. It was about to get a whole lot noisier when his brother-in-law, Crash, became a father in a matter of days.

Taking advantage of the unexpected blessing, Judd headed down the hall and straight into the shower.

With the water spraying in his ears, he missed hearing the rest of the family getting home.

The first in the door were Manny, the kits and Pashtallah, who had met up with them after she had done some shopping for the family. There was a reason that Cait family homes were relatively free of adornments. They would never have survived the children. No sooner had the kits gotten in the door they began wrestling in the middle of the family cushions.

Manny let them go, knowing that their play was normal for their age. In fact, she patently ignored them as she helped her mother put away the groceries. "I hear Scanner's home," she said, the sound of running water catching her ears.

Pash flicked her ears towards the hall and caught the sound herself. "I know he loves his showers," she said. "He told me he finds them very relaxing."

Her daughter made a disgusted face. Being able to swim was important for any sentient, yet that didn't make it

something that had to be enjoyed. "It's one of the things I've just learned to be patient with. I've found husbands and wives don't always have to agree on everything."

Pash snorted. "That's the understatement of the millennia."

Manny sighed. There were moments when she almost forgot that her parents had only recently divorced. Her father, Slash, had moved out and had severed all connection with not only Pash, but also his three children. "Sorry," she said, quietly, suddenly feeling insensitive.

Her mother lightly cuffed her over the back of the head. "Don't do that," she said, only slightly annoyed. "Your father made his choices." She gave her a small smile and added in a whisper: "And I haven't been this happy for a long time."

Any further comment was cut short as the sound of a flutter landing was heard through the still open door. Lila bounded over to the door and shot outside. "Aunty Susanna's home!" she cried joyfully. Everyone knew Lila loved her Aunt.

Her behaviour was nothing new to the family. Lila did this every day. They were certain she would continue doing so, even after she went back to school next week.

Drallah was playing it cool, curled up on his favourite cushion, watching the door. He was waiting for his adopted sister to return so he could pounce on her the moment she showed through the door.

Usually, Lila was first back inside as she was small and quick. Not so, this time as a taller, tawny, adult Cait

stepped inside wearing a bejewelled necklace and light purple gown. At the sight of her, everyone inside dropped to one knee.

Cait's Queen Castashack, a young female Cait who was as down-to-earth as the next person, accepted the respectful offering then waved them up. "I appreciate it," she said with her gentle voice and nature, "but after all we've been through together, I've come to think of you as family."

Pashtallash, who was the slowest to rise, was reluctant to agree. "You honour us with your presence, my Queen." The ancient Cait custom towards taking care of guests kicked in. "Can I offer you something?"

"Faith!" The surprised voice came from the hallway, where Judd was dressed in his favourite, worn tracksuit. Unlike the rest of the family, Judd stepped forward and shook the Queen's paw. "It's been a while."

The Queen smiled, glad to hear her favourite moniker for herself. It had been given her by one of Judd's fellow *Millennium* crew mates in response to her overly long name. The helmsman had noted her love for the Cait's spiritual leader, known only as the "Teacher", who had died two millennia before. So, in response to her devotion, he dubbed her "Faith". It had caught on, and the majority of the planet now referred to her by it.

Glad that someone was finally treating her like a normal person, Faith's whiskers arched forward and her pupils widened in delight. "Scanner!" she replied in kind. "Thanks for all you've been doing for Cait in getting our

starbase established. It's really helped.”

Judd ignored the annoyed looks he got from Pashtallash and pushed on. He knew she was very old-school when it came to royalty, that somehow they were a cut above the rest. He knew the truth, that Faith *was* cut out of different cloth, but that it was the same stuff as everyone who lived in service to others. “You're welcome,” he said, shrugging it off. “I've never been so busy.”

At that point, Lila returned, clutching her Aunt, Susanna Llash, Federation Ambassador-at-large, who was now also heavily pregnant with quads. No sooner had Lila entered she let go and jumped on Drallah and began rolling around on the floor together once more, playfully grappling and clawing.

With a delighted smile, Queen Faith added: “Yes, I can see that.”

Manny met Susanna at the door and quietly hissed: “Why didn't you tell me the Queen was coming to our home tonight?”

Susanna merely gave her a sheepish grin. “Faith insisted on surprising you.”

The security specialist looked out through the door. “I'm sure the Queen's bodyguard is also surprised she's disappeared again.”

At that, Faith interjected: “No, they won't be. I duck out all the time. I hate being stuck in the palace.”

Manny tipped her head to the side in a gesture that said: “I can understand that, but please call them anyway.”

The Queen acquiesced and waved her off with a bashful grin. “All right, I'll call them, I'll call them.” She stepped over to the corner and produced her private communicator to check in.

A moment later, two of the palace guards materialised outside their home and made their presence known. After a quick check inside, they left the Queen in the Llash clan's company. The family was famous for their actions in the recent civil war and they knew without a doubt that the Queen was in good company.

Pashtallash roped Manny and Scanner into helping prepare the evening meal while they insisted Susanna rest. This late in her pregnancy, she was tiring quickly and it was beginning to show on the Persian. Like Manny, Crash had married outside his species, but this time he had taken a felinoid bride. They had their similarities in some areas, but where the Cait resembled sentient lions, the people of the Ambassador's world took after overgrown Persian cats. Susanna was herself around five feet tall with long, mottled fur that reminded humans of a tortoise-shell moggie.

The only reason it took time to prepare the meal was the fact that Scanner refused to eat his meat raw. “Ah just don't like eating meat that hasn't finished mooing,” he once told Manny.

She had countered with: “That's all right for you, just don't expect me to eat meat that's been cremated.”

Most of the time Judd simply ate replicated catfish, cottage fries and vegetables. It was all weird to the Cait palate, but at least it didn't offend their senses.

As she watched from her prone position, Susanna found herself getting drowsy. She knew she was getting near full term, but her body wasn't telling her it was time yet. "Thanks for giving me a chance to rest," she told her family. "I seem to be getting tired more and more easily these days."

"It's the least we can do," Pashtallash said mildly. "Besides, I know what it's like. I slowed down to a crawl in my last days before birth, and I was only carrying three kits! My son has given you four!"

Susanna's eyes narrowed to slits. "Remind me to thank him for that when he arrives," she said not unkindly.

A shadow appeared at the front door. "Thank me for what?" came her husband's baritone. Six foot tall and black as night, Krashtallash entered the room to be greeted with nuzzling, waves, and Lila and Drallah jumping on his back.

Susanna watched her husband play with his niece and nephew with a smile playing around her lips. He was so good with children, she thought. He was going to make a great father. "My dear, your mother was reminding me how blessed we are to be having quads!" she said with mock seriousness.

"It's a good thing we'll have her here to help when they arrive," Crash replied with a chuckle. At that moment, he remembered they had company. He had seen the guards outside and realised the Queen was dropping by for one of her famous absences from the palace. She seemed to enjoy breaking with tradition. He looked over at

Faith and gave her a bow. “My Queen, you honour us with your presence.”

The monarch stepped over and batted Crash's sooty shoulder with her tan paw. “I've told you before, Krashtallash, the honour will always be mine. I wouldn't have a crown at all if it wasn't for you bringing freedom once more for all Cait.”

Crash was tempted to sigh, but was too polite to do so. He had great respect for their world's newly appointed monarch. Although she was still young, she had also suffered much to bring peace, including the loss of her mentor.

On the other hand, she spoke the truth. He had played a pivotal role in their world's recent uprising, but it was not something he liked to dwell upon and he certainly did his best to shun the limelight. He just wanted to get back to the business of being a Starfleet Officer, which included commanding the *Jolly Roger* and overseeing the “Starbase Cait”.

Instead, Crash simply nodded and moved on. He stepped over to his wife, dropped down onto the same cushion she was on, spooned her and began licking the back of her head.

Susanna immediately began purring. “When you do that, my dear, I'm always happy to have you home,” she said blissfully. She closed her eyes and lapped up the attention.

Pash gave her son a mock scowl. “There's a time and place for that kind of thing,” she said with only the

tiniest reproof. “Now, get yourselves up off the floor and come and eat.”

Only a mother could push around the people assembled in the room. The Starfleet Officers, the Ambassador, the Queen and the children obeyed and seated themselves at the table. As Crash was now officially the head of the household, he gave the blessing and the family began tearing into their meals – which mainly consisted of replicated raw meat of various kinds. In deference to Scanner, who took longer to put away his meal, the rest of the family, the Queen included, waited for him to finish.

As families do over the dinner table, subjects of all kinds were discussed. In respect for her position in society Faith started things off.

“The great clock in the palace ballroom has been taken down to be repaired,” she said. “The technicians told me it’s the first bit of bother it’s given them in the last four hundred years. In all that time it’s given perfect time.”

Scanner’s eyes widened at that. The engineer was curious. He put down his fork and asked: “Did they say what it uses for a timer?”

Faith frowned. The inner working of technology was not her strong suit. “Caesium?” she said, doing her best to remember.

Judd shrugged off her awful pronunciation of the word and scowled. “That’s weird,” he said, the tension he felt heard in his tone.

Science wasn’t anyone’s forte at the table – including Crash. He was command and communications,

not engineering. What he knew of time was what he needed to know to avoid dilations that would interfere with transmissions.

The expectant mother worried the most. She had the most to lose. "What's the matter?"

Scanner held her gaze. "Technically, what Faith has just told us is not possible. A caesium clock, properly maintained, should last a millennia and not lose a second in *fifty million years*."

Crash's pupils narrowed in concern as a thought came to him. "Judd, your second on the *Roger* told me he was having problems with the warp engines. He said they were having some unusual phase variances."

The children could keep their silence no longer. Lila asked in her little girl voice: "Faze whats?"

Her father simply smiled at her to put her at ease. "It just means the warp engines are a little out of tune, sweetheart. Nothing to worry about."

Drallah was more perceptive. "Then why *are* you worried?" he asked with all the innocence of youth.

Scanner gave his wife a look which she immediately understood. This was not a conversation for the children. "Come on kits," she said. "It's time for bed. Say goodnight to everyone."

Children the galaxy wide hate hearing those words. They moaned and quietly complained, yet complied. They gave everyone a nuzzle, including the Queen who lapped up the attention, then followed Manny down the hall. With a last worried look, she closed the door.

Judd turned back to Crash in all seriousness. “I’ve been having trouble all day with ships suffering problems with their engines. Nearly all of them are experiencing phase variances.”

The hackles on the back of Crash’s neck raised. “What could cause that?” he asked slowly, fearing not only for the world, but especially for his family.

Scanner knew enough about physics to know there could only be one cause. “A singularity could be passing through the system.”

“A what?” the Queen asked, worried, but confused.

He put it in layman’s terms. “It could be a miniature black hole.”

The words hung in the air like a death sentence. Every child of the Federation was taught the dangers of space flight – especially those involving singularities and how they could devour not only entire star systems, but in some places whole galaxies.

“What can we do?” Susanna asked. Her fear for her unborn children had her fur standing on end.

Scanner patted her hand. “There’s not a whole lot we *can* do,” he said. “If it is a singularity and it’s close, it’s already too late. We could be caught in its grip already.” He grinned sheepishly. “I know that’s not much comfort.” He turned to Crash. “But if it’s a large one, there may still be time. We need to get the *Jolly Roger* in the air and see if we can find it, track it’s course and, if necessary, begin the evacuation of Cait.”

Krashtallash sat in the Conn of the *U.S.S. Jolly Roger* and marvelled that the pocket starship was his to command. It had only been a year ago that he was still a lowly Lieutenant in charge of Communications on the *U.S.S. Exeter*. Now, he was a Lieutenant Commander, third in command of the fleet's flagship, the *U.S.S. Millennium* and commander of the pocket starship tasked to it, the *J.R.*. All the same, a lot had happened in the previous year, and he had found that sometimes life simply put you in the right place at the right time. He smiled to himself as he watched the system's fifth planet, a gas giant, pass by slowly on the screen. He loved being out in space.

“Have you found anything yet?” he asked Judd, who was manning their scanners.

His answer came as a puzzled shake of the head. “There doesn't seem to be anything out there at all,” he said, mystified. He sat back and tapped the console with a finger. “This stuff isn't the most sensitive in the universe, but it should still be able to pick up a singularity at this close range.” He rubbed the bristle on his chin, considering the situation. “It's bizarre.”

Amantasandage swivelled to look at him from the navigator's station. “Isn't it a good thing we can't find anything?” she said, with a touch of playful sarcasm.

Scanner caught his wife's eye and said: “Yes, and no. A singularity would have been a nice, obvious cause for the problems we have. We've got problems with space/time throughout the sector, and I can't find the cause.” He pointed to the screen where he had displayed

his findings. The three of them approached it and stared in amazement. "I've found pockets of space and subspace damage all over the place." The screen displayed their solar system, and beyond, which should have showed clear space dotted with pink, largely spherical spots of various sizes. They seemed to remain stationary compared with the planets, however some of them appeared to be in their orbital path.

"What are these?" Crash asked, beginning to sound worried.

Scanner smirked to himself. "I may not have found the *cause*, but I have found the *effect*. The pink areas are places where space/time has distorted and time is flowing slower than usual. The differences are usually only in the manner of .02 of a percent, but it's enough for not only clocks to be thrown out of synch, but for a starship that passes through one to collapse its warp field. And if they try to go to warp again within one they'll drop out again when they pass back into normal space." He grimaced, realising the full effect of the problem.

Krashtallash picked up on the thread. "It's a massive hazard to shipping," he said, astounded. He stepped back to the command chair and sat down heavily. "Do you have any idea how far this goes?"

"I need some coffee," Scanner stated, letting his frustration show. He walked over to the small food replicator on the wall and dialled up a hot cup of brew. It quickly materialised and Scanner took a moment to savour the aroma before taking a sip as his family watched him

and waited. He gently placed the cup on the desk next to him and took a seat as he collected his thoughts. He began slowly. "Whatever this is, it goes beyond this system. We need to track it to find the locus, and maybe then we'll find the cause." He gave them both a worried look. "Whatever it is, it's going to be big."

Crash's fur bristled as he thought about their situation. "We've got to inform Starfleet. Let's put together what we've found and transmit it ASAP."

"I'm not sure that's going to help," Scanner said quietly. "If subspace is as distorted as I think it is between here and Earth, our message may have a snowball's chance in hell of getting through." He gave his brother-in-law a quick grin. "But, we've got to try!"

Their commander nodded his understanding. "We may have to do this one on our own." He turned to their pilot and said: "Take us back to Cait. We've got to get this ship ready for a journey."

Chapter Two

Starbase Cait was a hive of activity. Only recently opened to the Galactic public, it was quickly becoming *the* place to have your ship repaired in their sector. As such, the vast, open space in Cait's only moon that once housed the *Millennium's* sister-ship, the *Ingram*, was full of starliners, freighters and small pleasure craft.

The captain of the *Interstella* noted this as their ship passed it by. He waited patiently until they were given clearance to land on the Caitian homeworld. He had hoped to dock in the new facilities, especially given the problems they had experienced with their warp engines in this sector. Phase variances had made their journey tedious in the extreme as they had all too often dropped out of warp suddenly when their warp field collapsed. Their chief engineer had no idea what was causing it, which didn't surprise the Captain all that much. The Starfleet drop-out was competent – and that was being generous.

As he watched the view of the green world of Cait rotating beneath him, he sipped his tea and considered how far behind schedule these delays had put them. Theirs was a pleasure cruise that was supposed to take in the most beautiful of the Federation's worlds. Andoria had been first, Cait second and they were supposed to take in the Eye of Orion next, but he was beginning to have doubts about that if they were to return to Earth on time.

He took consolation that the Starfleet Officer who was travelling with them had proven helpful with their

little problems. It was a pity they were going to have to leave her here.

If there was one thing about this world she was beginning to really like, it was the fact that transporters were *everywhere*. Public transporters were easily found in convenient places, a public transportation alternative to personal ground cars or flitters.

Lieutenant Caitlin Ryan trundled her luggage behind her in a small, wheeled suitcase. A spinal injury two years before had left her incapable of carrying anything over five kilos, but that had not stopped her from continuing her exemplary career in Starfleet. “Ghost”, as she was known among her peers, was the organisation's best and most highly decorated fighter pilot. Her skills had brought her to a place in Starfleet enjoyed by few. Her lowly rank of Lieutenant was the result of her being busted for striking a superior officer. The reason she was still in Starfleet was that even Admirals respected and deferred to her judgement. She was a living legend in her field.

On first impression, the diminutive dark-haired, slender young woman with the distinctive Irish lilt was friendly and out-going, not the type to suffer fools gladly. She had a rapier wit and a keen mind. There were few who doubted that she would one day captain a ship of her own – if she refrained from punching out her fellows long enough.

In the fresh morning air, she stopped for a moment, looking around her at the many trees with their wooden homes built among their branches, and wondered once

more how these people found anything. On Earth, houses with numbers on them lined streets that were identifiable. On Cait, the only way to find a home was through scent – which didn't help her – or GPS location. She looked down at her datapadd and checked her location once more. The home she was looking for was thirty metres to her left. She looked over at it and marvelled at how the owner of it had decorated it with many colourful touches, mostly floral murals.

It wasn't unusual, however, as most of the homes were similarly decorated.

Certain of her destination, Caitlin began walking once more and soon came to the base of the tree. Her next problem was an obvious one. The entrance to the home was right above her head – an open space with a platform next to a door. It seemed the only way inside was to climb up the tree.

In her cheerful, southern Irish accent, Caitlin mused to herself: “I am not a monkey, you know!” After a quick look to see if there were any doorbells attached to the tree, she decided to set aside her pride and raise her voice. “Is there anybody home up there?”

After a moment, the door opened and a tawny local looked out and down at her. As her Starfleet uniform was clearly recognised, the older female broke into a welcoming grin. “Can I help you?” she asked.

Caitlin gave her a winning smile. “I'm looking for Commander Krashtallash. I was told I could find him here.”

Pashtallash beamed back at her. “You've found the right place. Please wait there a moment.”

Before Caitlin could ask for help getting upstairs, her host disappeared inside. A minute later, Susanna appeared in the doorway, looked down and gave her a bemused grin. “Can I help you?” she said, surprised to find a Starfleet Officer at their door. “What brings you here?”

A shadow passed over Caitlin's face. “Business. I'm here on urgent orders from Starfleet. Is there somewhere we can talk?”

A hundred kilometres away, but only a moment by public transporter, the *U.S.S. Jolly Roger* landed at her usual berth near the Capital, her retro-thrusters kicking up dust as she touched down on her extended landing struts. The retro-fitted starliner with lines that reminded one of a huge, space-going whale, was one of Starfleet's latest acquisitions. Captured during the recent Caitian civil war, Captain Piper had pressed it into service for the protection of Cait. She was operated by a mixture of locals left over from the war and a detachment of Starfleet officers and crew.

As soon as the *J.R.* was down, the engines powered down and the cargo bay doors opened up. Krashtallash was wasting no time taking on provisions for their journey.

Under the nose, the *J.R.*'s docking hatch opened and the landing plank extended, allowing her officers to disembark. As they did so they found they had an unexpected surprise waiting for them. They were met by

Susanna and Lieutenant Ryan who had been waiting for them in the departure lounge.

Krashtallash greeted his wife with his usual display of affection – a rub under her chin with the top of his head, which she returned. Scanner and Manny said hello to Ghost the old fashioned way: with a friendly handshake. “What brings you all the way out to the rim?” Scanner asked.

Manny chipped in: “Yes. The last time I saw you, you were still in bed recovering after our little fun with that bounty hunter on Mars.”

Ghost gave her a cheerful smile as she recalled their little adventure, then she remembered why she was here. Her sense of urgency great, she darted her eyes about her then she drew the group off to the side for a little privacy. “I’m here on special assignment from Starfleet,” she said, finally able to let her worry show. “The *Millennium* has vanished, and they want you to find her.”

Scanner gave a start, the notion not quite getting through to him. “*What?*” he blurted out incredulously. It took him only a second to go from disbelieving to angry before adding: “They’re trying to catch that fish with the wrong bait! What can our little starship do to find Piper when the rest of *Starfleet* should be out looking for them?”

Ghost gave him a thin-lipped smile, letting her own annoyance at the whole situation show. The *Millennium* crew was her family too. “I know, Commander. All I can guess is that they’ve got bigger problems at the moment.”

As Scanner ranted: “What could be bigger than the

flagship being missing?" Manny remembered her vision of a destroyed world, perhaps this one. The gut feeling she had been carrying for some time surfaced once more. "There's something wrong with *everything*," she said, suddenly feeling nauseous. A momentary wave of weakness came over her and she dropped to all fours, doing her best not to retch.

Worried, Scanner squatted next to her and ran his hands through her head fur. "Are you getting another one of those "feelings" of yours?" He had seen the way his wife had been behaving recently. He knew she had been unsettled by something that was very real to her.

Manny's whiskers bristled and her tail swept the floor as she recalled her vision from the morning. She related it in detail. She finished with: "I still remember the *smell*."

Ever the sceptic, Ghost asked: "Are you sure it wasn't just your imagination, love?"

Annoyed, Manny let a little of her impressive teeth show. "No, it wasn't just in my head. After I came out of it Drallah said he could smell something strange."

Ghost still wasn't buying it, but Scanner knew his bride too well to doubt her gift. He had long learned to trust that she had what his folks called "the Second Sight". He also trusted his son. He stroked her back gently to help her calm herself. "I believe you, Honey. We'll find out what it means, I'm sure. I wouldn't be surprised if all of this was somehow linked."

Caitlin turned her back and rolled her eyes. She was anything but a believer in such things, even given their

history together. She, still respected Manny too much to say it to her face.

She was startled at a low growl from behind her. “I can feel your scepticism from here,” Manny said angrily. “Don't ever roll your eyes around someone like me, Caitlin Ryan. I'll always know.”

All her life, Caitlin had been a warrior: fighting the good fight and never backing down. This was an exception. She had not only hurt the feelings of a good friend, she realised she had insulted her. Swallowing her pride, she offered: “I'm sorry, Amantasandage. You didn't deserve that.”

As any husband would, Scanner wanted to go to his wife's defence, but he was also fully aware that she could take care of herself. It was all the better, too, that the two women sort things out between them. As Manny simply nodded her acceptance, he said: “You'd better get your kit together, Lieutenant. You'll be coming with us.”

Caitlin glanced at the *J.R.*, which was the size of an average passenger liner, curious. “Is it big enough for *my* luggage?”

Knowing what she meant, Scanner gave a short laugh and said: “Don't worry, Ghost. We won't be leaving your tinker toy behind.”

Crash spoke up. “Actually, both it and you could be of great help to us. I need you to fly the *Roger* around the time distortion fields if we're going to find the cause of them *and* find the *Millennium*.”

Finally, she hit something she wasn't prepared for.

Caitlin's eyes went wide and she sputtered: “The *whats?*”

He had faced angry Klingons, Romulans, humans and even his own kind. Yet nothing he had experienced had prepared Crash to face his angry wife. “What do you mean: *You can't come!?*”

Out of the corner of his eye, Crash noticed his mother slip out of their common room at home. “Coward,” he thought to himself. He fell back to legalities. “Starfleet regulations forbid our taking our children along. Not to mention a pregnant female,” he said. It sounded weak, even in his own ears.

Susanna clutched her belly, clearly distraught. “There is no way I'm having these children without you here!” Susanna screeched hysterically. She gesticulated wildly as she challenged: “I don't want to be left behind to have *our children* while you go off in your little starship! Who knows when you might come back?”

The implied “if ever” hung in the air. Crash knew she wasn't doubting him, it was fate she was suspicious of. He sighed, took his wife by her paws, and lowered her to the floor. “I know it's a big ask, my beloved,” he said gently. “It's going to be dangerous and I don't want to risk yours *and* our children's lives. Besides, you won't be alone. Pashtallash will be here with you.” *Once she returns from wherever it is she's escaped to*, he added in his thoughts. He loved his mother, but these days she had an annoying predisposition towards avoiding conflict – of any kind.

Susanna softened along with her husband, but not her resolve. She ran a paw through his short, black mane and purred a little. “My love, you know I have great affection for your mother, but she's not you,” she said, tapping his nose. “She's not Manny. She's not Scanner. You and the crew of the *Millennium* are my family now, and I'll be damned if I'm left holding the kits while you're out there looking for Piper.”

Her request left him in a quandary. His desire to protect his family warred against his personal need to have his wife nearby. He also knew that, in the scheme of things, technically Susanna out-ranked him. As a roving Ambassador for the Federation, she could order him to take her with them. However, in the end, he knew she would still defer to his judgement and not put him in that position. It was never a good idea to emasculate your husband – especially this early in their relationship. That usually came later.

A thought came to him and he wondered for a moment whether it could be true. If Manny's vision had been brought on not by her sixth sense, but an actual crack in time, then she may have witnessed their world's destruction. It was not a pleasant thought. A notion came to him and he acted on impulse. “You can come with us, my love, but I'm going to need Pashtallash and the kits to come along as well.”

Susanna's eyes narrowed a little as she wondered at the thought behind his decision. She decided then that she really didn't care about the why, as long as she got what she

wanted. “All right, my love. I’ll pack what we need and let your mother know we need to leave immediately.” She moved to do so, then turned back and gave her husband a loving lick. “Thank you, my husband,” she said gratefully.

In response, he gave her a haunted look. “Thank me when we get through with our tails intact.”

Two hours later, the *Jolly Roger* departed as Faith watched from her palace on a nearby hill. She couldn't help but feel a tinge of fear as her friends were leaving to find the *Millennium* – she had been fully briefed. The Captain and crew of that massive ship had risked all to save her world in their recent revolution, and now they were out there, lost.

All the same, her fears for them were not as great as her concern for the Llash clan who was leaving to find them. They had become an extension of her family, confidants and guides as they had been rebuilding their society to once more become the friendly world it had once been.

As she saw their ship rise, she said a quiet prayer for their safety, then watched in amazement as a small fighter craft took off, met the *J.R.* about a kilometre up and swung into its open cargo bay. She had no idea what it was, but whatever it was, she added it to her prayer list.

On the Bridge the doors whooshed open and Ghost strode out. She took a look around her at the compact command centre, staffed by a mixture of Starfleet and

Caitian volunteers – leftovers from Cait's former military. In the centre seat sat Krashtallash, looking like he was born to lead. Beside him was his sister, his wife and Scanner. At the sound of her arrival, they turned as one and welcomed her aboard.

“What do you think of the *Jolly Roger*?” Scanner asked, genuinely curious.

Ghost gave him a cheeky smile. “She seems spaceworthy enough,” she said. “No two guesses who gave this ship her name.”

The comment elicited a quiet chuckle from her companions. Captain Piper was notorious for giving ships odd names. The *Millennium* carried a “runabout” class shuttle that was so big that its tight fit had led her to dub it the *Cork*.

Caitlin stepped over to the pilot's chair. The Lieutenant manning the console, a young, impressionable human fresh out of the academy named Christopher Manning, took one look at Ghost and fairly leapt out of the way. The fighter pilot's reputation had preceded her. She gave the fellow a brief smile then got down to business. As she sat, she felt a pinch in her spine, reminding her she still had to be careful.

Behind her, Scanner picked up on her discomfort and joined her. “I'll replace the chair for you. These back-killers were made to suit felines, not our fragile selves.”

Gratefully, Caitlin gave him a quick grin. “I see the console was made for the Cait, too.” She brushed her fingers over the touch panel. “What can this thing do?”

The Engineer chuckled. “The *J.R.* will surprise you.” He took a moment to run her through the ship's specifications, giving Ghost cause to whistle.

“You've been tinkering with this ship, haven't you?” she said in mock accusation.

Scanner pretended innocence. “Moi?”

Ghost rolled her eyes and glanced over at Crash. “Captain, with your permission, I'll take a minute to personalise the controls.”

Crash gave her a nod and logged their departure. “When you're ready, Lieutenant.”

Behind him, Susanna dropped her head so only her husband could hear her. “I'm off to watch the kits, my love. At least I can do something useful while I'm lying around getting fatter.” She gave him a lick behind the ear before bounding over to the doors which barely had a chance to open far enough for her to slip through.

Crash watched her go with a mixture of delight and awe. It had only be a matter of months since they had met, married, and started a family. In that tiny passage of time they had endured much – including an attempt on Susanna's life – and their shared adventures had cemented their relationship. All the same, he sometimes had to remind himself that her presence in his life was a very real thing, and not some passing fantasy. He had been alone for so long he had become used to the notion that he would meet his maker in the same fashion.

Now his life felt more complete than ever. He had become content to follow and advance his career, but now

having a family of his own was taking him in a direction that was both wonderful and foreign to him. Having a starship full of people he was responsible for was one thing – having a wife and coming children was something else altogether. There really was no comparison as he knew that he would live without his career – but not his family. The mere thought of it opened a bottomless pit in his soul – one he had visited once before when he had watched his wife go to what was certain death. Only her amazing agility had saved her.

With a flourish Ghost finished reorganising the controls. “At your command, Captain,” she said eagerly. She always loved taking a new ship for a spin.

“Aunty Susanna, where are we going?” Lila asked as she was putting away her simple belongings in her parent's room.

It was moments like these when Susanna wished she was a bit of an oracle like her sister-in-law. While Manny seemed to have more than a touch of sixth sense, Susanna found herself sometimes jealous, at other times spooked. It was a hard thing for her to understand. All the same, when children asked tough questions, it still would have been great for her to either see into the future or be able to think quick and come up with a comfortable lie when necessary. The best she could do was: “We're going to find Captain Piper. Starfleet doesn't know where they are.”

Drallah was a bit older and wiser beyond his years due to his experiences as a slave mining dilithium on an

asteroid. He was still only two and a half, but in his people's timelines he was already half grown. Susanna's half-truth was as clear as plexiglass. "Captain Piper's not the sort to get lost anywhere," he said confidently.

This family had gone through too much already for her to think of these kits as naïve, Susanna realised. As she looked at their expectant faces, she decided to give them the whole truth. "The *Millennium* is missing, and Starfleet has asked us to find her."

Since their adventures only months before, Drallah had spent a lot of time studying things offworld – including Starfleet. He was aware of just how big an organisation it was. "I don't get it," he said, confused. "We're on the outer edge of the spiral arm of the galaxy, lightyears from anywhere. Surely there are other starships out there that could find them quicker than we can."

Susanna sat down, glad to take the weight off her paws. She was finding it harder and harder to walk around on her hind legs now her four babies were getting closer to their arrival date. She put out her arms and the kits bounded over and snuggled into her fur. It was moments like these that she was glad she had taken a sabbatical to raise her children. She delighted in being an aunt and expectant mother. "I don't begin to understand all that's going on, my darling kits, but I *can* tell you that there's no-one that can find them like your parents and Uncle Krashtallash." She gave them a squeeze. "Especially your Mum. She could find a single hair in an ocean of fuzz."

Lila purred against Susanna's chest. "That's Mum, all

right. I can't get away with anything, even when she's nowhere near us. She always knows.”

From anyone else, it would have sounded like a complaint. To Susanna's ears it was the contentment of a child who knew without a doubt she was loved. “Yes, your Mum's really amazing,” she said. Inwardly, she was grateful that her own mother didn't have Manny's senses. There were some things she wanted to keep a secret. Mothers don't have to know everything.

Drallah pulled away a little and looked into Susanna's eyes. “After all that Captain Piper's done for us, we owe it to her to help her.” The young male's determination was inspiring. “I don't care how long it'll take.” He took her paw in his own. “Can you help us with our studies while we're gone?” he asked.

It was an appeal from the heart to just the right person. Susanna's first love was teaching. She had even taken some classes on the subject before university in preparation for a career in that field. Her dream had been squashed as there had been an over-abundance of teachers on Persia. “I'd love to, my dear,” she said. She pulled them closer. “Both of you.”

Krashtallash had decided to look away from the starfield on the view screen after ten seconds of watching their new pilot fly. Caitlin had decided to put the ship through its paces and was flying manually, taking the ship out past their asteroid field whilst dodging not only the rocks, but also the “pink fuzzies” as the time dilation fields

had come to be called. Thanks to the ship's inertial dampeners he felt nothing of their crazy flight, but he still had to avert his eyes to avoid becoming nauseous.

After three hours of this, Caitlin finally announced: "We're clear of the system."

Crash stepped forward and ordered up a scan of the space ahead. "Show me the plot to Argelius," he added. He glanced at Ghost. "That was their last port of call before they vanished, wasn't it?"

Caitlin nodded. "They were doing a milk run dropping some supplies before they were called away." She glanced at the sealed orders she had been given. It was an envelope they had been told not to open until they reached Argelius' orbit. Bound by duty, it remained sealed, sitting on the edge of her console.

Scanner stepped over and joined Crash and together they looked at the winding path ahead. He gave Crash a wry grin. "And that's only out one light-year. We're going to have to rely on the computer to keep replotting our path to keep us free of the fuzzies." He gave their pilot a wink. "I don't think even Ghost wants to keep us on manual for the days ahead."

Caitlin gave him a smirk. "You've got that right," she said drolly. "My back wouldn't stand it."

"What's the best warp factor we can hope for through this mess?" their Captain asked as he gestured at the screen rudely.

Ghost gritted her teeth. She didn't like this any more than her commander would. "Warp five," she said. "And

there's no guarantee that we still won't bump into one or two of these things along the way to slow us down.”

That was not good news to Crash. This was going to be a long cruise. He gave a low growl then said: “Whatever it takes, we do. We're not in it for us, we're in it for the Captain.”

It took two days for Susanna's biological clock to go off. As was typical for her species, she wanted to be alone with only her husband by her side – and he was under strict instructions to sit by and do nothing unless she asked for it.

“Are you sure you don't want a bowl of water?” he asked her, at one point after she had been panting for an hour.

The comment earned him a glare and a gritted: “If you must.”

Crash got up from the floor in their quarters and walked over to the replicator, wondering if all husbands felt like fifth legs when their wives went into labour. He didn't feel very useful – in fact, he felt worse than useless. Only his wife's request to watch over her lest anything untoward happen gave him a reason to believe he *could* be useful.

As he returned, Susanna got up and did a quick circuit of the room on all fours before gladly drinking the bowl of water in one quick slurp. Once done, she returned to the carpet – and the large blanket to protect the flooring – and began to push.

Crash watched in amazement as the muscles in her

torso began to ripple. Her eyes reflected the effort she was putting in as she strained with all her might time and again. Her fur became matted with sweat from the exertion.

After ten minutes of nothing happening, Crash was beginning to worry. His wife had been whimpering from the strain, and just when he was about to call for his mother's help Susanna pushed out their first-born with one mighty shove. The kit hit the blanket with a wet splat after sliding off its mother's fur.

Not knowing if he should do something, Susanna came to his rescue as she said: "Take care of it, Crash. I've got another one coming."

Almost gingerly, her husband leaned over and picked up the tiny bundle of fur. It had already begun moving, fingers extending, tiny claws just visible. Crash quickly cleaned their child up with one of the towels they had ready and marvelled to himself. He was a father!

Knowing the kits were coming was one thing, but until he held the child in his hands, until he heard their first mewling, it had yet to become concrete to him. This tiny person was *his* responsibility – his and his wife's. The weight of it fell upon him like a brick from heaven.

"Are you going to tell me the sex or not?" Susanna growled between contractions.

A little embarrassed, Crash held the kit up to see. He put it down and held it to his chest lovingly. The kit instinctively tucked into his warmth. He still wasn't certain about the colour, it was very wet, but one thing he did know. "We have a son," he said, letting the joy he felt

show.

Before she had a chance to respond, Susanna pushed again. This time, Crash was ready to catch it. Being careful not to jostle their first-born, he scooped up their second child and cleaned it as well. Eager to know, Crash declared: "We have a daughter."

To his surprise, Susanna gave a deep sigh and declared: "I'm taking a break." To his amazement, she got up and made her way over to the replicator and ordered up another bowl of water which she quickly downed. She then rejoined her husband and curled up on the floor. "I think these little kits need some milk," she said joyfully. "Besides, it's either that or I start dripping it everywhere I go," she added with a touch of sarcasm. She gently placed the pair on her belly and watched as the kits quickly found her teets and began to feed.

Crash's eyes became saucers. "I don't know what else to say but: Wow!" he said, letting his admiration show. His wife had just performed a miracle by bringing forth two little miracles, and yet she had the ability to stop her labour and resume it at will when she was ready. He leaned forward and gave her a loving lick on the cheek. "You are an amazing female, my beloved," he said, adoringly.

Susanna licked him back, then grimaced. "Thank you for that, my dear, but you can tell me that when I've finished the job." Her body trembled with a contraction. "I've held this off as long as I can, I'm afraid," she said painfully. Whilst the first two kits fed, Susanna got to

work bringing the last two into the world.

This time, Crash simply sat back and stroked her head as she pushed. He wasn't sure, but this time around seemed a little easier for her. Within moments, they had two more children, born within minutes of one another. Once again, the first was a boy, the other a girl. Again, Crash took the burden of cleaning them up and placing them on their mother's belly. Like their siblings, they began feeding within minutes, although the last one took a little longer than the rest.

They lay together for a short time, huddled together not for heat, but the warmth of a family's love. As they dried off their colours became apparent. Their mixed heritage showed.

Crash nudged each one in turn as he and Susanna named them and began to get to know them. The first male was white, except for black socks on each leg that came up to his ankles. They had long agreed on what to name their children, so Crash held him up as if offering him to God. "Welcome, Leontallash," he said with all the dignity of a long-held ritual.

The second child, a female, was tortoise-shelled in colour like her mother. She, too, was held high and named: "Kintallash."

The third raised Crash's brows in wonder. He always knew that their children would be a mix of both their worlds.

"He's a peculiar colour," Susanna said in amazement. "Even for people of my world."

Crash tilted his head to the side. "He's not exactly tawny, either. I'm not sure what you'd call him." His lips formed a smirk. "I'm sure Scanner would know."

Susanna had to agree. On Judd's homeworld, he was a bit of a cat-lover and his people had names for all kinds of feline colour schemes.

Once more Crash held him aloft. "Welcome Huntallash," he said cheerfully.

Last, but not least, Crash turned to the smallest of the four, an all black kit like Crash had been so many years before. For a moment, he felt a pang of sorrow for her. Although things were changing on Cait, there would be many who would reject her because of her colouring. All the same, he took comfort from the knowledge that his friends would never do that to her. He reached down and stroked the tiny child's back lovingly. "I know you're going to find this world tough at times, little one. But don't worry, I'll always be here to remind you that a black Cait can achieve the impossible, just like the Teacher did." He paused for a minute and changed his mind regarding what to call her. They had agreed on names for all their children, but he knew just what to give this ray of sunshine.

He gently lifted her aloft and said: "Welcome, Hopetallash."

Susanna was a little surprised at first that he had done so, but the choice pleased her. Hope was an appropriate name for a child born into a new world that was trying to overcome the prejudices of the past. "Well, at least you didn't call her Last-to-arrive-tallash," Susanna quipped.

She gave her husband a tired, but completely content, smile and lay down to let her children feed.

As Crash bathed in the glory of being a new father while watching his new family bond, his wife could not help but pop the bubble for him. “My dear, don't you think you should tell the rest of your family the news?” she said. She was so tired it came out in a dreary mumble.

For a moment, Crash wasn't certain she had even said anything. He was so enamoured of his little brood that he almost forgot his wife. Just before Susanna felt the need to repeat herself he realised not only that she had spoken, but what she had said. He felt silly for forgetting, but all the same, he had to tear himself away. “Will you be alright?” he asked, trying to find some excuse to remain.

Susanna was too tired to be polite. “Get out before I throw something at you,” she said in a low growl.

The ship's captain hadn't been married for such a short time that he didn't recognise his cue to leave. There were times to assert himself and his authority as husband. This was not one of them. “I'll be back soon,” he said, giving her a loving lick on the cheek. As Susanna simply groaned in response, the new father lightly stroked each of his children on the back. Partly to say “I'll be back”, and partly to confirm they were, in fact, real. With great reluctance, he opened the door and stepped out into the corridor where his sister and mother had been waiting.

Crash thought that they had obviously been there for some time as they had dragged a cushion into the hall and were curled up on it, chatting. It was only then that he

checked the ship's chronometer. They had been locked away for over four hours.

Not wishing to wait a moment longer than necessary, both immediately sat up and began plying him with questions.

“Is Susanna OK?”

“Are the kits OK?”

“What sex are they?”

“What colours are they?”

Clearly unable to answer all the questions at once, Crash simply put up his paws and waited a moment. His family got the hint and shut up.

With great delight he informed them: “Susanna's fine, just tired. The kits are fine and are feeding. Two of each and they're a real mixture.”

Manny got in next with a quick-fire “What did you name them?”

He spoke and they approved. Both realised the honour they had bestowed on Kintallash by naming her after her uncle's lost love from the civil war.

Pashtallash then stepped forward and took her son's shoulder in her paw. “Krashtallash, it's time for you to resume your duties as this ship's captain,” she said, using the full force of her motherly prerogative. “The crew needs you. Leave Susanna and the kits to us.”

Crash shook his head. “Mother, she said she wants to be left alone,” he said.

Pash chuckled. “Son, there are some things you will never understand about females.” She said sagely. “One of

them is that there are times when husbands are best off doing something else while the women are taking care of each other.”

True to form, Crash did not understand, but then he would not doubt his mother's wisdom either. She had been there before with him and his siblings. He reminded himself that she, of them all, would know what she was doing. “I won't pretend to understand,” he said graciously. He glanced at Manny. “I'll see you at the end of my shift,” he said, giving her an order without it sounding like one. With their short staff, the command duties had been divided between himself, Manny, Ghost and Scanner who was looking after the Bridge whilst he was with Susanna.

His sister gave him a simple smile and said: “Yes, Captain,” before giving him a surprise hug and loving lick. “Congratulations, Shrallal,” she said, overjoyed for him and feeling his emotions through their touch.

Crash left them and began walking down the corridors. At every turn he met crew members who gave him some kind of acknowledgement that they were aware the *J.R.* had four new passengers. By the time he got to the Bridge Crash was practically walking on air.

As he entered Scanner stood and gave him a hearty hand-shake. “Welcome, brother Dad,” he said jovially. “How does it feel to have the weight of the world on your shoulders?”

Scanner's attempt at humour went partially over Crash's head. “Firstly, I didn't know there was a fraternity among fathers,” he said, slightly confused. “Secondly, I

already have the weight of finding the Federation flagship. What could get heavier than that?"

His brother-in-law's eyes went a little wide as he realised Crash had so much to learn about being a father. Truth be told, he was in the same boat. However, Judd had at least already begun to paddle.

"Have we gotten back in contact with Starfleet, yet?" Crash asked.

Judd glanced in the direction of their communications board. "Nothing from any Starbases or HQ. However, we've made intermittent contact with Memory Alpha, so we've been able to upload some emails in mirco-bursts. We've had a few replies and requests for further information." Judd shrugged. The man seemed to deflate before Crash's eyes. "All I can tell you from what we've got so far is that the whole galaxy is starting to look like Humpty Dumpty."

This time Crash did nothing more than twitch his whiskers in annoyance. He had told Judd many times that many of his favourite home spun stories were completely wasted on him.

Judd quickly picked up on his brother's mood, putting up his hands and shaking them in surrender. "Okay, okay. What ah am sayin' is that the whole fabric of space-time throughout the galaxy is cracked. *That's* why we've been given the task of finding Piper. Starfleet is stretched too thin at the moment as they've got every available resource tasked to finding the cause and puttin' a stop to it before this gets worse than is already has."

Crash's eyes widened in shock as the enormity of their problem sank in. He sucked in a breath and asked: "Are you saying that this is *progressing*?"

Scanner sighed, letting the cracks in his good mood show. It wasn't often that something truly bothered him. His southern accent thickened the more he spoke. "Yup," he said, letting the finality that he felt show in his eyes. "Starfleet projects that, if we can't get this fixed, all spaceflight will cease in two months." At this point he grimaced and scratched the back of his head nervously. "That'll be the least of our problems, though."

The new father was finding his levity quickly being deflated. He had just welcomed his children into a universe that was disintegrating before his eyes. "What else?"

The engineer waved his commander to the Conn and let him sit down. Neither of them had noticed the silence that pervaded the deck. Everybody was listening with every fibre of their being. Once seated, Crash bade him to continue as Scanner took the vacant navigator's chair to face him.

"The time distortions have already disturbed the orbits of some worlds. Not much so far, but there is a real fear that planets are soon going to be knocked around like billiard balls." As Judd spoke the reality of their situation was beginning to sink in. His eyes widened in shock as the image played itself out in his mind. Planets began spinning off on their own, some becoming wanderers and dying, frozen. Others falling into the sun and burning up long

before they hit its surface. Either way, not only billions would die, but perhaps reality as they knew it would end.

Krashtallash sat in awe as the information sank in. It was almost too big to wrap his thoughts around. The universe was dying. “Do they know was caused it?” he asked, his voice tight and rough.

At that, Judd shrugged. “Starfleet didn't say. Frankly, I don't think they have the faintest idea. There is one thing I *do* know, though,” he said with a faint trace of hope.

“What's that?”

“The *Millennium* was the ship tasked with finding the source of the anomalies before she disappeared.” He slapped his hands on his knees and suddenly stood. “Ah have to go and tell all this to Manny,” he said sadly. “I'm pretty sure she already knows how I feel. Now I have to tell her *why*.”

Crash watched him go and found he did not envy Judd. It would be a terrible truth to tell his wife. The thought of his newborn kits came to him and he suddenly felt very angry. How could this happen to him and his family! He wanted to lash out and vent his feelings, but the chair he sat on reminded him of his obligations. He had a crew to lead.

He also had a family to save. He was not going to go down without a fight. His gaze turned to Ghost who was eyeing him expectantly. She had listened to the whole conversation without a word. She could see the anger in him. She also knew he was not a male to take this lying

down.

“Is there any way we can make this thing go faster?”
he asked.

She gave him a slight grin. “I'm glad you asked.”

Chapter Three

Two weeks later, the *Jolly Roger* entered the orbit of Argelius. It was the second planet in the system, and reminded one a little of Earth with its clouded blue/green surface. As ports-of-call went, the world was a paradise. Its beaches were beautifully sanded, its seas azure blue and its mountain ranges a mixture of sheer rock face and gentle slopes topped by snow dusted peaks.

The people of Argelius were known for their hospitality, but also for their lack of ambition. Their docile manner led them to use offworlders to run their administration branches of their government. Their lackadaisical manner had led their world to a generally run-down state. If a doorknob came off, a local would say: "Oh, well. I'll fix it later."

It was a world that most of the Starfleet crew of the *J.R.* had visited before. It was a much frequented port for ships looking for shore leave. Well placed in the space lanes, it was also a great place for people to do business. So it was no surprise to Caitlin that it took a few minutes to wait for a place to be offered them in orbit.

Once there, they put in a request to speak with the Orbital Controller. Unlike many other Federation worlds, Argelius did not sport a huge, mushroom shaped Starbase. Instead, it maintained an older satellite that was not much more than a glorified transporter station. If a visiting ship did not have transport capabilities, the crew could shuttle across, board and use the large transporter facilities to

beam to any place available to them on the side of the planet facing it at the time. Curiously, it did not maintain a geosynchronous orbit, but followed the sunrise, allowing it to be partially powered by the sun's rays which were collected by its enormous, fanning solar panels.

From the Bridge's overhead speaker, Krashtallash heard in a dry monotone: "The Controller is presently busy. Your call is important to us, so please wait and we will get back to you shortly."

A collective groan was heard throughout the *J.R.'s* bridge. For hundreds of years, beings of all sizes, shapes and genders had to endure being put on hold and listen to the local version of elevator music.

Argelian music sounded like something some ancient gypsies might play during a night of hard drinking. It was pleasant, but discordant.

In the Command Chair, Krashtallash drummed his nails on the armrest and wondered if anyone was even home. A previous visit had convinced him Argelians were largely lazy to the point of indolent. Only Gillian's presence on the *Millennium*, serving as a bartender, gave him any hope for the locals. She had an excellent work ethic and a very keen mind. She also had an uncanny knack of knowing what you wanted to drink before you even asked for it.

He corrected himself. No, before you even realised that was the drink you desired.

"Uh, hello?" The voice came with a visual on the main screen. The Controller was a blue-skinned Andorian,

a people well known for their efficiency and almost paranoid concern for their people's well-being.

However, this person broke the mould. He seemed almost timid and spoke to him with an near starstruck reverence. “Captain Krashtallash, your reputation precedes you. I am Shrig. Welcome to Argelius.”

At the helm, Caitlin shot her commander a look. She had no idea what was going on.

Manny caught her eyes and gave her a twinkle in return. Her unspoken message was clear. She would tell her all about it later.

Crash gave Shrig a amiable smile which was totally lost on the controller. “Thank you, Controller Shrig. I trust you received our request for immediate re-supply of our vessel.”

Shrig frowned, looked about the mass of messy paperwork on his desk and gave him a sheepish grin. “I'm sorry, Captain. I've received no message to that effect.”

As Crash's whiskers bristled in annoyance at the waste of time, the Andorian said: “However, we do have a free berth on landing pad Genoa that you're welcome to use. I will do my best to get things moving for you. However, you are aware of how things are done on Argelius.”

From her place at the security console, Manny muttered: “Glaciers move faster.”

Krashtallash was furious at the delay. With space/time coming apart around them the last thing they needed was to waste time in the slowest port in the

Federation. However, his paws were tied. He had no idea how long they might be gone, and they needed to be prepared. Never mind the *Jolly Roger's* deuterium gathering Bussard Collectors were not the most effective. It was something he was going to have to take up with Scanner some time. Their ship could not operate for long periods of time without gassing up in the old fashioned sense.

“Permission to land?” he growled, not hiding his feelings.

Shrig looked like he had just disappointed his father. “I apologise, Captain. With all the distortions in subspace, it seems your message was lost. I will do my best to get things moving for you.”

Crash's nose twitched, sending a ripple through his long whiskers. All the same, he knew all too well the situation and that yelling at people would not always get you what you wanted. In fact, on Argelius, it made no difference at all. He had once growled at a local and gotten a slightly startled expression before the sleepy look dropped once more. “Thank you for your assistance, Controller Shrig. We are beginning our descent now.” He nodded at Ghost, who took that as her cue. “Please do your best to expedite our departure,” he added, with just a hint of a growl. “Starfleet is counting on us to complete our mission as quickly as possible.”

For all Shrig's previous kow-towing, he gave Crash a look that said: “I wish I had a credit for every time I've heard that.” “I understand, Captain. Argelius welcomes

you and your crew and we hope your stay is a pleasant one.”

With that said, the screen winked off and the crew was treated to a visual of the fire of re-entry as the *J.R.* descended through the outer layers of the planet's atmosphere. For their borrowed Cait militia crew, the sight was somewhat disturbing as Ghost brought them in quickly. However, those who knew her well were quite aware that she was trying to have them docked in a minimum of time.

Crash turned to his sister. “Talk to the local Starfleet contingent. I want to know if and when the *Millennium* made orbit and her last known trajectory.”

Manny nodded. “Aye,” then opened a channel.

The Captain then turned his attention to his engineer. “Scanner, can we do anything while we're here to improve our B.C.s?” he asked, referring to their fuel situation.

Judd tipped his head to the side and considered. “It's possible,” he said after a moment. “Let me see what ah can do.”

Crash tapped his intra-ship comm button. “All hands, prepare for landing.”

It was time. Crash tore open the seal orders and quickly scanned the contents. It mostly told him what he already knew. That the *Millennium* had been tasked with finding the root cause of the temporal anomalies.

However, the orders made it clear that, in his current status as a Lieutenant Commander, he could not be read in

on the rest as it was beneath his security level. It could only be revealed to Captains.

So, due to the state of emergency he had been granted the "Battlefield Commission" of Captain. Effective immediately.

Stunned, Crash re-read the document. His eyes widened in astonishment. Incredulously, he turned over the piece of paper half expecting the words: Ha! Ha! on the back, as if this was some cosmic joke. He looked at the writing again and even checked the signature on the bottom. Sure enough, it was signed, in pen, by the Detailer himself.

Wow. His dream of becoming a Starship Captain was now a reality. A good part of him was elated, especially as this had come in record time.

The other part of him was well aware that, under the current circumstances, it could also be a very short-lived commission. The thought kept him grounded.

He glanced to the side and saw his sister watching him. The look in her eyes told him she was aware of his feelings, but not the reason.

He looked around the Bridge and noticed that everyone who wasn't busy was watching him expectantly.

He was about to say something when he realised there had been another page in the envelope. He slid it out and read the contents. The instructions were simple. He had to log into Memory Alpha with his new rank and supply the code written below. Only then could he be given the remainder of what he needed to know.

He looked up at Caitlin. "Lieutenant, proceed with the landing. I'll be in my office if you need me." He turned to Manny and gave her a simple nod to follow. As he stepped off the Bridge he flipped open his communicator and summoned Scanner.

Within minutes, the *U.S.S. Jolly Roger* had set down, its skin still cooling but the crew wasted no time. The cargo hatch opened wide a moment later and the largely Caitian crew members swarmed out and began hooking up the deuterium hoses as well as acquiring food stuffs and necessary equipment.

At the bow, the boarding ramp lowered and soon the ship's officers made their way out, accompanied by their families. Susanna and Crash's kits were still tiny, however during the previous two weeks their eyes had opened and they had begun walking. The three larger kits paced between them as they walked side-by-side, however the much weaker Hope rode on her mother's neck.

As they walked through the market, Krashtallash rolled over the message he had received regarding the *Millennium's* whereabouts in his mind. The local contingent had given him their mothership's last vector and the date of their departure – approximately a month before. Finding the ship after such a long period of time after vanishing seemed a daunting task, and he despaired that all they might wind up finding was floating wreckage. The thought brought mental images of frozen bodies drifting amongst the metal, including the faces of people he knew

and loved. It brought him horrors.

At that point, he caught the thought and reminded himself that it was only one possible outcome. He felt the weight of leadership, then, as he realised he needed to be a positive influence on his people. If he acted as if he expected only death, it would bring his entire crew down. He needed to maintain the air of expectancy that any moment now they would find the *Millennium* intact and its people well. May the worst that had happened to them be that they simply ran out of fuel.

He knew they had a number of hours, at the very least, before the *J.R.* was ready to depart. The last two weeks had been trying for all his people, and he was considering giving them all shore leave for the rest of the day. The odds were that a few hours more would not effect the outcome. The rest would do his people good.

To his right, Scanner walked with Lila wrapped over his shoulders, her tail often flicking up unconsciously, tickling her father's nose. She and her brother, who walked at their father's side, looked about them in wonder. This was their first visit to a new world, Crash reminded himself.

Like any other child, it wasn't long before he heard: "Dad, can I have one of those? Mum, I *need* one!" For the sake of some peace, Scanner and Manny bought one plaything each for their children, using some gold pressed latinum for credit they had brought with them. However, Scanner placed them in a bag and gave them a knowing smile.

“Y'all can play with them when we get home,” he said kindly, with a hint of steel.

Lila's eyes went wide. Her voice reflected her despair. “You mean we have to wait until we get back to Grandma's house on Cait!”

Scanner looked his adopted daughter in the eye, which wasn't hard considering her proximity. “No, I mean when we get back to the ship.”

The girl relaxed on his shoulders and Scanner felt the tension leave her small body. He reached up with his right hand and gave her a loving scratch between the ears, which started her purring.

While Krashtallash's children were still a way off from becoming self-aware, they instinctively stayed within the relative safety of their parent's protection and field of view. He gave his wife a loving glance and smile, which she returned. He could tell she was enjoying this as much as he was.

He had only allowed an hour for their tour and R&R, and a glance at his chronometer told him that half of this period had already elapsed. He was just considering turning back when he heard a gasp from Scanner.

“What is it?” Manny asked her husband, beating Crash to it.

Scanner stepped ahead of the group and pointed further down the street and slightly upward. They followed his gaze and saw an old freighter that had been converted into a store front about a hundred metres away.

“Would you look at that, y'all?” he exclaimed. “I

haven't seen a *Swallow* class freighter for years!” Without hesitating, Scanner strode straight through the crowd towards the aging starship.

Crash took it in as he drew closer. It was an odd design, with the cockpit/bridge sitting above and slightly forward of the cargo bay, as if on a neck. The ship sported short, retractable aerofoil wings that aided its atmospheric flight, as well as a T-tail for the same purpose. Sweeping out of the tapering body from the rear were swept back warp nacelle pylons that were reminiscent of the *Enterprise-A*, each tipped by pocket sized nacelles. Overall, the ship was about a hundred and fifty metres from the nose of the cockpit to the tip of its tail, which was not very long as starships went.

“It doesn't look like much,” Crash told his brother-in-law when he caught up with him.

Scanner turned from gazing up at the vessel and gave him an almost pitying look. “Come on, Crash. Don't tell me you've never heard of these ships!”

He shook his head, as did his sister and wife. Collectively, they said: “No.”

The engineer shook *his* head in wonder and turned back to the craft. “Neanderthals,” he muttered to himself, not realising the word meant nothing to his family. Ghost, who had lagged behind them for most of the walk, stepped up next to him and joined him in his appreciation of the vessel. “She's a beauty,” she said in wonder. “I wonder what they'd take for it.”

Scanner looked down at the pilot. “I never would

have thought you'd be interested in becoming a boomer," he said, using the colloquialism for freighter operators.

Caitlin gave him a light chuckle. "No, sir. These ships were often used by pirates because of their speed and agility. I've got to admit there's a kind of attraction for that kind of life."

"Arrrgh!" Judd said, mimicking a sixteenth-century ocean-going pirate. He continued his impression. "The only thing missing would be a patch and a parrot, me hearty!"

Caitlin got in on the act. She gave him a light punch on the arm and said: "You'll never be catchin' me swabbing the deck, you lily-liver'd scoundrel!"

Judd was about to continue when he heard a light cough behind him and the two of them turned to see a large collection of felines who were looking at them in total wonder. Even Lila, who was still sitting on his shoulders, looked at him in confusion. Both humans gave them an embarrassed smile. "I'll tell you all about it later," he said.

He was rescued at that point by the owner of the store. At first glance, he appeared human and fairly advanced in years. Scanner guessed his age around seventy. Although he was older, he was very fit, his thinning hair had turned silver years before. His accent reminded them of the *Millennium's* helmsman, Jason Nunn. For some reason he was wearing a particularly delighted grin. "G'day, people. Welcome to the Bad Habit Bar and Café." He stepped to one side and offered them his hospitality.

While Crash was uncertain, Scanner and Ghost needed no further encouragement. They made their way inside under the pink and blue neon sign. Their hands forced, Crash led the rest of his family in, still dubious. The human seemed friendly enough, but any bar named “Bad Habit” tended to bring all kinds of nefarious activities to mind. He looked at his wife and said with all the confidence he could muster: “It’ll be alright. Just keep the kits close.”

“You don’t have to ask me twice,” Susanna Llash said dubiously. She used her prehensile tail to draw the kits a little closer.

As they passed through the entrance, which was really just the open front cargo door hatch, they found the place was anything but seedy. In fact, it was brightly lit. The spacious cargo bay had been converted into a dining area that consisted largely of a bar that graced one wall, booths that lined the far end, and a number of cushions that littered the floor in true Argelian style.

Their host offered them the cushions. “The locals don’t like having to go too far before they can sit down,” he said. It was obviously an insider joke he had told many times before.

Along the left hand side of the room, a large landscape mural had been painted. Scanner walked over and examined it and wondered to himself whether he could just step through it and onto the undulating blue/green hills. He could see clouds that seemed to be flowing over gaps between the mountains and grassy knolls in the

foreground. To his surprise, he saw cows and sheep grazing in one place, and what appeared to be a light brown dog looking at them hungrily.

He stepped to the right and followed the picture and found kangaroos and emus running free in the picture. Although he'd never been to Australia, Scanner recognised the hallmarks of that earthly nation.

He turned to his left and saw Caitlin looking over the mural beside him. She seemed as fascinated as he was. "Are they cows and sheep?" she asked him, curious.

"Sheep?" Crash and Manny said together, their eyes lit up with the desire to devour one. Followed by their mother, they sauntered over to the mural and gazed at the landscape. They had no idea which world it displayed, but the notion of seeing one of the extinct creatures was something they could not resist.

As they all gazed at the image, their host appeared at their sides carrying a large tray with a number of glasses and small bowls on it. He handed Caitlin a Guinness, Scanner a bourbon, Crash, Manny and Pashtallash catnips, Susanna a cappuccino and he put down bowls of lactose free milk for the young ones.

As one, they all turned towards their host. Crash spoke for them all. "How did you know what we like to drink?"

The older human gave them a grin that looked very familiar. "I should know, Captain Krashtallash," he said. "I'm Jason Nunn."

Scanner looked him in the eye, not wanting to

believe his senses. “Bull!”

Five minutes later, the group were all sitting comfortably on cushions in the centre of the room. “Jason Nunn” had closed the bar and shut the front hatch and joined them after pouring himself a VB beer. He was too old to be put off by their staring at him and he took it in his stride.

“Stare all you like,” he said with a shrug. “I've been waiting for you lot to arrive for fifty-odd years.”

Crash took up the interrogation. “How can you prove what you're saying is true?”

Nunn put out his arm. “Feel free to take a blood sample for a DNA comparison,” he said amiably. He gave them a sly look, like he was about to reveal a great secret. “However, I've got something that's a whole lot better.”

He took a remote control out of his back pocket and pointed it at the wall. An old fashioned digital screen came on and a video, taken elsewhere on the ship, began playing. The hand-held camera jostled for a moment, then the image focussed on someone they all found very familiar.

“Hello Krashtallash. You're watching this video because I need you to know a few things before you take another step in your mission to find me.” The voice, the image, were unmistakably those of Captain Piper. In civilian clothes, but definitely her. “I know you're considering whether this video could have been forged. Scanner,” she turned her attention to her engineer, “I know that was a still under the sheet.”

Scanner smiled at the memory. On their first mission on the new *Millennium*, he had tried to find somewhere to stash an illegal still on board the ship. Piper had caught him in the act, but had let him off that time. "It's Piper," he said with a smile.

Piper's image paused for a moment as she waited for the information to sink in. Confident she was now going to be believed, she said: "As you may have guessed, I'm about fifty years in the past. Don't worry. I'm not planning on staying here for long. However, there is a problem. The *Millennium* has been caught by a ship from the 31st century around a world that is home to the Guardian of Forever."

As Piper once again paused, most in their little circle had no idea what she was referring to. All except Scanner, Crash and Manny. Unlike the other two, Scanner knew what it was and where he could find it because of experience. Like the rest of the original *Enterprise* crew who had been involved in its discovery, he had been sworn to secrecy.

Crash sniffed in Jason's direction. "You smell different," he said by way of accusation.

Nunn simply shrugged once more. "I'm getting old, Captain. I'm probably going off."

Susanna nudged her husband for his suspicious nature. To give her Crash some reassurance, she asked Jason: "What's my nickname?"

Nunn stared at her for a second as he tried to recall. "Hell, Ambassador, it was a long time ago." He took a sip

of his beer and said: "I think it was Fuzzy, or Floppy. No! Fluffy. Ambassador Fluffy." He gave Crash a brief smile. "Some things will never be forgotten."

Even given the fact the man before him was fifty years older than the last time he saw him, Crash found it a little disrespectful being referred to so familiarly. His eyes narrowed ever so slightly, and Nunn was sensitive enough to pick up on his change in demeanour.

"Sorry, Captain," he said. "I haven't been Starfleet for a long time since I got stuck here, a man well and truly out of time. I knew you got the promotion, but this is, for you, the first time I've seen you since."

The more Jason spoke, the more he put Crash at ease. Indeed, the last time his fellow officer from the *Millennium* had seen him he was still a Lieutenant Commander and Jason was still sensitive to that fact. "A battlefield commission," he said by way of explanation.

"Ah," Jason said. "Gotcha."

Manny watched the two converse and wondered why he had been left behind. All the same, she found it difficult to listen to the males and hear what the Captain had to say to them as well. "If you two are finished your yammering, Jason, can you replay the last minute? We've missed something important."

"Hmmm?" Jason seemed a little lost in thought for a moment, then said: "Oh! I'll just back it up a little." He used the remote and the image of Piper repeated the information they had missed.

It took a couple of seconds before they caught where

they'd left off. Piper continued giving them information regarding the tactics required to defeat the ship from the future. She finished with: "There's something you'll need in my old quarters on the *Pterodactyl*. You'll find it in the top drawer next to the bed. Give it to Merete when you see her. She'll know what to do with it." She reached forward as if to shut off the camera, then changed her mind. "Oh, and by the way. Congratulations Crash, Ambassador, on the birth of your kits. Don't worry, Hope will be fine."

If there was any lingering doubt about the authenticity of the film, it was erased with that one line. There was no way Piper could have known the name of Crash and Susanna's youngest.

Manny's whiskers arched forward in curiosity. "*Pterodactyl?*" she asked, curious. "What kind of name is that?"

Lila spoke up in her child-like fashion, all curiosity. "What's a terracactus?"

Drallah lightly cuffed his sister's ear. "Pterodactyl, silly."

"Bet you don't know what it is!"

"Bet I do!"

Manny cuffed them both. "I know you don't, because *I* don't," she said. She looked at her husband, hoping he could rescue her.

He gave her a confident smile as he thought back to his childhood school days. "A pterodactyl was a creature that was thought to be extinct on earth from many years ago." He then let her in on a little secret. "Until they

found Jurassic Planet,” he said. He took a sip of his bourbon and continued. “It’s in the Beta Crucis system. There’s an M-class planet there filled with dinosaurs that have been long dead on Earth.” He gave them a slight shrug. “More evidence for the Preservers, I guess. Anyhow, a pterodactyl was a large, flying reptile with a long beak and sharp teeth. Funny how they turned out to be fruit eaters.”

Mimicking Judd, Crash said: “Anyhow, I’d like to see the Captain’s quarters. She left something for us and I want to know what it was.”

The *Pterodactyl’s* hull was old, but anything but sagging. In fact, Scanner wondered to himself what was keeping her from flying. The metal plating under their feet creaked a little, but that wasn’t uncommon for ships of her day.

Jason Nunn led Judd, Crash and Manny up the stairs through the aging vessel. Curiously, it was impeccably clean and well maintained. When they reached the top of the ship over the cargo bays, they found the crew quarters. Over each door was a faded, painted name. First they saw Crash, which he recognised in his own handwriting, then Manny and Scanner painted by her paw, then Jason Nunn’s quarters, Carman’s, followed by Piper’s, then, surprisingly, someone named Piper Silayna.

All the same, Crash realised they were not here on a tour. Time was still of the essence. He directed them all to the Captain’s cabin. Each looked at the others, wondering

if someone else would open the door.

“I don't know about you,” Scanner said, shuffling his feet. “But I still feel like I'm invading Piper's privacy.”

“How can we be?” his wife said. “She's the one who pointed us in this direction.”

For all Manny's bravado, her husband saw straight through her. “So, why haven't you opened the door yet?”

“To tell you the truth,” Judd said in his older, wizened voice. “I haven't been in there since the Captain left all those years ago.”

The door had been opened and Manny could not help but step through it. “If everyone else returned to the future, why are you still here?”

Jason shrugged. “I don't know. Ask the Guardian. It should have brought me home but didn't.”

Krashtallash had a suspicion but he kept it to himself. “What was the Captain's original plan for us finding this ship?”

Nunn went quiet for a moment as he thought back. He didn't have to try too hard. He had been playing those final days over and over in his mind for the past half century. “She had put the autopilot on to take the old girl to a place between here and the Guardian. The idea was that the ship would be powered down with only the scanners still operational.” He patted the wall affectionately. “She had been programmed to watch for the *Jolly Roger's* signature and signal you when you came near.”

Scanner made a face. “Hell of a gamble, if you ask

me.”

“The Captain had faith.”

Judd looked at Crash and realised he had already come to the same conclusion. The Guardian had left him behind to ensure the *Pterodactyl* would be found. He wondered to himself if Jason knew this, or that, if he did, was he simply in denial.

Crash broke the moment by taking hold of the door lock and sliding it open. It gave with a dry metal squeal but didn't resist too much. As he stepped into the small cabin he asked: “So, Mister Nunn, what have you been up to these last fifty years?”

Piper's cabin was painted in her favourite purple, this time in a lavender. The bed was still made, the synthetic sheets faded but likely to outlast the rest of the ship. Her desk held her log – a handwritten book that Manny delighted in opening. She was surprised when Crash snapped it shut. “We can't read it,” he said. “Not yet. It's part of our universe's past, but it's still *our future*. I don't think I want to know what's going to happen next.”

At first, Manny felt like her brother was over-reacting and part of her rebelled. However, she remembered her place and trusted in his judgement. “Okay, Captain.” She handed the book to him. “You keep it. I'm too tempted to read it.”

He took it reverently and put it under his arm. He then turned to Piper's small metal desk and opened the top drawer. There were assorted tools and office supplies – and a small cardboard box labelled: For Crash.

Nobody said a word as he lifted it out and opened the lid. Inside was a small device that none of them recognised. It looked vaguely like something medical. Attached to it was a simple note. Give this to Merete as soon as you see her. She'll know what to do with it. *Do not lose it.* Piper.

Closing the lid, Crash turned to go. He had seen all he wanted to see. "Let's get back to the *J.R.*" he said. "I want us to get going as soon as we can."

"You don't want to see the other cabins?" Jason asked, surprised.

"We'll see them soon enough is my guess," Crash said. At the door's threshold, he added: "Do you want to come with us?"

There was no hesitation. Jason shook his head, no. "I'm already there," he said. "Besides, I'm an old man and I've got family here."

At that, all three of them looked at him. "From home?" Manny asked.

"Nah," Jason said with a smile. "I've got three children and five grandchildren. One of my kids you already know." He looked at them enigmatically and left it at that.

Scanner spluttered: "You're not going to tell us?"

"Where'd be the fun in that?" He looked at their puzzled faces. He waved them off. "Don't worry, you'll figure it out." As he guided them downstairs he added one more thing.

"When you get back to the *Millennium* don't tell the

younger me what happened.” He ran his fingers through his remaining, short hair. “It was hard enough getting used to being left behind,” he said, his voice becoming hoarse. “But I’ve made a good life here and now I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

As they left the *Pterodactyl*, Crash took a final chance to say goodbye and shake his friend’s hand. He couldn’t shake the feeling he was never going to see this version of Jason again. “Take care of yourself,” he said.

Jason gave him a weary smile and said: “I’d say the same to you, but I already know you will.”

Chapter Four

It only took a day for the *J.R.* to be resupplied and get on its way, and while Krashtallash nearly wore a rut in the bridge deck plates, he knew he just needed to be patient. If it was true what had become of his beloved *Millennium*, and he was tempted to take the older Jason Nunn at his word, not to mention the video of the Captain, then time meant very little to those on board at present. They were stuck in a stasis field where time had ground to a halt.

Needing something to do, he sat in the Conn and toggled the log button.

Captain's Log, U.S.S. Jolly Roger Stardate 8811.2

We're en route to the world known only as the home of the Guardian of Forever as its actual name is classified. In her video message to us from the past, Captain Piper gave us the co-ordinates which Commander Sandage has verified.

The video also informed me that the Millennium is currently held there in a stasis field by a Time Agent from the future called Daniels. I've done a check of Memory Alpha – when the link holds – and found only a few scraps of information about him, most of which has been classified way over my head.

The Captain gave me enough information to formulate a plan. I can only hope that we got all the details right, or we could find ourselves stuck in time as well.

Our best speed at this point is warp four as the fuzzies seem to be increasing in size, density and number. Commander Ryan is being kept on her toes navigating around them. It's like trying to run through a jungle. One misstep and we will find ourselves dropping out of warp – or worse.

At least we're in a better position fuel-wise. Commander Sandage managed to pull off a minor miracle and upgrade our Bussard Collectors whilst in port. They're now operating at 120% of previous capacity.

He knew he still had a few days before they got anywhere near the planet, let alone the system. Yet he found himself getting anxious. He had led ships into battle before, but this one remained untested, never mind its mixed crew. He mused that, while he found the feeling unworthy of one in command, he had to admit his feelings to himself and deal with them.

Out of the corner of his eye he noticed his sister glancing his way once again. He saw the concern in her eyes and knew she was well aware of his feelings. Her ability to read people had been growing over the years since they had reunited, and he realised that, in his current state, he had to be fairly broadcasting his feelings to her.

He turned to her fully and let her see his gratefulness for her sympathies. There were times he really appreciated being able to serve in Starfleet with family around to help carry him through.

Lieutenant Manny Sandage simply nodded and went back to scanning ahead of the ship. While Ghost piloted/navigated the ship, Manny kept her informed on the space ahead by pushing the scanners to the limit and constantly updating their navigation charts. If they were ever going to get there, the whole crew would have to be contributing.

She noticed with a look at the chronometer that it was time for Beta Shift to take over. While she wanted to keep an eye on the space ahead, she had to remind herself once more that the others on this ship were just as qualified as she to perform the task.

She wondered for a moment whether her brother had remembered to order the shift change. With the seconds counting down, she almost spoke up when Crash shot up out of his chair and gave the order.

“Beta shift take over.”

The change meant that both Crash and Manny could now take a break, but it would be shorter than most. Both of them – and Scanner – were pulling double duties. Crash would now head down to Engineering and help out there, while Scanner took the Conn. Manny went off shift altogether, but would return for Gamma Shift to command.

As Scanner stepped out of the turbo-lift and came on duty, Manny noticed Ghost almost reluctantly surrendering the helm to Lieutenant Manning. The young man was capable. However, everyone knew he wasn't Caitlin Ryan. Manny found herself sympathising with him. It was quite a shadow to work under.

Crash headed down to Engineering in one lift, leaving Manny and Caitlin to catch the next one. Together, they took the other option rather than wait and stepped out the side door and into the corridor.

“I'm going to be glad when we get out of this mess,” Caitlin said wearily. “I need a break.” She paused for a moment and stretched her back, her hands supporting her as she bent backwards.

Manny sighed, bone weary herself. “I know what you mean. I can still see fuzzies in my head as I walk. It looks like the ship's been overrun by tribbles.” She reached out in front of her as if she could touch one of the hairy creatures. Then she too stretched in her marvellous feline manner that made humans envious. It was if she was made of rubber. “I tell you what. I'm glad my mother is here. Otherwise, I don't know what I'd do without her here to watch the kits while I work.”

Ghost's head had been on driving the ship for so long she had temporarily forgotten that her friend had a family waiting for her. For a moment she found herself rather envious. “How do you manage?” she asked.

The white feline looked at her and knew that Caitlin's question went way beyond the obvious. “It's like everything else in life,” she said. “If you want it, you get it. And once you have it, you have to work your tail off to keep it.”

“Aren't you worried about how having children will effect your career?” The question was asked innocently, but Manny had to stop herself from reacting in irritation.

She stayed quiet for a moment as she internalised her feelings. Caitlin realised she had stepped on a raw nerve. “Sorry. I didn't think before I opened my trap.”

Manny thought for a second, then said in all sincerity: “I've come to realise that there's more to life than a career in Starfleet. I'll always be grateful to it for bringing me and Judd together, but since I met him I've discovered that I also want a life with children in it.” She turned and started walking again. “I hope we can manage that on the *Millennium* when we return, but if not, then it'll be time for us to retire and raise our kits elsewhere.” She wiggled her whiskers speculatively. “Perhaps we'll return to Starfleet once they're grown.”

Caitlin didn't say anything for a while as she considered Manny's words. Finally, she said: “Since I stuffed my back, I've had to do some soul-searching of my own. While I can continue for a while, the doctors have told me it's only a matter of time before my injury gets the better of me. At that stage, I'll be repatriated home on an invalid's ticket.” She rubbed her back, feeling betrayed by her pain. “It's going to be a pain in the ass.”

Amantasandage fell a step behind Ghost and rubbed her friend's back gently through her brace, being careful to keep her claws sheathed.

The pilot moaned her appreciation. “Can I go off shift with you every day?” she asked wishfully, her face a picture of bliss.

Manny chuckled. “Sorry, my husband would get jealous.”

Before she turned the corner Manny knew there was something terribly wrong. Multiple minds were screaming, their pain excruciating. Without thinking, she broke into a run and came to her brother's quarters as the door flew open and Susanna ran out cradling her youngest, Hope. She didn't have to look at the tiny person to know she was dreadfully ill. Her ribs were barely moving.

“Where is the doctor?” Susanna screamed.

Ghost took her by the elbow, looking in close at Hope. “What's the matter?” she said, concerned, but unaware of the seriousness of the situation.

Susanna looked at her as if she was not only out of her mind, but completely stupid. “My daughter's sick. I think she's dying. *What do you think is wrong with her?*” The last came out in an hysterical screech.

She was so aggressive Caitlin backed away defensively, her hands raised. “Look, I didn't mean anything by it.” She turned to Manny, seeking help.

Fortunately for her, she knew what to do. She took her sister-in-law's paw and started dragging her down the hallway. “I'm taking you to sickbay,” she said as calmly as she could. It wasn't easy for her. She couldn't shut out the cry in her mind that was coming from Susanna. She knew how desperate she was and it was taking all her self-control to keep Susanna's feelings from impacting her own. “Ghost, call ahead and let him know we're coming!”

With Caitlin coming a distant, frightened third, her ear to her communicator, Manny marched them through the hallways. “I don't know what our resident medic can

do for her, but he's going to fix Hope. That's what he's going to do.” She was saying it as much for herself as she was for Susanna. The tiny, sick life in the crook of Susanna's arm was her niece. She was terrified for her.

It took a couple of minutes with Susanna wailing as she went, but they got there. As they approached the door, it whooshed open and their medic, Ishtalam, a Cait on loan from their reformed militia, was waiting. “Give her to me,” he said, his tone brooking no argument.

Susanna let him take Hope and place her on the operating table. Automatically, the gauges came on on the diagnostic board on the wall. Their announcement was dire. Hope's lifesigns were low and steadily falling.

As Ish worked, Manny tore herself away and stepped over to the wall. She toggled the communicator on. “Sickbay to Pashtallash.” When her mother answered, she told her to go and watch the rest of Susanna's brood while they were in sickbay.

With that done, she turned back to see Ish working frantically to help her tiny niece. She noticed her ribcage was still moving, but only just. She stepped over and took Susanna's arm when she felt her sister-in-law's overwhelming desire to intervene and do something to help her child. She did her best to project a peaceful, tranquil feeling to her, but it had all the effect of a tennis ball on a brick wall. It just bounced off.

“What can I do?” Ghost said, wishing she could not only help but somehow redeem herself for her earlier comment.

Without looking up, Ish said: "You can be quiet and let me concentrate." He frowned for a second, then said: "On second thought. You can call her father. He needs to know."

Manny and Susanna recoiled. "What was I thinking?" Manny said, slapping her own cheek. She stepped back to the wall communicator and punched the button. "Sickbay to Captain Krashtallash, medical emergency. Come quickly." She did her best not to project the panic that was threatening to overwhelm her.

Crash replied within seconds. "What do you need me for?" he asked, curious and only mildly concerned.

"It's Hope," she said, the words coming out in a squeak through a very tight throat.

"I'll be right there."

Manny turned back, hoping that something had changed for the better. She prayed in the privacy of her thoughts, begging God to somehow intervene and save Hope. She didn't realise her eyes were closed until she forced them open in time to see the heart rate monitor flat-line.

As Susanna cried out "No!" and lunged forward, Ish beat her to it and scooped Hope up. He stepped over to the other wall and activated a panel next to an adult Cait sized drawer that Manny assumed was for storage for the dead. She stepped into his path and adamantly shook her head. "I'm not going to let you give up on her that easily."

Ish growled at her. "If you don't get out of my way we'll lose any chance of saving her." He pushed past her

roughly and slid open the drawer. Without preamble, he placed the unmoving kit on the tray and closed it with a slam. He then activated the module.

It came to life with a barely audible hum as Krashtallash vaulted into the room. He caught where everyone was looking and saw his daughter's tiny form through the glass. "What are you doing?" he shouted.

Susanna was inconsolable. "Hope's dead," she said to herself, over and over. She slumped to the floor, Caitlin catching her and cradling her head in her lap.

Crash looked from her to his sister, who seemed conflicted. "Are you sure?" she said to Ishtalam.

The medic turned to his Captain and reported. "I've placed Hope in a stasis chamber to preserve her. There's nothing I can do."

The usually stalwart Captain felt like he had been stabbed through the heart. "What?" he said, trying to reconcile what he had seen and heard.

Ish stepped forward and drew Crash over to his wife. He spoke to both of them. "I believe Hope has an undiagnosed hole in her heart. The problem is that I have neither the equipment, nor the expertise to operate on her. I'm only a medic, not a doctor and certainly not a surgeon. That's why I've placed her in stasis."

Crash was beginning to understand. There was still hope. "What can we do?"

The middle-aged medic gave him the facts. "We have four days before Hope begins to deteriorate. Our stasis chambers aren't one hundred percent efficient. We

need to get her to the nearest qualified surgeon as quickly as possible so her heart can be repaired.”

Manny shook her head. “We're light years from Cait, Ish,” she said, resigned. “There's no-one out here who can help.”

At that, the medic threw them the only bone he could. “There is. Her name's Doctor Merete AndrusTaurustabrisk and we're already on our way to her.” He looked his Captain in the eye to make certain he understood the gravity of the situation. “You have ninety-six hours to save your daughter.”

Life and death are an accepted part of the Starfleet career. Nobody entering the organisation to serve their fellow beings thought it to be anything other. Sometimes people, good people, died. Friends would be mourned. It was a part of the job.

Of course, one did their best to prevent it from happening. Starfleet wasn't just a flying militia, it was a family. Its members knew that, as long as there was another of their kind nearby, someone had their back. Like the Marines of old, nobody got left behind. Starfleet took pride in that. All the same, sacrifices sometimes had to be made for the greater good. It was known and understood.

Even the possibility of losing the *Millennium* was accepted. All the same, it was not going to happen without a fight. The people of the *Jolly Roger* would see to that. They were going to do their level best to see that that mighty ship would live to fight another day.

However, things changed, as they always do, when children come into the equation. Word spread quickly that the Captain's youngest child, Hope, was in stasis. Her only hope for survival lay with the CMO of the *Millennium*. The only way she was going to be able to help her was to get the *Millennium* free of her captors. It was up to them.

A child, an innocent, needed them to be successful. So, the crew, who had already been giving 100% to the task, took it up another notch.

During the three days that had passed since Hope's collapse, the *Jolly Roger* flew more wildly, and faster, sometimes almost skimming the edges of fuzzies that got in their way so that they could get to their sister ship in time. It wasn't only Ghost that flew like she was possessed it was Lieutenant Manning, whose skills had been increasing greatly under her tutelage and with all the practice of the previous days.

Engineering had worked to give the pilots 110% from the engines. Those scanning the void ahead pushed their equipment to report updates more and more frequently.

Nobody on board wanted to fail. It was not an option.

In the midst of this whirlwind sat Krashtallash. He took his place in the Conn and took solace that his crew had made this personal. He could not help but notice their increased devotion to duty, and that they had brought their ETA forward an entire solar day.

All the same, they were pushing it close. As they neared the outer edge of the Guardian's solar system, he

knew they could not rush the next steps. They had to be taken deliberately and carefully.

As his people prepared, Crash's thoughts returned to his wife, as they had so many times before in the previous days. In his down time, he had done his best to comfort and console her, to give her hope that their child would live. He reminded her of Piper's message to them that Hope would be all right. That it would all work out.

However, all Susanna could see was her lifeless child being placed in stasis. She was practically inconsolable. She seemed to be deaf to his pleas.

He had to admit to himself that, even given Piper's message, he didn't hold out much hope. Too much needed to be accomplished in a short time.

He wished he could be with his Susanna, to remind her they still had three beautiful kits that were well and needed them both. She hadn't forgotten them, but even feeding them seemed to be a weight his wife found almost impossible to carry.

He was glad that his mother was on board to help. Pashtallash adored her multi-coloured grandchildren and she was only too happy to cuddle, encourage and play with them. She was even on hand to help them learn the most basic of lessons – toilet training. His mother understood the source of Susanna's despair and there was nothing too great for her to do. Susanna and the kits were family, pure and simple.

From her post at the helm, Ghost turned to him. "It's time, Captain."

Their plan had been discussed, reviewed, and discussed some more. Everyone knew what to do. As Crash looked about him at his people, all gave him reassuring nods. They could do this.

As Caitlin slid out of her seat, Manning took over and hit his macro button, readjusting the console. He sat and waited for the order. He knew it wouldn't come just yet.

The *Jolly Roger* sat behind a fuzzy, using its time dilation effects to mask them from whatever ship was holding the *Millennium*. This was the only time in their entire journey that they were grateful for its existence.

As Ghost passed the Captain, she put a comforting hand on his shoulder. "It'll work, my friend," she whispered before disappearing into the turbo-lift.

The bridge crew waited, almost holding their breaths. The silence was fairly palpable. A few minutes later, the screen changed suddenly and was filled with the image of Caitlin's personal fighter – the *Spectre*. Painted all in black, the only reason they saw it at all was the ship's running lights and the light reflection off the cockpit glass. Even that was something Caitlin had an eye on fixing. From within, Caitlin gave them a cocky grin and quick salute.

Crash returned it, knowing she couldn't see it. All the same, she deserved it.

The wedge-shaped, but rapier deadly, vessel spun about and began to move around the fuzzy. Caitlin had spent a lot of her off hours honing the craft's sensors so she

would have plenty of warning to avoid the invisible snares.

Under Manning's hand, the *Jolly Roger* moved to follow. At this point in their mission, it was Caitlin's job to navigate them through the minefield of fuzzies – they were at their highest density in the Guardian's system. Slowly at first, then more quickly, Ghost moved them into the system. Their target was the fourth planet, which was presently on their side of the sun, only a matter of minutes away.

“Keep sharp, people,” Crash warned quietly. “We don't know what's out there waiting for us. We can't make the assumption that Daniels is alone.”

At her post manning the Weapons console, Manny watched every direction she could. Her phaser pods were hot with plasma energy, and their photon torpedo launchers were loaded and ready to bear.

While they were within sight of one another, the two ships kept contact via an ultraviolet laser link, ensuring they could not be overheard.

“Bloody fuzzies are everywhere,” Caitlin cursed. “They're going to slow us down something fierce.”

Manning grinned. He was actually enjoying himself. “Just make sure you lead us through the biggest gaps, Ghost,” he said cheerfully. “I don't want to lose a nacelle on our way past.”

“Speak for yourself,” Caitlin replied. “I have no intention of having to rebuild the *Spectre* again.”

“You could always make it faster if you did.” Manning grinned.

From the Conn, Crash said: "I'm not sure you could if you wanted to." He had seen the *Spectre* in action. It could not be matched.

Manny, the only other person on board who had actually flown the custom fighter, said: "It's fast enough, if you ask me."

Slightly tinny through the speakers, Caitlin replied: "Nothing's ever fast enough."

At his place at the Engineering console, Scanner added: "Spoken like a true fighter jockey."

"Hey," Caitlin said. "When it comes to flying, more is more. The bigger the engine, the happier I am."

"Isn't that thing *all* engine?" Scanner asked cheekily.

"Just about," Ghost conceded.

On the viewscreen, the Guardian's planet hove into view. Crash decided the fun was over. "Look sharp, people."

Even from this distance, the world looked dead and immensely old.

It was time to go their separate ways. Their intel had the *Millennium* on the far side of the planet, ensnared by a time dilation field produced by Daniel's ship. The plan was to split up and attack from different directions.

"Good luck," Caitlin offered.

Crash nodded to himself, forcing a grin. "And to you."

"There's something out there."

The statement caught Daniels by surprise. Since his

return from 2063, he had been devoting all their combined resources to tracking down any other anomalies in the time stream that could be attributed to Captain Piper. So far, they had found none.

It suggested that she hadn't returned.

The Guardian of Forever's function was well known to his people. It would send people back in time and then retrieve them once their mission was complete. The interval was a very short one.

Since Piper had yet to reappear, Daniels considered the possibility that she had been killed when the *Phoenix* blasted off.

He had come so close to apprehending her. Since he tracked her down due to a poorly timed photograph taken by an *Enterprise-E* crewman taken just before the ship's launch, he had watched for an opportunity to catch her while no-one was looking.

His people had never interfered with Picard's people as it was well known that, due to Cochrane's poor judgement regarding the exhaust from the *Phoenix* not being properly redirected, the majority of the people of Bozeman would have been incinerated and First Contact would have been the site of a graveyard.

All the same, as he observed Piper, it became clear to him that her presence was expected, even respected. It was odd.

He had followed her downstairs, hoping to catch her in the hallway but she was too fast. And when he had run into Deanna Troi, he decided to abort rather than push

things. Besides, it was clear to him that Piper would never get out of the shaft in time before the *Phoenix* blasted off.

Now, he was back in the 23rd Century wondering what to do next. Since he had failed to find any further evidence of Piper's activities in the past, he had only one conclusion. The damage to space/time wasn't her fault after all.

He had considered letting the *Millennium* crew go, but not yet. He hadn't exhausted all the possibilities.

Now, Sally had shattered the silence with her almost paranoid statement. Nobody knew they were here.

“You're getting jumpy, Sally,” he said. “We're alone.”

The A.I. sounded wounded. “I'm not a human that I should experience such things, Kieren. Your people get irrationally scared. Mine don't.”

Daniels shook his head in wonder. “No, your “people” only get rationally scared. Is that it?” His patience with the computer was beginning to wear out.

“There it is again,” Sally said. “I'm detecting movement nearby. Due to the number of distortion fields in the vicinity it's hard to get a fix.”

Daniels decided he wanted to check it out. He left the timeline holeroom, stepped into his cockpit and took a seat.

“Show me what you've got.”

In the air in front of him, a three dimensional display appeared, filled with distortion fields of varying shapes, sizes and intensities. Twice, a medium sized blip appeared

and disappeared, as if it was hiding behind the fields.

“It's a stealth approach,” he muttered to himself. “Battlestations! Raise the shields.” He wondered how effective he was going to be fighting off invaders whilst his ship still held the *Millennium*, which was filling most of his front viewport.

To port, two photon torpedoes appeared from behind a distortion field, following an arc that brought them straight at him. They exploded harmlessly against his shields.

“Follow the track of those torpedoes and fire quantum torpedoes,” he ordered. His adversary wouldn't last long.

From her viewpoint behind a fuzzy, Ghost watched as two bright white globes were fired around the distortion phenomena that had hidden the *Jolly Roger* from view. Fortunately, the *J.R.* was no longer there.

Now it was her turn. Pushing her impulse engines to the limit, she swung the *Spectre* out from behind her fuzzy and fired her phasers at the aft end of Daniels' ship. Her shots were pinpoint in their accuracy and, phased at the same frequency as Daniels' shields, they passed through them and knocked out his sensors and aft weapons.

Daniels' ship rocked violently, the concussion evidently coming from behind. “What was that?” he said, startled.

Sally replied emotionlessly. “The enemy craft has

disabled our sensors and rear weapons. In the instant I caught it, I identified it as Caitlin "Ghost" Ryan's *Spectre*."

Even centuries out of time, that was a name that shook Daniels. There had been few pilots in history with her reputation and talent. Never mind her fighter was one of the deadliest weapons to ever fly. Almost regretfully, he ordered: "Shoot her down."

"What with?" Sally said, her tone insulting. "I can't see her or fire upon her."

"Then catch her!" Daniels demanded.

As Daniel's ship reached out with another of its stasis nets and ensnared the *Spectre*, the *J.R.* released another volley of photon torpedoes, this time phased to pass through Daniels' shields. As they flew out and around the fuzzy they were now hiding behind the time had come to reveal themselves. Crash had them appear on the *other* side of the fuzzy, this time firing phasers, also phased.

As much as Crash wanted Daniels defeated, he also wanted the ship intact. Piper's message had included the fact that Sarda was a captive aboard it.

As expected, the photons scorched the hull of the vessel and, in retaliation, Daniels fired some of his advanced torpedoes back along their track.

This time, the diversion worked to their advantage by drawing his fire. The *J.R.* came about, guns blazing. Manny did her best to keep the fire to weapons and shields, both of which she took out with expert shots.

Smoke filled the air of the cockpit. Daniels sat and stared in amazement as one of the oddest starships he had ever seen bore down on his position. It looked like some bizarre, space-borne whale.

“This is Captain Krashtallash of the *U.S.S. Jolly Roger*. Surrender and prepare to be boarded.” There was no doubt in Daniels' mind that its captain was totally sincere and ready to do violence.

His people had a simple motto. When cornered and there was no chance of escape, leave nothing. His shields and weapons were gone, and, with his stasis generator maxed out holding the *Millennium* and the *Spectre*, he had no more options. He could switch his attention to the *Jolly Roger*, but that would still leave one of the other two vessels to attack, both of which could be deadly in his current state.

“Sally,” he said, resigned. “Self destruct.”

“Okay, honey,” Sally said, sounding profoundly sad. “It was fun while it lasted.” She began her countdown. “Five, four, three, two, one.”

On the *Jolly Roger's* viewscreen, Daniel's vessel sat there, while the man himself kept his silence. A minute passed and nothing happened. Then, a chirp from his comms panel.

“We're receiving a hail.”

Crash sat back in the Conn, curious. “Put him on screen.”

A decidedly youthful human appeared before them,

shrouded in the smoke emanating from several destroyed systems. His normally short, combed hair was dishevelled. He was not the least bit happy. “This is Captain Kieren Daniels of the Federation Timeship *Taurus*. I am here on orders from the Federation council, and, under the Temporal Prime Directive accords, I order you to withdraw.”

“Balsy,” Scanner muttered from behind Crash.

“More like stupid,” Manny countered.

Crash hissed quietly for silence. “Captain Daniels. The only person I see in violation of history is *you*.” He gestured at the space around them. “Our universe is experiencing a breakdown of its very structure and I find you at the epicentre. I'd say that's suspicious. Never mind you're holding the *Millennium* and the *Spectre* against their will.” He fixed Daniels with a glare. “Either shut off your stasis device and release my friends, or I will do it for you.”

Crash watched as Daniels considered his situation. It was clear he was out of options. He was just interested in how long the man would try to stall them. “Your conditions will be met, Captain Krashtallash. However, I must insist you not board my vessel.”

Crash's patience ran out. He leapt out of his chair and gave a blood-curdling roar. On the screen, Daniels backed away, clearly terrified.

“No conditions, little man,” he growled. “Or I will beam over to your ship and take you apart, piece by piece.”

Captain Daniels' eyes widened in alarm, believing

every word. Speaking to his computer he said, his voice quaking: "Shut down the stasis device."

From Caitlin's perspective, one moment she was looking at Daniels' ship and it was only slightly damaged, the next it was more so and it was being menaced by the *Jolly Roger*. Her comm unit caught Crash's voice. "Lieutenant Ryan, please remain on station temporarily. If the *Taurus* moves, blast it."

"Aye," she replied, turning her ship and bringing her weapons to bear.

For the first time in a month, the *U.S.S. Millennium* moved. However, as far as the Bridge crew was concerned, no time at all had passed. Only a moment before, they had been talking to Captain Piper on the planet. Now, they were looking at their adversary which had been damaged, and two other Starfleet vessels were nearby. Both were immediately recognised.

Lieutenant Carman Valastro, their grecian Alpha Centauran, gawked at the *Jolly Roger* in amazement. "Where did that come from?" he asked, bewildered.

"No idea," the young Lieutenant Jason Nunn replied. "But I'm glad it is here."

Before Carman could order a hail, they received one. "On screen," Carman ordered.

To his surprise, his old friend Krashtallash appeared. However, it was clear that fond greetings would have to wait. "Lieutenant Valastro, tractor the *Taurus* into shuttle

bay one and have it boarded. Put it's Captain and any crew in the Brig. The charge is kidnapping, among other things. He has Commander Sarda aboard in a stasis chamber.”

Carman gave him a nod. This was the time for business. “Aye, Captain. We'll get right on that.” He gave the order and watched as a tractor beam took hold of the tiny craft and began drawing it forward.

Not wishing to waste a moment more, Crash then ordered: “Put me through to Sickbay.”

A minute later, Crash stood in the *Millennium's* sickbay, surrounded by old friends. He was accompanied by his wife and Ishtalam.

“What is it?” the platinum haired physician par excellence, Merete AndrusTaurus, asked.

Ishtalam stepped forward. “I'm the *Jolly Roger's* medic and we've got a situation.”

Merete listened intently, not wishing to miss a single detail. The medic was good, that she understood, but it was also clear he knew his limitations. She mulled the situation over in her mind. She could perform the operation, but she was still short some equipment.

She looked at Crash sadly and said: “I wish I could help, but I'm short a micro tissue regenerator that's geared for the Caitian genome. We don't have one on board.”

With his heart in his throat, Crash leaned forward and presented the Doctor with the box Piper had left for him. “Is this one?” he asked, fearfully.

Surprised, Merete took it and peered inside. Sure

enough, it was just what they needed. With a squeal of glee, she hugged his neck and said: "Yes! Where did you get it?"

Crash gave her a tight smile. "You'd never believe me if I told you."

Not unused to the bizarre, Merete simply shrugged. "Give me ten minutes, then have Hope beamed over. All things being equal, she'll be alright."

Those few words breathed life into the couple and for a moment they just held each other, glad for the hope and afraid they might be let down. All the same, Piper's words repeated themselves to them both. "Don't worry, Hope will be fine."

An hour later, with Daniels in the brig, the *Taurus* safely stowed and powered down, the *Spectre* sitting on the *Millennium's* hangar deck floor being refuelled and the *Jolly Roger* flying alongside them in formation, the newly revived Commander Sarda called a meeting in the Briefing Room. Now that their chronometers had been reset and the crew were aware they had lost over a month, it was time to catch up.

Before a word was said, Sarda said: "It is gratifying to see you again," to the senior officers of the *J.R.*. "I am pleased that you are well." Not one to miss anything, he had noted Crash's insignia. "Congratulations, Captain, on your promotion." He raised a curious brow. "Battlefield Commission?" he asked.

Krashtallash nodded as he spoke for his group. "It's

good to see you all again, too,” he said. “And yes, it was. Thank you.”

The *Millennium's* First Officer offered them all a seat. With Sarda at the head of the table, the place where Piper usually sat – an anomaly that no-one missed – he started the meeting. He began by recalling the events on the planet shortly before he was stunned and incarcerated. “I do not know if the Captain made it through,” he said. Although stoic, his friends could hear his concern.

Scanner gave him a grin. “Don't worry, Points. She made it through, all right. So did someone named Piper Silayna.”

It took only a fraction of a second for the Vulcan to divine his meaning. “Captain Silayna went through as well? Fascinating.” His brows drew together as he considered the information. “If they both went through to a point in history before the timelines diverged, they could have emerged together.”

Manny chimed in. “We think they did. We saw both their names on the *Pterodactyl*.”

The *Millennium's* crew did not understand the reference. However, Sarda did notice that, upon the mention of the name, Krashtallash's people all looked at Lieutenant Nunn. Curious.

Crash spoke up. “We're getting a little ahead of ourselves.” He turned back to Sarda. “We'd better start at the beginning, about a month ago, when Ghost told us you were missing.”

An hour later, Sarda broke up the meeting, his mind full of fascinating possibilities. Time was being meddled with on a colossal scale, that he was certain of. The damage was visible everywhere. Very soon, planets would start spinning out of their orbits. The entire universe was in danger.

And yet, as he stood with his friends in Sickbay, there was still time for joy. He watched as Captain Krashtallash and his wife cradled their resuscitated daughter and took the simplest delight in watching the kit's chest rise and fall. He observed as Merete gave Susanna instructions to feed the child.

Ambassador Llash looked rapturous as she lay down on the bed on her side, her teats exposed. Crash laid their child on her belly and, although still weak, the child drew herself to a teat and latched on, drawing milk deeply.

All the felines in the room began purring contentedly. The moment was not lost on the Vulcan. Family was still important to him and, while their temporarily reassigned members had returned with the *Jolly Roger*, bringing even himself some semblance of happiness, one was still missing. The fact that he no longer felt Piper's presence in his mind was something he could not hope to miss. She was the linchpin that was absent, around which all revolved. Without her, things could go spinning out of control. They needed her back.

He had to admit to himself. He wanted her back.

Chapter Five

The impatient horse paced underneath him, eager to go. It took a bit of doing keeping her steady but, to one as experienced as her rider, it came naturally.

However, for he and his friend, their need to be fed was greater than the horse's desire to be free.

His horse, Judi, shifted again under him again. He hissed quietly. "Keep still," he whispered.

Judi had other ideas. The chestnut quarter horse wanted to be running, not just standing around in this gully. She wanted the smell of the eucalypts in her nostrils and the sound of cracking twigs under her hooves. She stamped in frustration.

"Keep still, you nag," her rider said again.

With nothing better to do, Judi looked down and spotted a small patch of green grass within reach. She tore it loose with her teeth and began chewing.

The motion threw off her rider's aim as he lurched forward after the unexpected motion. His finger caught the trigger and the bullet he fired went wide of the target. Fortunately for him, the horse was used to such noises and just kept eating.

"Missed," his partner said with a shrug. "You'd be better off shooting the thing with a phaser rifle than that old antique."

Before his friend could answer, both of them heard a snapping twig off to their right that didn't belong. There were no natural predators on planet Merrijig and the only

creature they had to worry about was the local variety of rodent that was similar to Earth's rabbits, only a lot tastier. They were concerned about them because a lot of horses had been lost stepping into their burrows and breaking their legs.

So, like the rabbits of home, the local settlers had a simple policy for them. The only good "Barrit" was a dead Barrit.

Just when they were about to discount the sound as paranoia, they heard another sound to their left. "There are two of them."

With a flurry of movement, two women wearing jeans and t-shirts stepped out. Each had been using a gum tree to conceal themselves. One held an odd looking phaser. The other held a sword.

"What are you shooting at us for?" they asked, their voices oddly similar.

The man holding the antique rifle just looked past the sword and gave their visitors a welcoming smile. "If I might say, it's about time you showed up, Captain."

Beside Jason, Scanner mock scowled at his friend. "We were beginning to worry, Piper."

Piper looked from one to the other in total amazement. "What are you two doing here?" she asked. Suspicious, she raised her lowered katana. "You shouldn't be here."

Scanner simply shrugged and scratched at his beard. "That's what Manny tells me every day."

Making her way through the bracken, Piper Silayna

stepped over to join her double. “You know these clowns?” she asked.

Her “sister” nodded. “They're my Helmsman and Chief Engineer.” Confused, she pointed at Scanner with the tip her sword. “Where are we and what are you doing here?”

Judd gave a tired chuckle. “That's a long story and would you believe you invited us?”

Piper Silayna's eyes went wide. “No, we didn't. Why were you shooting at us?”

Jason was getting a little tired of the conversation. He slapped his beloved .303 bolt action rifle that was laying in his lap. “I was shooting at lunch.” He showed them two bloodied barrits he had caught previously that day that were hanging off the back of his saddle. “I'm afraid you got in the way.”

Piper looked about her at the dense woodland. It reminded her a little of Earth, but the gravity was wrong. It was a little weaker. “Why are you out here?” she asked.

With a sigh, Scanner said: “Looking for you.”

Both Scanner and Jason took a Piper each and had them ride behind them. They picked their way through the forest, keeping their mounts at a light trot as they followed the well worn path. It wasn't long before they found themselves following a stream of crystal clear water full of river rocks at some points and grey sandy loam in others.

Jason breathed in the pure air with delight. It was just like the farm back in Mansfield on Earth. There was

very little pollution in the mountain air there, and even less here. His thighs were becoming a little tight after riding for a half hour, but he welcomed the feeling. There was no place like home, but this place was the next best thing.

With the horses bouncing underneath them, the Pipers found it hard to converse. They gave up and fired thoughts at each other instead, a talent they had developed during their stay in the mid-twenty-first century.

Where the hell are we, Susanna? In the privacy of their thoughts they still referred to one another by the names they had adopted.

You've got me. At least we're with friends.

Silayna's brows drew together in frustration. *Do you know when we are?*

Piper's eyes met hers as they rode side by side. *Your guess is as good as mine.*

Why don't we ask them? Without waiting for a reply, Silayna asked her rider, Jason: "What year is this?"

"2232," he said.

Still nowhere near our time, Silayna thought. *Why did the Guardian send us here?*

She shook her head. *No idea, Suzette. But I can tell you we're in the company of friends.*

Piper Silayna not only heard her sister's words, but felt her happiness of being reunited with her crew members. It made her a little envious, not that she was missing her own people, but that, even if these were her own people, she still wouldn't feel the same way about them.

They soon came to a small town that looked like it came out of old story books of the wild west. However, this town wasn't occupied by Americans, but ex-pat Australians.

As they came to the edge of town, both men slowed their mounts to a walk then stopped. Both women took the opportunity to slide off the back of their horse. As they were unused to that kind of travel, their thighs were aching and they took a moment to walk out the stiffness.

With practiced skill, the men threw their legs over the back of their horses and dismounted. Jason stepped forward and patted his horse, then took a carrot out of his jacket pocket and fed it to her. "Good girl," he said affectionately. "Good lady." Likewise, Judd gave his mount a friendly slap on the shoulder.

Scanner led their way down the street that was lined by shops made of timber with windows of glass, not transparent aluminium. Each had a porch of wooden floorboards, with a rail out the front for horses to be tethered to. Piper counted another six horses in town tied up outside various establishments.

"This place is amazing," Piper Silayna said as she walked, her boots kicking up dust with every step. Her sister thought she looked like a bona-fide tourist. "It looks like it came straight out of a story book."

Jason nodded, amused. "It probably did. Welcome to Eureka Creek."

The men tied off their reins to a hitching post

outside the local pub. It had a large watering trough out front and the horses immediately took a drink.

Piper looked up and took note of the establishment's name. The Commercial Hotel. "Not a very imaginative name," she said.

Her guide squinted into the sun as he looked down the street, then back at his Captain. "In the old days, there used to be Commercial Hotels everywhere in Australia in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The people of Merrijig wanted things to stay as they were so, when this planet was discovered in the early 22nd century, these people were the first to put up their hands to colonise it."

Without another word, Jason walked up the steps and was about to go inside when Piper asked: "Aren't you going to do something with those, Lieutenant?" He turned back and saw she was indicating the barrits. "They could be stolen."

At that, Jason laughed. It was a sound touched by a little sadness and irony. "Captain, on this world, you could leave a million credits on the porch and nobody would touch it. People hereabouts respect and look after each other." His explanation given, he turned and entered the pub, Judd following.

The Pipers simply shared a puzzled look and joined them.

Inside, the Captains found them sitting at the bar, ordering a beer each. Piper came up and sat on a stool next to Judd. "I thought you preferred bourbon," she said, a

little suspicious.

Scanner snorted. "If only the Guardian had sent us to a world where they served it," he said.

At the mention of the name, both Pipers sat up straight. "You got here through the Guardian?" they asked, not realising that once again they had spoken in unison.

Judd nodded. "We'll tell you all about it when we get back to the ship," he said.

Piper blinked. "Are you telling me that the *Millennium* is here as well?"

The beers were served from taps and handed out. The portly bartender, an older human male, regarded the women. Curiously, he didn't bat an eyelid at Silayna's artificial eye. "What'll it be, love?" he asked in the broadest Australian accent she had ever heard.

"Got any fruit juice?" Silayna asked.

The bartender looked at her as if she had just escaped from a mental institution. "Nah. None of that," he said. "Here, it's either beer or water."

The women shared a glance. Their mutual disdain for ale was profound. "Water," both Pipers said.

He looked from one to the other, then at Jason. "Mate, are these the ones you've been waitin' for?"

Nunn nodded and sipped at his glass jug of ale. "Yep, Carl, they are."

The bartender just shook his head in wonder. "They're a few short if you ask me."

Judd grinned. "They're a lot sharper than you think," he said chuckling.

Carl shrugged. "If you say so," he said dismissively. He turned and poured them each a glass of pure mountain water before handing it to them.

"Thank you," Piper said. She held it up to the light and, for all the town's appearance of complete backwardness, it was clear. She took a long sip, then poured the rest down her throat, not realising she was parched. Her sister mimicked her actions. "I needed that," she said thankfully. She then turned her attention back to Scanner. "You didn't answer my question."

Judd looked at her blankly for a second as he tried to recall. "Oh!" he said when it came to him. "No, the *Millennium's* not here," he said, waving her off. "Just the two of us, Carman, Crash and Manny."

Piper Silayna then asked: "So, what's this about a ship?"

The men shared a look. "It's better if we show you."

Once the beers were drunk, the Pipers were led through the town, past general stores and haberdasheries to a path that led up the side of a hill. Piper peered off into the distance at the planet's little, yellow sun, and noted the days here seemed a little shorter than Earth's. She mentioned it in passing.

"You're right, Cap'," Judd said. "It's about 22 hours a day on Merrijig." He grinned to himself. "Weird thing is, it's got three moons."

Jason grinned. "Yeah, they've got weird names,

too. Bert, Graham and Norman.”

Piper looked at him sideways, not quite believing him. “Ohhhkay,” she said.

It wasn't long before they crested the hill and there before them was an older style cargo ship. Piper checked her sister. “Swallow class, isn't it?” she asked.

Silayna nodded. “It is. Haven't seen one of these for years.”

Piper noticed its large wings. “Why haven't its wings retracted?” she asked.

Judd sighed. “Because I haven't fixed them yet. There's only so much I can achieve in a day, you know.” He sounded tired.

“I thought it was you!”

The voice was familiar to Piper and she turned and welcomed another friend. However, Piper Silayna recoiled as the huge, white feline barrelled out the front hatch and right up to them, pulling up just short of them. “It's good to see you, Captain,” she said happily. “We've missed you.”

The day was young for Piper Silayna as the surprises just kept piling up. She watched as Judd turned to the newcomer and gave her a kiss. “Hi, honey,” he said lovingly. “I'm home!”

She, in turn, licked him on the cheek. “I'm glad you finally made it. I'm starving and we haven't lit the fire yet.”

Piper looked at her askance. “I thought the Cait didn't eat cooked meat.”

“We don't,” she said. “However, we like to eat our evening meals as a family and my husband hasn't cooked his yet.”

It was all getting a bit too much. “Husband?” Piper Silayna asked with more than a note of derision. “Seriously?”

Without answering, Judd looked to his Captain. “Right now, I can see the differences between the two of you go a lot more than just skin deep.” He gave her double an angry glance then snubbed her and went inside to prepare the barrits while Judd put the horses in their yard.

Piper watched them go, pausing a moment before following. She turned and looked her sister in the eye. “These people are my family,” she said with just a hint of warning. “I would appreciate a bit more decorum when you're talking to them. The Sandages are not only two of the best officers I've ever worked with and my friends, but I've rarely met two people more in love than they are.” Hurt for her friends, she left Silayna standing there and walked inside, looking for the rest of her people.

Crash and Carman didn't appear until an hour later, just before dusk. They, too, had been out hunting barrits, but they had been much more successful. Their style had been to go on foot, and while Crash hunted them the old fashioned way with his bare hands, Carman simply followed and carried their prizes.

When they arrived, they walked in through the open hatch and were about to call out when they spied the new

arrivals. Upon seeing Piper, Crash ran up and shook her hand warmly. "It's good to see you, Captain," he said. "It's been too long."

Piper gave him an odd look. "Depending on how you look at it, it's going to be a while since you started missing me."

Crash's whiskers arched forward in mirth. "True," he said. In the periphery of his vision, he spotted her double sitting in a corner on an old crate, looking out of place. "Piper Silayna, I presume," he said, his curiosity piqued.

His Captain sighed, a sound from the depths of her soul. "She is. Although she's in the dog house with Scanner and Manny at the moment."

While he didn't quite understand the idiom, he guessed she had somehow offended his sister and her husband. Not one to let offence spoil a good day, he walked over and introduced himself.

"Hello, Captain Silayna," he said, holding out his paw. "I'm Captain Krashtallash."

For a moment, it seemed like she was going to snub him, but Crash just stood there with his paw out, waiting for her to return the gesture. He was being so disarming that she could not help but respond in kind. She turned to look at him and really saw him for the first time. She was impressed by his black fur and thick mane, but mostly by his sense of presence. He had true leadership qualities with the intellect to match.

"It's a pleasure, Captain," she said. "I must look

peculiar to you,” she continued, feeling self-conscious. “You'd be so used to seeing your Captain as she is that I must look odd with this.” Her right hand went up and stroked her cheek next to her artificial eye.

“Not at all, Captain,” he said kindly. “Humans all look strange to me.” He gave her a huge, welcoming smile and helped her to her feet. “Come. Help us with our meal and we'll talk about our adventures.”

Sitting outside in the cooling evening air, the seven of them sat around a wood fire in a pit surrounded by large stones. The human's barrits cooked on metal poles suspended next to the flames while they chatted. As the sun went down, their faces became illuminated by the flickering light of the fire, giving them an ethereal look.

Piper Silayna sat between Piper and Krashtallash as she still felt uncomfortable around the Sandages who were avoiding her gaze.

“Are you telling me that you *met* Zefram Cochrane?” Judd said, not quite believing. He leaned back on his folding chair and popped another marshmallow into his mouth. There were few condiments on this world, but at least the locals knew how to make a decent marshmallow.

Piper looked him in the eye and said: “He wasn't a gentleman, either! You know he tried to hit on the two of us?”

Scanner chuckled. “I've always found one Piper was more than enough!”

At his side, sitting on her haunches, her tail around her husband, Manny said: "You won't be hitting on the Captain, either. Ever!" She gave a low growl, then nuzzled her husband's cheek.

His wife's mock jealousy aside, Scanner asked: "What was it like?"

Out of the quiet of her thoughts she said: "It was a simpler time. A bit like this, but more dangerous considering all the shortages after the war. Most of the people we met were decent, though. Lily, especially, was very gracious." Piper took a little while describing their time sharing Lily's home and life. She finished with: "I can see why some people have such romantic notions of the old times. There really is an attraction to the simpler life."

Her friends heard it in her voice. She, too, felt the appeal.

Scanner jerked a thumb in the direction of the ship. "What do you think of our latest acquisition?" he asked.

Piper gave it a look of derision. "Darn thing looks like a pterodactyl. How did you get your hands on it?"

As her crew mates laughed over who-knew-what, Piper glanced at her sister. She was still a little distant and she fired a thought at her. *Cheer up. You'll find they're great once you get to know them.*

Silayna looked back at her with a pronounced sense of sadness. *What about when they find out that I'm not?*

Before she could answer, Crash said between chuckles: "At least now we know where she got the name."

He turned his attention to his Captain and began telling her their tale, being careful to leave out certain details. He didn't mention where he found the ship or anything about the older Jason Nunn. Piper got the feeling he was holding out on her, but didn't pry. She knew the dangers of fore-knowledge personally.

Manny chimed in: "Oh, and Captain. Susanna had her kits. Crash is the proud father of four children!"

Genuinely delighted, Piper slapped his shoulder. "Congratulations, Krashtallash. I know you're going to be a great father. How are the kits doing?"

A great sadness passed through Crash's soul momentarily, and Piper feared one or more may have died as she saw his expression darken. "They are well, Captain. Thanks to you."

Perplexed, Piper turned her head to the side, wondering how she could have possibly have helped in something that wasn't due to happen for over another fifty years. "How..."

Crash gave her an enigmatic look. "I'll tell you later," he said.

"Okay," Piper said, letting it go. "At least tell me their names," she said, truly curious.

With great pride, Crash announced their names. "Leontallash, Kintallash, Huntallash and Hopetallash."

Across the way, Piper could see that Manny and Scanner shared his pride and joy. She also noted one familiar name. "Kintallash? Is she named after..."

"Kintabung?" Crash finished, referring to his

brother's late mate, who had been lost in the civil war. "Yes, Captain. She had a warrior's spirit. It's fitting she be remembered."

Piper nodded to herself, remembering that time. "From what I heard, she was. I'm sure Grun would be very pleased with your choice."

As Crash thought of his brother, he solidified a decision he had already made. He would never be ashamed of his children and would proudly show them off to his "normal" brother – the only one of the three siblings who carried the standard Cait colouring. "I will visit him when we return to Cait, Captain. I want him to know he's an uncle."

For the first time since they sat down, Piper Silayna spoke. "Tell me about your planet, Captain Krashtallash. In my timeline, Cait was lost about ten years ago with the loss of 99% of the population. Where I come from, the Cait are an endangered species without a home."

Before Crash could answer Piper brought them up short. "*Captain?*"

At that the former Commander appeared embarrassed. He hadn't mentioned it to her yet. "Yes, Captain. Due to the necessities of the mission I've been given a battlefield commission so I could be read in on the Guardian."

Piper's eyes widened in understanding. "Ah." She reached around the fire and gave his paw a shake. "Congratulations." She put all the joy she could into the gesture, but she couldn't help feeling a touch of sadness.

His promotion would take him away from the *Millennium* – permanently.

Krashtallash shared the sentiment. The feeling was definitely bittersweet. Turning his attention back to Piper Silayna's question, he mused that, if he existed in the alternate timeline, that he would probably be one of the few survivors. He glanced at his sister, realising that she would have been lost in the alternate timeline.

He turned back to Piper Silayna to answer her earlier question. “Cait is a world that is rich with life,” he began. He took some time describing in intimate detail his favourite parts of his home. Every once in a while, Manny would interject and add some colour. It seemed to Crash that the ice was melting between her and Piper Silayna.

However, Manny noticed that her brother had given her a sanitised view of their home. “I love you, brother, but if I went to Cait expecting what you just told us, I'd be very disappointed.”

Crash just bowed his head slightly and kept quiet as his sister described the political, social and religious aspects of their home, which had recently gone through a massive upheaval that Crash, in good part, had led them through.

“I can see you're very proud of your brother,” Piper Silayna said, giving him credit.

Manny's tail twitched a little as her previous annoyance showed once more. She didn't trust this Piper yet. “What's not to love about him?” she said a little cagily.

Scanner butted in then as a thought came to him. “Captain Silayna,” he asked a little more formally than he had to. “How was your Cait destroyed?”

Silayna paused for a moment, casting her mind back. “If I remember rightly, it was a sudden, unexpected collapse of the star. It threw off a number of coronal mass emissions, one of which burned Cait to a cinder before it collapsed in on itself and became a white dwarf.” She tapped her teeth as she thought about it. “To this day, nobody knows why.”

Judd caught Piper's eye. “I do. In the Captain's timeline,” he said, indicating Silayna, “the dilithium comet hit earlier before anyone could stop it.” He frowned to himself. “I wonder why.”

A notion came to Piper and she put it to the test. She recalled seeing Klingon architecture while she was inside the comet and she wondered if it had been thrown into the past by some great future cataclysm. It would explain why the comet had somehow travelled halfway across the galaxy and still sported infrastructure that had been clearly Klingon in origin.

She looked her sister in the eye. “Has there been any supernovae or other big explosions in the Klingon sphere in your time?”

Piper Silayna blinked. How could she know that? “Yes, there has! About three months ago Praxis exploded. Caused a hell of a mess. A lot of their fleet was caught in the blast, as well as major damage to their planet.” She smirked. “Never were good at mining. It was just a matter

of time.”

Scanner caught Piper's eye. “Are you suggesting that the comet came from the *future*?” It was almost too incredible to believe. “Last time I looked, Praxis was still in one piece.”

“That's why Cait's still there,” Piper said, smiling to herself at her cleverness. “Don't you see? For some reason, Praxis exploded earlier in Suzette's timeline and that's why Cait was destroyed. We weren't there to catch it before it fell into the star.”

Piper Silayna looked from Piper and back to Scanner. “What you're saying is that my people missed it, but yours didn't.”

Not understanding why she was getting defensive, Piper said: “It's just another anomaly, that's all.”

Piper Silayna shook her head, not accepting it. “No, that's not it. If there's one thing I keep finding is that your timeline is better than mine. A whole lot less people die in yours.”

Crash tried to placate her. He handed her a pole with her cooked barrit on it. “It doesn't matter which timeline you're from, barrit tastes good in both of them.”

For a moment, it seemed like she was going to reject his offer, but hunger won out and she took it from him a little roughly. Crash didn't mind, but Piper noticed the Sandages had just lost a little more respect for her double.

Fed and tired, the crew all made their way to their

cabins after a long day. Piper's had been longer than most as they had left Earth later in the day and had to live through a few more hours of sunlight before nightfall.

Crash led them to their rooms and showed them which ones would be their own. Their names had been written with chalk above each one. It had been an odd thing to him wondering if he would have chosen the same rooms for each of them even if he hadn't seen them first in the future.

Piper slid open her door and noticed it was fairly sparse, but at least the bed was made with clean sheets.

Across the hall, the same was true of Silayna's room.

He led them down to the end of the grey-steel hall to a small door which he opened revealing the water shower. "We've got hot water now," he said with a measure of pride. He tapped the door next to it. "The head's in there."

Scanner's muffled: "IT'S BUSY!" came through it.

The three of them shared a knowing smile, then Piper gave her friend a hug. "Thanks for all you've done, Crash. We've got a lot to discuss in the morning."

He gave her a knowing smile. "That we do." He nodded to each in turn. "Captain, Captain. Good night."

He glided down the hallway, walking as all felines do, with an enormous amount of natural grace, before disappearing into his quarters.

The Pipers gave each other a quick smile. "Good night," they said together before retiring.

Piper closed the door to her room and checked the closet. There were a few clothes there, and she wondered if they had been left by the settlers who had come to this world, or by her thoughtful crew. She disrobed and tried on a few of the shirts before coming to an excellent leather jacket that she immediately fell in love with. “You're mine,” she said, holding it to herself.

She felt grimy, so she looked up and down the corridor and, seeing no-one, padded down the hall in her underwear, towel in hand and slipped into the shower. It took a moment for the warm water to come through, but after a week of stone cold showers, this one was bliss. She even found some soap and gave her hair a wash.

Not knowing how long it would last, she kept it short, towelled herself off then wrapped the towel around her midriff, feeling like a million dollars now she was cleaner than she had been for a while.

As she stepped back into the hall, she heard the door behind her open. She turned to look and saw Piper Silayna looking out. In the dim light it was hard to miss her green eye glowing. “What's up, Suzette?” she asked, still concerned for her from her earlier behaviour.

“Is the shower empty?”

It wasn't the question she expected, but Piper didn't want to push. Whatever was bothering her sister she would share in good time. She nodded. “After Lily's place, it's heaven.”

Silayna gave her a quick smile and stepped over to

the shower wearing only her towel. She slipped inside without another word.

Piper wondered at her odd behaviour, shook her head and decided that she would wait for her sister to come to her. She stepped back into her room and sat down on her bare metal chair, the surface cold on her exposed legs. She took another look around the room and her eyes lighted on an old-fashioned log book and pen. She wondered where it had come from, until she opened the first page and saw that the ship's previous owner had used it for that very purpose.

Captain's Log, April 15th, 2215. We've just left Earth on our way to our new home of Merrijig. Got twenty slabs of VB that should last us.

Piper narrowed her eyes at the entry. Nothing more was said about anything regarding the journey. As she continued to read she came to the realisation that the *Mount Buller*, as the ship had been dubbed for the one-way journey, had been bought second-hand with the single use in mind. As such, it was crewed by rank amateurs.

She flipped over a few pages. June 13th. Just ran out of beer. Still a month from destination. The crew's going to go nuts.

Knowing the ending, that the ship obviously arrived intact, Piper lost interest and closed the book. Then she had second thoughts, opened it once more and tore out the used pages. She then began fresh in her own handwriting.

Captain's Log,

What was the date? She'd ask Crash the next day.

She was about to continue and add the ship's name, but didn't know that either. There was no way she was going to continue calling it the *Mount Buller*. It was hardly inspiring. It needed something a bit more memorable. All the same, it had been a long day and she was past caring so she quickly dubbed it:

Starship Pterodactyl.

After an interesting day that started in 2063 and ended in 2213, Piper Silayna and I have found ourselves back in the company of some of my ship mates from my own time. It's clear they got here the same way as we did, but why they're here remains a mystery. I guess I'll find that out tomorrow.

The day seems to have been particularly trying for Suzette / Piper Silayna, as she's retreated into herself. Hopefully, I'll find that out tomorrow as well.

After the mission in 2063, I'm left wondering what's going on here and now. I've got a few suspicions, however. Whatever the G is up to, it's crafty, I'll give it that.

Piper

She put the pen down, leaned back in her chair and stretched. Realising she was even more tired than she thought, she headed over to her bunk, pulled back the sheets, dropped the towel and slid into it gratefully.

As she closed her eyes she heard a tap at the door. She covered her eyes with her hand and shook her head. "What did I do in a former life?" she asked the wall.

Realising the wall wasn't going to give her the answer, she called: "Come in," knowing full well who it was. Given their time together and their psychic resonance, as she had come to call it, it couldn't be anyone but her sister.

The door slid aside and Piper Silayna stepped inside, pulling it closed behind her. "Do you mind?"

Piper didn't want to be polite and lie, but she did anyway. "No. Make yourself comfortable." She wondered to herself a little then that, since they had arrived in this time, their relationship had shifted. Something had changed, and she felt a distance had opened up between them. She realised even her language had become a little more formal.

Annoyed at herself for letting it happen, she drew her blanket around her and sat up, leaning back against the wall. She crossed her legs and put on her friendliest smile. "Things have gotten a little weird, haven't they?" she said. Wanting her sister to feel more welcome, she patted the bed next to her.

Silayna took the offer and padded over to Piper in

her bare feet and granny nightie. Piper lifted the blanket and she slid under it and sat, her legs dangling as she had yet to become as flexible as her sister. “I can't help but feel like I'm an uninvited guest,” she said. “These people are *your* friends who have come back in time because they love and respect you.” She held her hands out wide demonstratively. “Do you see any of mine?”

Piper gritted her teeth. The absence of Suzette's people had caught her attention as well. “No, I don't,” she said, trying to put on a positive spin. “But that doesn't mean they're not going to show up. It could be that the Guardian has something else for them to do.”

Silayna shook her head, her freshly washed hair not quite dry yet, making her look like she had just come in out of the rain. “I'm not so sure.” She rubbed her metal cheek once more, which she always did when she was self-conscious. “I've been a first class bitch to my crew. Even Merete was getting tired of me, and she's been my closest friend since the Academy – aside from Brian.”

Piper didn't speak. She just let her sister vent. She couldn't lie to Suzette. She had seen the crew of the *Ingram* and noticed right away a difference in the way they related. She found them tightly strung.

“Then I see how your people talk to you, how they relate to you, and I can't help but be envious.” She sounded far away at that moment, and Piper watched as she rubbed her cheek once again. “Ever since....I've been angry at the world. I've pushed everyone away.”

Piper rubbed her sister's shoulder, allowing the

contact to share her feelings. “You can always stop doing it.” She took her hand and reached out and ran the back of her fingers over both of Suzette's cheeks. “This isn't what makes you truly you.” She lowered her hand and put her palm between her breasts. “*This* is what makes you either a kind or cruel person.” She lifted her palm and cupped her metal cheek. “How people react to your prosthesis is their problem. However, how you respond to them is *yours*. You can either get angry all the time or teach them you're a worthwhile person regardless of your looks. Be the better person.”

Through her touch, Piper felt her sister's feelings run from being comforted to a flash of anger and back again. It was as if she was at war with herself. Tears glistened in the corner of her eye. “I'm just so tired of being alone,” she said, her throat tight. She looked Susanna in the eyes and said: “When we met, you seemed like a cruel reminder of what I could have been like. I hated you for that. Then I got past that and appreciated you as an individual and stopped constantly trying to compare myself with you.” She put on a brave smile. “I wanted you to teach me to come out of my shell. I still do.”

Although she didn't move, Susanna knew instinctively Suzette needed to be held. She slid over next to her and wrapped her arms around her, cheek to cheek. “I may not always appreciate you,” she said, “but I always want to be here for you. You deserve that much.” She blew a lock of brunette hair out of her face as Suzette did

with Susanna's honey blonde.

Up close, Suzette's electronic eye zoomed in and said: "Your roots are showing."

They let go of one another but stayed close. With their legs touching, they were able to maintain an emotional link of mutual friendship and understanding.

Susanna fluffed her hair and said: "I'm thinking of cutting it short and dying it red. I want to be a little less recognisable to the time agents."

Suzette thought about it for a moment, then said: "I think I'll join you in that. At least from the back we'll each be able to pass for the other. You never know when that might come in handy."

"Cool. We'll set it up when we can." As they sat there in a moment of silence where they didn't have to speak, but simply enjoyed having not only one another's presence, but an intimate knowledge of how the other felt, they considered the future. It was broken by the sensation of another dull thud in the distance and a small vibration under them. Both of them had noticed it from time to time during the day. They switched their dialogue to non-verbal.

What the hell is that? Susanna asked, bothered.

No idea. Could be seismic. Suzette knew she was stretching the realms of possibility, but she had to at least venture something. *When the scanners are functional, why don't we ask Mister Sandage to check it out?*

Without saying, or thinking a word, Susanna concurred. After a moment's peace, she posed: *Do you get*

the feeling we're being used? She was curious what her sister thought.

You mean, like there's someone else pulling the strings and we're nothing more than marionettes? Yeah. It's frustrating.

You know, I would never have pegged the Guardian of Forever with being so crafty. It seems to be putting us in places to suit an agenda. Why it seems to have a vested interest, I don't know.

Suzette gave a tight grin. *You mean, other than saving its own neck when the universe finally totally pulls itself apart in less than a millennia?*

Susanna nodded. *Yes. If it was just a machine, it really shouldn't care. In fact, in a way it should be a comfort for it that there will come a day when it will go offline rather than go on indefinitely.*

Suzette shifted a little, suddenly uncomfortable. It wasn't the mattress, however, it was their line of insight. *You're right. Curious that nobody had a problem with the crew of the Enterprise-E being there in 2063, but all hell broke loose when we showed up. It was like their presence was a known positive and ours was an unknown.*

Suddenly feeling a little cold, Susanna instinctively drew closer to Suzette. As they were in one another's minds, they tended to act as one person, so if one part was in need, the other would naturally fill it. The women wrapped their legs around each other's and drew from the shared body heat.

Susanna continued their musing. *Exactly. The time*

agents didn't have a problem with them because their actions saved the town. But they didn't know that the alien attack had damaged the Phoenix's ability for fire its rockets. If we weren't there the take off would have been a disaster.

We had to be there. Suzette's notion shook the women. The realisation that their presence was a necessary part of history, other than supplying a navigational deflector that may or may not have been essential was breath taking.

Somehow, the universes had to diverge for history to be complete. Susanna looked her sister in the eye. *I find it hard to believe it took the end of the universe to make history work as it should. I don't think even the Guardian is that smart, or ruthless.*

As one, they drew a deep breath and tried to relax. They were uncomfortable with the direction their discussion was going. By mutual consent, they left it for another time.

What's our next step? They asked themselves.

22nd March, 2233.

The date came to the forefront of their consciousness. However, it triggered different reactions.

Jim's birthday.

The day the Nerada destroyed the Kelvin.

Each sucked in a breath. It was the day everything changed for them both.

Suzette asked: *How well do you know James Kirk?* As she “spoke” she could not help but share some of her

animosity towards the *Enterprise's* captain.

Feelings of friendship and camaraderie flooded through Susanna into her sister. Instead of giving her words, she took a few minutes to share some of her adventures with Jim, including his loss of his ship and son. Her most recent recollection was of a man who was living to make a difference for as long as he could, knowing there was only a small amount of sand left in the glass.

How about his birth?

Uneventful. Winona returned to Earth shortly after to raise Jim and Sam in Iowa. What do you know about it?

Suddenly, both women's minds were flooded with images of space-born terror. They saw what appeared to be some kind of event horizon in space out of which an enormous starship emerged that looked like it was made out of black rapiers and scimitars and which proved to be as deadly. The Starship *Kelvin*, which just seemed to be curious, was mercilessly cut to pieces before its crew abandoned and its acting captain put it on a suicide trajectory into the *Nerada* to save the fleeing shuttles.

Their view shifted to the interior of the last shuttle that contained a face that Susanna was able to identify. Winona Kirk, covered in sweat and wearing a hospital gown, clutched her newborn son and wept for both joy for the new life and loss for her husband who had just sacrificed himself to save them. She kept muttering something in the baby's ear: "Daddy loves you, Jim. Daddy loves you, Jim."

Their perception shifted to the cockpit where the

pilots, who looked harried, exchanged a worried look. "It's going to take a week to get to Starbase Three," one said.

His fellow nodded. "The Euclidean system is light years from anywhere."

For a second, they could see the navigational chart on the screen, with their exact stardate and location displayed. The image burned itself into their minds.

As quickly as the vision began, it suddenly stopped. Both women sat back, gasping at just how real it was. They could still smell the plastics and sweat from the inside of the shuttle.

What the hell was that?

Neither of them was certain which of them thought it, and it didn't matter, either. It resonated with both of them.

It's not a memory, or a vision of the past. What we saw is still future. That's what's going to happen next year.

They looked each other in the eye. *Unless we stop it.*

Without a thought, Susanna jumped out of bed and padded over to her desk. She opened the log to the next page and, starting with the Stardate and location, wrote down everything she could remember.

Suzette carried over the blanket and wrapped her sister. "The last thing we need is you coming down with a cold," she said gently.

Susanna looked up at her and gave her a warm smile of thanks. "Can you help me with this? I don't want to miss a detail."

Suzette checked over the numbers and confirmed them. "I'm not certain we need to remember much more than that," she said. She placed her right hand on the back of Susanna's neck, reinforcing their link. *And besides* – she flashed an image that was just as clear as when she saw it the first time – *I'm not sure I can ever forget what I saw. Can you?*

Both of them shuddered involuntarily. There was no way they were going to forget it any time soon. All the same, they both realised the need to put it down in writing. The human memory is a very fragile thing.

I'm off to bed. Suzette let go of her and stretched. "I'm tired and tomorrow's going to be a big day, I'm sure." She leaned forward and kissed Susanna on the cheek. "Thanks for being a true friend."

Susanna turned and pecked her back. "Get a good night's sleep. I'm going to give you a real workout tomorrow." She flexed her spine, still feeling some of the aches left over from her electrocution. "I could use one, too."

With a cheeky grin, Suzette said: "Besides, I have to get used to sleeping on my own again. You did a great job of keeping the bed warm at night. Now, I've got to create my own heat. Do you think this thing has electric blankets?"

Susanna simply shrugged. Honestly she said: "You know, I'm going to miss it, too." She gave her a little smile. "Good night, Suzette."

"Good night, Susanna."

She felt a certain sadness once Suzette left the room, like a part of herself was gone. She took a certain amount of solace from the fact that she could still sense her sister's thoughts. The universe was an amazing place, she thought, as she turned back to the log and continued writing.

Chapter Six

The morning was wet and miserable, with a cold front having moved through overnight. The area had been lashed by driving winds and hail, effectively dousing the fire that had been lit the night before. Debris littered the area, with fallen branches evident from a number of older trees. Eucalypts have a habit of doing that in bad weather.

As the Pipers stood in the doorway looking out, they decided that their morning workout would have to be indoors.

They began clearing the small number of left-over crates, stacking them neatly against the wall. It left them with a squarish space roughly ten metres on each side. It wasn't quite what they would have liked, but it would have to do.

Each was dressed in the loosest clothing they could find in their closets, a mix of oversized t-shirts and tracksuit pants, comfortable clothes that had never quite gone out of style.

Suzette looked down at her plain blue top and said: "I miss my "face" shirt."

Susanna tilted her head to the side and said deadpan: "Why? Don't you think my boobs are worth looking at?"

They laughed together then took each other's hand, creating a link between them. Once they started to think as one they began their stretches before practising the kata Susanna had taught Suzette.

Focussed as they were on their exercise, they had no idea they had an audience. Standing on the railing at the back of the deck that led upstairs to the sleeping areas, Crash, Manny and Scanner watched them as they moved about the metal floor.

Scanner leaned in towards his wife and whispered: “How are they able to move about so....” he searched for the right word, “synchronised?”

Crash, who had overheard, leaned in on Manny's other side and said just as quietly: “Practice, I guess. We don't know how long they were in 2063 for.”

Scanner nodded, but his wife shot her brother down. “No, it's not that. Captain Silayna's had some practice, for sure. But I happen to know the Captain's a latent reader, and right now I can sense their thoughts. They're linked in their minds and working together as one. That's how Silayna is following the Captain.”

Her observation was confirmed when Silayna stumbled and had to catch herself. Piper stopped, stepped over and helped her up. Instead of saying anything out loud, it was clear both knew what the other was thinking. Piper led her back to their start position and they began again.

Scanner and Manny moved off to begin preparing breakfast while Crash continued to watch. He felt no shame watching them, but wondered to himself for a moment that things were going to change again. During his time commanding the *Jolly Roger* and since they arrived on Merrijig, he was in charge. While his fellows

were fairly independent and needed an absolute minimum of oversight, the final decisions had been his.

Now the game had changed. He was once more under Piper's command, as she had seniority and, without saying, she had taken over, as she should. All the same, he found it a little hard to hand over the reigns. He liked being in command. He relished the authority his new rank afforded him.

Behind him, he could hear his sister and brother-in-law pottering around in the kitchen. He knew Scanner was preparing oatmeal for himself and the other humans, while Manny was simply preparing a couple of barrits each for them to eat raw. He watched Piper and her double for a moment more before walking into the kitchen to get himself a bowl of water. Life seemed to be all about change, he mused.

Shortly after, most of the crew of the *Pterodactyl* sat about their metal dining table. Carman made his usual face at the oatmeal, but there were precious few choices on this planet. "I just can't get used to eating glue," he muttered in his Greco-English accent.

Scanner waved his spoon in the direction of Carman's bowl. "Hey, at least you've got milk and sugar this morning." Unlike the day before was the unspoken message.

"Thanks for fixing the refrigerator, Scanner," Jason said. "At least now our food'll keep a while longer."

It was at that point that Piper wandered in with her

sister. The Captain was only slightly winded, while Silayna was dripping with sweat. Piper noted how Jason had spoken to Scanner and filed it away for future reference. "I would have thought the drive systems would be the priority," Piper said.

As one, the rest of her team laughed. Scanner spoke up. "Piper, you have no idea what condition this tub was in when we first arrived." He pointed upwards. "There wasn't enough power in her to turn on a light bulb."

Multiple questions warred in Piper's mind, each demanding they be asked first. Instead, she was beaten by Silayna. "If you've achieved all this," she narrowed her eyes, "just how long have you been here for?"

Crash looked up at the makeshift calendar on the wall. "A month tomorrow, Ma'am."

To their surprise, Captain Silayna gave him a broad smile. "No need for formalities, Krashtallash. Call me Suzette. I got used to going by that name while we were in the 21st."

Krashtallash's eyes widened curiously. He turned to Piper, and asked the question without voicing it.

She gave him a tight, but playful grin. "Susanna," she said. She searched his face, wondering what his reaction was going to be.

After a moment of keeping her in suspense, he laughed in his basso voice. "I choose to take that as a compliment," he said merrily. "Considering also that I know who she's named after." He gave a nod to Suzette. "Captain DuQuesne would be honoured." He spoke of the

late commander of the *U.S.S. Firebrand*.

The moment also brought to mind the fact that he hadn't seen his wife or newborn kits for a month. He was aware that the Guardian would bring him back within moments of his leaving, so Susanna would hardly know he was gone, but in the meantime he was still missing his family.

Piper knew her friend well enough to know what was going through his mind. "I know you miss her, Crash, but I'm afraid the wait's going to be a bit longer than you might imagine."

Now she had everybody's attention, she revealed: "We're here to stop a ship from the future – the *Nerada* – from destroying the *U.S.S. Kelvin*. That won't take place until March next year."

Scanner, Manny and Crash all shared a look that spoke volumes. They were going to be away from their families for the better part of a year. It was a bitter pill to swallow.

"At least they won't have a chance to miss us," Manny said, doing her best to find some good in their situation. "We should be gone only minutes to them." The words were there, but it was a shallow consolation.

Piper and Suzette pulled up chairs to the table. Before they could continue, Manny stood and served the remainder of the oatmeal into two bowls and placed the steaming meals before them. "The replicator is still on the list of things that need repairing," she said cheerlessly.

Scanner shrugged. "Actually, I've looked at it and

it's not bad. The fact is, it won't work until I can get this tub's warp drive on line, and that won't be for at least two weeks.”

Considering time was working against them, this was not good news to the crew. “Why's that?” Piper asked. She didn't frame it as a challenge, and it wasn't received as such.

“No deuterium. I brought a small power cell with me, but I've had to put it aside until I've got enough deuterium in the tank to make just a gram of anti-matter. Once I've got the core going, as long as I've got a decent amount of deuterium, I can get the anti-matter generator going and convert some of the deuterium and keep the engine running. Once that's done, we'll be able to draw what we need from Merrijig's atmosphere. There's enough here to keep us going for a while.” He looked at Piper in a way that told her that a big *but* was coming.

“*But*, the problem is that there's not much deuterium in the water here. I've got pumps working, taking fresh water from the nearby creek – that's what you showered in – and as it's filtered it's extracting deuterium. The problem is that you could count the atoms we're collecting daily easily. It's going to take time.” He sighed, resigned. Still, where Judd was, there was a silver lining.

“At least it gives us plenty of time to fix what needs doing.” He gave the newcomers a sly look. “And now I've got two more sets of hands, it's going to go even faster.” Content he finally got one over on his captain, he scraped the last of his oatmeal off the bottom of his bowl and

downed it with a smile. “It may be one of the simplest meals ever invented, but at least it's better than nothing,” he said.

Before Piper could say a word, Krashtallash had a few words of encouragement and guidance. “Just remember folks, when you're out there hunting barrits, keep an eye out for gold. Old creek beds are good for it and it would be good to have something to buy the beer with.” He gave Piper a look and suddenly realised he may have spoken out of turn. “Sorry, Captain.”

As Piper finished her mouthful she turned up the tip of her lips in mild mirth. She found it odd that Crash still called her “Captain” even though now they were the same rank. Traditionally, they could go by “Captain X” or even their first name if they were well enough acquainted. It was if he, too, didn't want things to change. Perhaps his promotion wasn't that well received.

She put down her spoon and said thoughtfully: “You've all be working on this project for the last month and I can see that protocol has become a little relaxed. It's not like we're on a starship at the moment.” She indicated the room around them and the ship it housed. “In fact, we're going to have to do things very differently for a while.” She suddenly made a decision. “I don't want anyone calling me “Captain” from now on. Neither do I want you referring to me by my name. Like Suzette, I want to be referred to as Susanna.” She gave Crash an apologetic grin. “Sorry, Crash, but I've gotten used to it.”

Picking up the thread, Suzette continued. “We're

people out of time and on a mission. When we were in 2063 we had time agents from the future turn up and try to kill us.”

A collective gasp came from their friends.

Suzette added: “We were able to keep ourselves from being found by those in the future by adopting different names and by not getting our photos taken.” She chuckled then, surprising the others. “It didn't stop us from getting ourselves into the history books, though.”

Since he had been listening to the Pipers, Scanner had been bothered by something they said. Now Suzette gave him the last piece of the puzzle he could see the whole picture. He pointed at the two in turn, voicing his amazement at his discovery. “You two are Susanna and Suzette Lee, aren't you?! You guys were the ones who invented the navigational deflector they used on the *Phoenix!*”

Piper/Susanna put her hands up in surrender. “Guilty as charged!”

Silent until now, Jason interjected: “But what about the Temporal Prime Directive?”

Ignoring him, Scanner, who was still seeing only parts of the whole and trying to understand what he was contemplating, blurted: “When you arrived, you noticed the *Phoenix* didn't have a navigational deflector, didn't you? So you *invented* it?”

Suzette looked at both of them in turn. “It was either the Temporal Prime Directive or there was a real chance Zefram Cochrane would have never made it home.

So yes, we *invented* it.” She looked at Scanner with laughter in her eyes. “So much for staying out of history's way.”

Susanna added: “We tried.”

Scanner said: “I don't get it. If you guys were there, what happened to the *real* Lee sisters?”

Like Deanna Troi before her, Manny saw into the women and said: “They *are* the real Lee sisters. They didn't intend to pretend to be anyone.”

At his end of the table, Carman interjected: “You mean to tell us that your being there was a natural part of history?” His head was spinning as he tried to understand it. “I don't get it.”

Crash sighed. “It's called a Predestination Paradox. A notion in Temporal Physics that says that, sometimes, effect can precede cause. Like a man travelling back in time, meeting his grandmother as a young woman, inseminating her and becoming his own grandfather.”

“Ewww,” Jason said, repulsed. “That's gross.”

Crash just looked at him and put his overreaction down to his being human. “If you say so, Jason,” he conceded. He turned back to Piper and almost called her by name, but caught himself just in time. “Susanna, how long were the two of you *in* 2063?”

The Pipers turned to each other, trying to remember. “We got there on the 1st, didn't we?” Suzette asked, uncertain.

Susanna nodded. “Yes, it was the First. Remember that April Fool's crack?”

They turned and answered together: "Six days."

Jason said: "Cool! That means we're actually catching up to you in age, Ca... Susanna." The last came out clumsily, as if he could not be entirely comfortable calling her that.

All the same, the joke was appreciated and they all shared a chuckle.

Susanna just looked at Jason and said mock-serious: "And that's about as close as you're ever going to come."

As Jason, Carman and Suzette smiled, Susanna noticed the expression on the others changed, as if they knew something they weren't telling. They certainly weren't laughing. She looked into Crash's eyes and all he could do was shake his head, no. There were some things he couldn't tell her, that was clear.

The Pipers went back to their oatmeal and ate while Susanna turned the situation over in her mind. The dynamic was different here and it wasn't necessarily a bad thing.

Suzette dropped her left hand and placed it on an Susanna's back where her shirt had ridden up a little. It was enough for them to make a connection. *I know what you're thinking.*

What's that?

You're going to leave Crash in command until we're ready to leave, aren't you?

What made you think that?

I know you too well.

"You're doing it again."

Manny's words from across the table were clearly directed at them and broke their spell. Suzette moved her hand off Susanna's skin and pushed herself off the chair a little, as if she was trying to get comfortable.

Piper looked a little sideways at Amantasandage. "What do you mean?"

Manny's eyes widened a little as if to say: Do you really think I'm that stupid? "I know you're capable of talking to each other in your heads. What I don't think you realise is that, when you're touching, the pair of you actually amplify your thoughts. I can hear you too."

Embarrassed, both women blushed red. Neither knew what to say.

"I'm not telling you to put you to shame," Manny continued, trying to put them at ease. "Just to let you know, OK?"

Both Pipers realised they had been holding their breath. They let it go in a rush. "All right, Manny," they said in unison before Susanna added: "We'll try to be more careful for your sake."

Manny's whiskers arched forward gratefully. "By the way," she said, thinking back. "What can you tell me about a ship that's made of knives and a baby being born in a shuttle?"

Scanner smiled as he realised the origin of his wife's vision was his captain and friend. "Yeah, what about it, *Susanna*?"

That day was a busy one as Crash spent a good part

of it showing the Pipers what had been achieved and what still needed to be done. The scales still weighed heavier for the latter, but each battle won came closer to winning the war.

“Make sure you're wearing something to keep you warm,” he finished with. “It's another lousy day on Planet Merrijig.”

He sent out his usual hunting parties – they had to eat – while he took his Captains down to meet the locals. “You've already seen the bar, so half the town already knows you're here.”

Together, they walked down the now muddy street to the General Store. Fortunately, both women had found a pair of boots in the bottom of their closets. They weren't a perfect fit, but right now, they were just glad for the warmth.

They looked up at what appeared to be the biggest building in the street next to the Town Hall and the pub. It was showing its age, made of wood cut from local trees and painted with enamel that was in dire need of a recoat. The sign above the verandah stated simply “General Store” in fading black letters on what might once have been white. The windows were filled with bric-a-brac, second-hand items – including farming equipment – and horse riding tack.

Indicating the building, Crash said: “The other half comes through here. If you need pretty much anything on Merrijig, this is where you'll find it, or it's simply not on the planet.”

The women understood the implications. Sooner or later, everyone would come through this place.

Together with Crash, they mounted the creaking steps, pulled open the fly-wire door with the bell attached, which rang out its warning, and entered.

It was reasonably well lit and filled with shelves sporting just about everything. They wandered around the store, the Pipers spending their time just shopping. They looked at one another. “Do you do as little of this as I do?” Suzette asked.

Susanna nodded. “It's not that I'm not interested, it's just that there's never any time.”

Her sister looked over at Crash. “All the more reason, don't you think?”

Susanna thought to herself: It would be nice to take a back seat for a while. She knew that it had been some time since she'd had a break of any sort.

Having spent some time in two different times in places where life was led in a more laid-back fashion, she was beginning to understand the appeal. Her life had been spent at warp speed since her youth, and she had rarely had a chance to slow down. Now it had been forced upon her, she was seeing the other side and she had to admit that she liked it.

Their shopping was interrupted by the appearance of a very fit man in his mid-thirties who wore a welcoming smile. Susanna noticed his eyes were green and he had laugh lines around them. He was clean shaven, his fair hair neatly pulled back into a pony-tail. He gave her the

impression of a man who spent a lot of time enjoying himself. “Good morning, ladies,” he said in a friendly, educated voice. “Can I help you?”

The women both realised that he had taken the appearance of two complete strangers entirely in his stride. Odd.

Crash appeared at the end of their aisle with a basket full of shopping. “Hey, Jack,” he said. “These are the ladies I told you we were waiting for. They're Susanna and Suzette.”

Jack shook their hands warmly. “Welcome to Eureka Creek,” he said. To Susanna's surprise, he lingered with Suzette. He seemed genuinely interested in her, and she couldn't help but wonder if he was simply fascinated with her prosthetic. “You've been through the wars, haven't you, love?” He said it with such an air of disarming charm that Suzette was not put off by it.

Instead of getting angry, she chose to take it as simply friendly interest. “It's a long story,” she said with a shy smile. “The short of it is: don't step into phaser beams.” She deliberately focussed in sharply on his eyes, causing them to hear the faint whirr of her artificial eye adjusting. “You might wind up looking like a Terminator.”

It was a movie they'd had the chance to watch whilst in the 21st Century living with Lily. She had an excellent collection.

Susanna looked at her sister and thought: Now you think of it... On the flip side, she worried that Suzette had taken his comment personally and her words were the

opening salvo in World War Four. She interjected: "We hardly notice any more." She tried to steer his attention towards her. "How long have you been on Merrijig?"

Jack ignored her. He had eyes only for Suzette. "Long enough," he said, brushing Susanna off. To Suzette, he said: "How long will you be in town for?"

Stunned by the sudden attention, Suzette blushed and even fluttered her eyelashes.

In Susanna's eyes, she looked like a teenager being asked to the prom by the school's biggest hunk.

For a moment, Suzette was caught without a thing to say. Jack almost repeated himself when she blurted: "A long time if it takes forever to get the ship going."

The words were music to Jack's soul. "Then perhaps we could hang out. I'd like to get to know you before you have to leave."

Smooth, thought Susanna. She couldn't help thinking Suzette was spoken for. Brian was back in the future waiting for her.

In her mind she started. On that point she had to wonder: was he? To top it off, if they were successful, *that* Brian would cease to exist, their marriage would never have happened.

With that thought, she had to admit to herself that if they achieved what they were setting out to do her sister would never have existed, either. The thought opened a pit in her stomach.

A voice inside her said: But she's you, anyway. She's just a path that you didn't follow.

The notion warred against experience. Although they carried identical DNA and fingerprints, their personalities had diverged. They were different people, just as identical twins are only so in name. There was more to them than met the eye. As Jack talked to her sister, she was beginning to see it. The man saw something in Suzette that was absent in her. Whatever it was, she had no idea, but she had to admit it seemed to be true.

Crash appeared at the end of the aisle once more. "All done here, ladies." It was a less than subtle hint to wrap it up.

At least Jack was gracious enough to let them go. With old style courtesy, he shook Susanna's hand, then Suzette's. Both women noticed he lingered the second time. "Nice to meet you." Pointedly to Suzette: "I'll be seein' you."

He turned and joined Crash at the counter. The Pipers watched as Crash paid for the items with a small gold nugget. They remembered his mentioning looking for gold and now realised the locals used the precious metal for currency. They glanced at one another.

"Whatever works," Susanna muttered. As she turned to go a thought came to her. She stopped and looked Jack in the eye. "By the way, you wouldn't happen to know what those dull thuds are I can hear from time to time?"

He stared straight back. "I heard there's a mining operation about ten miles away. I think they're mining bauxite."

It didn't matter what century you were in, bauxite was a worthwhile commodity. In her day, it was used mainly for making windows. All the same, the notion that there was mining going on struck on odd note with her. A people who wanted to live a life devoted to the simpler things would hardly be tearing holes in their world to mine for minerals.

Before Susanna could respond Jack added: "It helps pay the bills around here. There are only so many things you can buy with a cow."

He had a point, so she let it go. She gave him a friendly smile. "I'll see you around," she said over his shoulder as she stepped out the door.

Once outside, they revelled in the warm, bright sun that had made an appearance through the thick cloud cover.

"He's cute," Suzette said, sounding like the schoolgirl her sister had wondered about earlier.

"You're taken," Susanna said, bringing her back to ground. "Last time I looked, you're still married."

"Killjoy." Her sister only injected a little heat. "There's no reason why the two of us can't hang out though. He knows we're leaving as soon as the ship's ready, doesn't he?"

Krashtallash, who had been silent up to this point, answered truthfully. "He knows we plan on leaving in the planet, yes." He didn't know if he wanted to get in the middle of this conversation. He made as if to run on ahead when Susanna pulled him up short. Now they were out of town on the path up to the ship she was confident they

could talk in peace.

“Captain Krashtallash.”

The formality brought the realisation to Crash that he was still very much under her command. “Yes, sir.” He took up the at-ease stance.

Susanna sighed. “Relax, Crash, I'm not going to rain on your parade.”

The saying was lost on him, but he knew she was just trying to put him at ease. He put his head to the side and waited.

“The two of us have talked and decided that, until it's time to go, it's best to leave you running the show. You've had everyone organised and working well together that the last thing we want to do is turn up and upset the balance. Naturally, we'll be here if you need any advice but, until the job's finished, consider us part of *your* team. If you've got a job for us, we're here!”

Krashtallash, his head still to the side, suddenly smiled.

“You did have to volunteer us for *any* job, didn't you?”

A light drizzle was falling as the Pipers worked together to drag the three inch pipe over to the old mine ventilation shaft. Fortunately, it was long enough and the slope was downhill, but it was still a nasty job. Suzette scowled as the two of them heaved. “I was thinking, maybe he'll get us to fix the impulse drive or clean out the fuel lines on the atmospheric jets, but *no*, the first thing he

gets us to do is dump the ship's sewage tank.”

Susanna wasn't certain whether she should defend Crash or heap it on him as well. She decided to walk the fence. “I'm not wrapped with the job, either. But you've got to admit that it has to be done. Every time I've flushed the head I've gotten a whiff of fifty year old faeces.”

Like Jason before her, Suzette said: “Ewww,” whilst she kept pulling while trying not to slip in the mud. The flexible hose played out behind them. “I understand the job needs to be done, I just wish they had done it before we got here.” She slipped and dropped a knee in a mud puddle. “And certainly *not* today.”

Susanna helped her up and found she had to agree. “I suppose the priority is to get the stink out of the ship.”

They finally reached the shaft and managed to push about a metre of it into the opening. “That should do,” Suzette said, glad that part was over. They headed back to the ship and made their way past the landing struts at the base, then crawled to where the sullage outlet was located, grateful that the ship's wings had kept the underside dry.

Susanna tried to slide the cover open, but it refused to budge. Suzette turned and gave it a kick with the heel of her boot. It moved slightly, so she repeated the exercise.

“Nearly got it,” Susanna said as she kicked one more time.

Together, they picked up the end of the pipe and tried to connect it to the newly exposed outlet. Another problem became clear when they discovered the locking tabs had been broken off the pipe. There was no way to

hold it on other than by hand.

The women eyed each other warily. “Rock, paper, scissors,” they said together.

Without a beat, they started. Suzette won the first round with scissors over paper.

Susanna took the second with rock over scissors.

It was down to the wire. One, two, three.

Paper covered rock. Susanna won.

The only way they were going to get the job done was to get in close. Suzette picked up the nozzle and placed it over the form fitting outlet, holding it tight. She gave her sister a nod, and held on tight as Susanna pulled the release lever.

To their relief, the effluent ran freely down the tube, flexing all the way to the shaft where they could hear it splattering on the rocks.

“Thank God,” Suzette said, still holding on tight.

About fifteen seconds later, with no end in sight, they heard something get jammed in the outlet, slowing the flow to a trickle.

“I don't *want* to know what that is,” Susanna said, grimacing. She gave the mechanism a thump with her closed fist, to no effect. She sat back and gave it a swift kick instead.

Whatever it was dislodged and slipped into the pipe. However, whatever it was was heavy and it caused Suzette to lose her grip. It lost the seal against the outlet and showered her with disgusting gunk.

As both women gagged, Suzette forced the nozzle

back on and stemmed the flow. Half a minute later the last ran out, allowing Susanna to close the valve and Suzette to drop the hose. As she did so, some remaining fluid splashed out and covered Susanna's clothes.

“Yuk!” they said in harmony as they quickly crawled out from under the ship. They immediately headed for the loading hatch and the shower upstairs.

They were caught at the door by Amantasandage, whose nose wrinkled up as soon as she came within ten feet of them. “No way you're coming in here smelling like *that*,” she said, thoroughly revolted. “We'll never get the smell out!”

Both women paused. Susanna was particularly aware of just how sensitive the Caitian nose was. Manny and her brother needed to be able to eat in this place.

She considered alternatives and came to the only one available. “Fine,” she said, annoyed and not afraid to voice it. “Bring some towels and a fresh set of clothes down to the creek. I saw a spot over there,” she pointed off to the right, “where it's deep enough to bathe. Warn the men to keep away if they know what's good for them.”

Manny nodded. It was a fair compromise. “I'll see you there,” she said before disappearing inside.

Suzette turned to her sister. “You're not serious,” she said.

Susanna sighed deeply. “I'm afraid I am.” She looked skyward. “At least it's stopped raining.” She wore a hopeful smile. “Perhaps the sun will even come out.”

“You know, this would go a hell of a lot easier if we had an grenade.”

It was another of those moments when Carman Valastro wondered what planet Jason Nunn really came from. It was as if the people of his home town courted disaster. He looked at his companion warily, wondering if he had one in his bag and he was just pulling his leg. Knowing his history, he wouldn't put it past him. “That would be overkill. What is the thinking here? The barrits are intelligent enough to see a grenade rolling into their burrow and, screaming “Run!” they will coming scurrying outside where you will pick them off? And what if they didn't? We would have a crater full of debris where we would not be able to sort the dirt from the barrit pieces.” He turned from their place watching the barrit warren and gave up. They had been watching the entrance for an hour with no results. “I say we go back to the ship.” He indicated the six barrits they had already caught. “These will do us.”

Jason pursed his lips as a child does when they're told “no, you can't have that lolly”. “Okay,” he said before snatching up his rifle and quick firing at the burrow entrance. He walked over and picked up his prize: a big, five kilo barrit that he had shot through the head. “Now, *that* was worth the wait.”

Content to call it a day, he slung the corpse over back of his horse and the two of them made their way home. “It's good to have the Captain back,” Carman said. “I've missed her.”

“Yeah,” Jason said. “Although her robotic double makes me wonder sometimes.”

Carman nodded. “She does take a bit of getting used to. It's weird, though. They're so much alike in most ways...”

“But in the ones that matter,” Jason finished, “not so much. She gets on my nerves.”

“Is it her eye?” Carman asked. “If it is, you should know better. Lots of people have prosthetics.”

Jason wrinkled his nose up as if he has smelled something unsavoury. “No, it's not that. Captain Piper...Susanna is the sort of person I want to follow. Suzette just stands there and expects me to without giving me a reason to.”

His friend shook his head. “Jason, you should consider yourself fortunate you serve on the *Millennium*. I've known many Captains who are capable commanders, but terrible leaders. And as we are Starfleet officers, it's not for us to question their command styles. It's our job to follow orders.”

Jason mulled it over for a few moments then simply said: “Message received.”

Shortly after, they arrived at the ship, corralled their horses and put away their saddles and tack. As they were lugging their catch up to the hatchway they heard a scream from the direction of the stream. Both of them recognised their Captain's voice.

Without a thought, the two of them dropped their barrits and took off at a run, Jason making certain he still

had his rifle.

Behind them, Manny appeared at the door with towels in her arms and wondered why a bunch of freshly killed barrits were just lying on the ground. She heard trees rustling and looked off towards the creek to see the men running as if they were on fire. It took her a moment to realise what they were doing when she heard Piper squeal again.

“Jason, Carman! No!” she cried and took off after them.

She reached them at the same time they found the creek. Fortunately, both Pipers were submerged up to their necks with their arms crossed over their chests as they shivered in the cold water.

“Captain! Are you all right?” Carman asked concerned. Then realisation sunk in and he grabbed his partner and turned their backs. “Sorry, Captain!” he said, embarrassed.

Jason, who had turned bright red, said nothing. He simply started walking back to the ship.

Suzette wasn't going to let him go without saying something. “Mister Nunn! Thank you for your chivalry!”

“It's just the water's freezing!” Susanna added.

Carman, who had begun following his friend, said without turning his back: “You have our apologies, ladies. I hope you enjoy your bath.”

Embarrassed, Manny just looked at the women and shrugged. “I'm sorry. I didn't know they were there until it was too late.”

Susanna just gave her a look of long suffering. “Just another day in the service of the fleet,” she said before taking a deep breath and ducking her head under the water.

Out the back of the General Store was a water tower. It served not only the store but a number of other buildings. Jack was generous that way.

He found it a useful place to keep watch on what was happening in town when things were slow – as they were this day. The foul weather was keeping people at home.

All the same, he liked to climb up the ladder and walk around the narrow platform at the tank's base and use his binoculars to look for fires, riders, anything that would alleviate his boredom.

Today he stood there with his glasses trained on the old ship. He had noticed an increase in activity around it. They were obviously serious in their intention to make it fly again.

He had even watched the women drag out the sullage hose. He had guessed what they were doing and thought it might be worth a laugh. “Careful, ladies,” he said to himself.

When the pipe shifted and both women were covered he smiled and let out a chuckle. “Now that's a crap job,” he commented. “Time for the shower.”

He was just about to give up on watching them when they headed inside when he noticed the white cat

stop them at the door and turn them away. The girls looked annoyed, but they had a plan B. They walked over to the creek.

Knowing they were about to take a bath made him smile for a whole different reason. He shifted on the tower to try to get a better view of the hollow, but he could only see part of it. He could see some movement through the trees and guessed the girls were undressing, then he caught a splash as they jumped in. He heard one of them squeal, even from where he was standing.

He still couldn't see anything so he grabbed the glasses in his left hand, took hold of the side of the tank with his right and leaned out to get a better view. Now he could see them clearly, but all he could see were their heads.

“Bloody hell,” he cursed to himself. “Missed the show.”

All the same, he kept watching, not realising that his fingers were tiring from the strain of holding his weight.

He took delight in watching the women splash each other, then wash each other's backs, but he thought he'd hit the mother lode when Suzette started to rise from the water.

That was when his fingers slipped and he dropped to the ground fifteen feet down – straight through his chicken coop roof.

Later that day, Krashtallash entered the hold of the *Pterodactyl* holding a couple of paper bags of something

that looked heavy. He made a proud announcement to all who could hear: “It seems Jack had a turn of bad luck today so I picked up a bargain.” He held the bags high. “We're having CHICKEN tonight!”

Chapter Seven

Life was a lot like that during the weeks that followed. It was a little routine and a little nuts. The repairs on the *Pterodactyl* were going slowly, but successfully. In due time, Scanner finally collected enough deuterium to be able to convert some anti-matter and fire up the warp core.

Once that happened, life took off in the little starship. With enough power, and being able to draw fuel from the atmosphere, they were finally able to synthesise missing parts and, more importantly to a crew fast tiring of barrits, food.

All the same, Crash and Manny would still catch the odd one and enjoy them fresh with their meals.

During their off hours, the Pipers not only kept up their exercise regime but availed themselves of the opportunity to take some riding lessons from a very willing teacher – Jason Nunn. He often joked that he had practically been born in the saddle.

When he wasn't teaching, Jason and Carman were able to spend more time working on the ship rather than hunting food or searching for gold. One of Jason's first tasks was working out what all the switches on the pilot's console were for considering the vast majority of them weren't marked.

Sitting in the pilot's chair, he viewed the panorama of controls and decided that throwing a few of them wouldn't kill him.

He leaned forward and toggled one that looked innocuous. Immediately on the console in front of him a warning came on. “Are you sure you wish to retract the landing struts at this time?” it said.

He turned it off. He smirked and decided to make a list as he went, and even began marking some with a texta.

Just before he finished up, he felt an odd vibration through the console. He wondered for a moment what it could be, then reminded himself about the mine that was on the far side of the mountain range.

“One of these days I'll have to check that out,” he mused to himself as he took his jacket off the back of the chair and tossed it over his shoulder. Right now he had some horses to feed and a stable to muck out.

Each day finished with Manny giving her husband a massage – he needed one considering the minor miracle he had been performing getting the ship functional again.

“You're working too hard,” she would complain, concerned for him as she worked his shoulders.

“I'm not the only one, my darlin',” he said in return. All the same, he would still moan with a mixture of pain and pleasure.

She had also been noticing he had been losing weight. Not that he had been overweight, but since their arrival on Merrijig, Judd had been becoming much leaner and muscular simply because he had been working harder than usual and often missing meals. Never mind the barrits had been practically fat free.

She would climb into the shower with him and rub

him down as he showered as he was often too tired to do it for himself as an act of love considering her own personal disdain for getting wet.

At least Krashtallash had insisted that, even given their time constraints, they took Sundays off. “Everyone needs rest,” he would say, “if they're going to stay fighting fit.”

Sundays were usually spent in town, with the boys in the bar enjoying the odd beer and playing pool on the ancient table that had been repaired more times than most people remembered.

Susanna, Manny and Suzette would often meet with the local women, who didn't spend anywhere near as much time in the pub. On one such occasion, the Pipers found themselves the guests of a local woman, Sharon Torkington and her sister, Eliza, both in their late thirties. They had taken their day off to help them out as Sharon's husband, Malcolm, was in Mansfield on business and their broken fence wasn't going to mend itself.

As the horses grazed nearby, Susanna and her sister helped pull the wire together while their hosts rejoined it. It was late in the morning, yet the air was still crisp and the smell of fresh grass was sweet.

“When does Mal get back?” Suzette asked as she strained to hold the wire. She was glad for her leather work gloves as it would have been cutting into her flesh otherwise.

“Tuesday,” Eliza said with a grunt. Her short, raven black hair that was so similar to her sister's dripped with

sweat. "I'll be glad to let him do this work from now on."

Suzette could not help but ask: "Why leave all the fun work for him? Not only is this good exercise, it'll keep you strong."

Her feminist plea fell on deaf ears. "Don't get me wrong, love," Sharon replied as she snapped off the excess wire. "I don't mind helping out with the farm chores, but I don't want to wind up looking like Hercules. I want to keep my girlish figure." She dropped her pliers and ran her hand over her hips.

Susanna shook her head with a smile. There was nothing wrong with either of the women's figures. Only the scars on their cheeks marred their natural beauty. She cheerfully slapped her own upper arms and said: "Nobody's taking these from me! I've worked too hard to keep them."

Eliza stepped over and gave Susanna's arm a squeeze. Impressed, she said: "More a fighting arm than a working one, though." She gave her a respectful nod, knowing she was in the presence of a warrior. "I bet you've used them more than once."

Her katana still slung over her back, she reached upward and stoked its handle. "That's true," she said, steel touching sadness. "But I wouldn't say it's ever been fun."

Suzette stepped over and handed Eliza the water bottle. "Not even when she's slaying alien cyborgs," she quipped.

Susanna gave her a quick glance, but she knew Suzette had revealed nothing of damaging import. Nor

would she.

Eliza took a grateful swig, then passed it to Susanna who did the same. “That sounds like a good story,” she said. “Why don't you tell it to us over lunch?”

Half an hour later, the four women sat in a modest sized homestead made from a mixture of brick and wood panelling that was painted in basic colours. The kitchen sported a wood fired stove that kept the room warm and a hand-made distressed wooden table that had been polished to perfection. It was obviously something the women took great pride in.

Each sat on a similarly made chair while Eliza busily made ham, lettuce and tomato sandwiches with bread that smelled like it was just out of the oven.

While the Pipers sat on opposite sides of the table, they had decided to keep an open link between them by leaning their partially bared legs together. This way, they found they could keep their stories straight if they were asked any touchy questions.

Sharon got up and poured them each a tea from the ancient looking kettle on the stove. While neither Piper appreciated coffee, they had found the local black tea delightful and each took theirs gratefully.

“Where did you learn to use that?” Sharon asked, nodding towards the katana that leaned against the door frame.

The truth would not hurt them as the Andorians had been part of the Federation for nearly a hundred years

already. Susanna ventured: “An Andorian master taught me that art of Scheel-tah years ago. I haven't been able to pick up a Vin'tah fighting pole, so I've adapted my style to use the katana.”

Eliza nodded and turned her gaze to Suzette. “What about you?”

Piper's alternate gave her a shrug. “It didn't appeal much to me until recently. Since then, Susanna's been giving me lessons. I can at least pick it up now without losing a finger.”

Sharon lost a little of her usual smile. “I wish more of the people around here knew how to fight like you do.”

The Pipers didn't need to share a glance to know they had each caught the urgency in the woman's tone. They wondered what it could be they needed to defend against and, at the speed of thought, they shared a few speculations, but quickly realised that, without more information they would only be guessing.

Susanna asked: “What do you need to defend yourself against out here? There are no natural predators and Starfleet isn't far away.”

Eliza gave a snort, but didn't elaborate. “Sheep stealing is usually our biggest problem,” she said cagily. She broke into a cheeky grin. “But we just steal them back!” she said with a laugh.

The Pipers knew there was something that was not being said, but were intuitive enough not to push the subject. They just hoped they could steer the conversation back that way.

“How long have you been married?” Suzette asked curiously.

Eliza narrowed her eyes in thought. “About eight years,” she said with a smile that spoke of many happy memories.

Her sister nodded her agreement. “That's right. We got married eight years ago next month.” She caught Eliza's gaze. “We'll have to organise something to celebrate this time. If we left it to Mal we'll get stuff all again.”

The revelation hit both Pipers like a thunderbolt. The women were sister wives. They were *both* married to Malcolm. In that moment of realisation came the thought that, if the two of them were in a similar situation, they would not be willing to do the same. Never mind the question: would their children be cousins, half-siblings, or full-blood brothers and sisters as both women carried identical genes?

The practicality of the situation was clear to them. It was well known that fledgling colonies would permit, and even encourage, multiple wives to push along population growth – especially if there was a gender imbalance.

The non-sequitur was also clear. Susanna said: “We understand that you've both married to the same man, but we're curious. How come you haven't had any children yet?”

Suzette added without a beat: “We're not trying to be pushy. You don't have to answer that.”

Sharon reached out and took her sister's hand in a gesture of mutual comfort the Pipers well understood. "Like the pair of you, we've just decided it's not the right time yet," she said, gently making it known that was all she was going to say on the matter.

The conversation turned to more innocuous subjects like the weather and the size of the farm and its running. Eliza complained that their tractor needed servicing and Susanna suggested they get Scanner over some time to have a look at it for them.

"We'd appreciate that," Sharon said, genuinely delighted. "I can't do much with it right now. Bloody thing's on its last legs." As a gesture of good will, she got up to retrieve the kettle to pour them each another cup of tea. As she poured Suzette's, she couldn't help but take a good look at her metal eye and cheek. "Does that ever bother you?" she asked.

The impetuous question was not entirely unwelcome. Through their shared thoughts and feelings, Susanna felt her sister's pain. All the same, she filled her sister with her love and acceptance which she gladly accepted. It helped her find the will to answer honestly.

"It used to – a lot," she said quietly. She glanced at Susanna. "I've recently been reminded that true beauty is on the inside." She reached out and took Sharon's hand and guided it to her cheek. "I'm grateful for this, you know. If the technology hadn't existed to reconstruct my face, I would have been dead long ago."

Sharon was surprised by Suzette's candor.

However, she wasn't about to let the opportunity pass and so she lightly touched the warm, hard metal that was Suzette's cheek. It felt as smooth as gold and she marvelled that it had a dull shine. She focussed on her mismatched eyes and found there only acceptance. She quickly withdrew her hand and found herself gently stroking the scar on her own cheek.

Susanna said: "It's a pity Doctor AndrusTaurus isn't here. She could have fixed the scars on their cheeks in a matter of minutes."

As Suzette nodded her agreement, they found themselves surprised by the sister's reactions. "Oh, no, we couldn't!"

The Pipers, connected as they were, could not help but feel the fear the sisters were projecting as if it was a tangible thing; the elephant in the room had just revealed its fangs.

"What is it?" the Pipers asked together, concerned, wishing they could do something for them.

Sharon, the older sister, took the lead and simply began cleaning up the dishes. "I'm sorry, Susanna, Suzette, but you should go. We've still got a lot of chores to do and the sun will be down before you can say boo!" It was a bad dodge, but it was effective.

Confused and worried, the Pipers realised there was nothing they could do to change their host's minds. It was clear that, whatever it was they feared, they were not going to elaborate.

As the sisters bundled them out the door, Sharon

said to Susanna: "Just get your ship working and get your pretty face off Merrijig while you still can."

As the door was closed, leaving Susanna wondering at the non-threat, Suzette just narrowed her eyes and said: "We'll see you at the B&S Ball."

Susanna thought she was probably right about that. It was only a month away and they still had a lot of work to do. In the meantime, she was going to see if she could find out what it was the sisters were so afraid of. She didn't think it was Mal. They were both clearly in love with him.

So, if it wasn't him, then what was it?

With the ease that came with a lot of recent practice, the women saddled their horses and swung onto their backs. Suzette cast a last look through the kitchen window to see Sharon watching them as they left. Once more, their host unconsciously touched the scar on her cheek - a habit she was quite familiar with. It was if it defined her.

Susanna clucked at her ride, a bay mountain gelding called Billy and quickly brought him to a trot. Even though they were putting some distance between them and the sister wives, her thoughts remained with them.

"It's weird, isn't it?" Suzette said momentarily when she caught up. She had Judd's horse, Judi, today.

"Whatever it is, the Temporal Prime Directive prohibits us from interfering in their society." She said it with more than a hint of regret. She was a woman who not only loved to serve, but protect the downtrodden. Having her hands tied was frustrating.

"You suspect there's more going on here than just simple farm accidents," Suzette said. It wasn't a question. She knew her duplicate's mind.

"Of course. Her comment regarding my "pretty face" was a stand-out."

"Well, you *are* pretty, you know."

Susanna grinned ruefully. It was an understatement, both of them knew. Over time she had used her looks to her advantage many times, but it had proven a hindrance even more often. Some people seemed to find it hard to take her seriously. She felt the weight of the katana on her back and knew the locals certainly did, now. Her ability as a swordsman was becoming common knowledge. The other day she had been walking down the street in Eureka Creek and she noticed a man not only see her coming, but give her a very wide berth. She had given him a friendly smile, but there was more than just respect in his eyes. It was fear.

She shrugged. "Whatever these people are afraid of they're going to have to sort it out on their own." She looked over at Suzette who was now only feet away from her as they followed the well-worn path back into town. "They'll just have to get used to how good we look," she said with a light chuckle. As Suzette rode on her right she only saw the left profile that was so much like her own. It was like looking into a mirror of sorts.

Suzette smiled, but it took a little effort. "Then we'll have to knock their socks off at the Ball," she said, determined. "If not for them, at least I'd like to look my

best for Jack."

Susanna turned her attention back to the road. She realised they were only a few minutes from town. She kept her concern for her sister to herself and, instead of answering urged her steed into a gallop and stormed her way back into town. For all its charms, Merrijig was starting to get on her nerves.

Suzette's mind was elsewhere as she rode, relishing not only the rhythmic beat of her mount's hooves on the soft, grassy soil and the smell of her sweat, but the knowledge that her attentions would soon be filled with the likes of the handsome Jack.

Once they came to the main street the women slowed to a walk and hitched the horses to the railing outside the Store. Both horses drank greedily from the trough while the women dismounted.

Like magic, Manny appeared on the end of the verandah. Susanna guessed rightly that she had heard the sound of their mad charge into town and had run down to meet them as they had arranged earlier. It was time to do some shopping. "What took you so long?" she asked cheekily. She loved to shop.

As Manny and Susanna worked to restock their supplies it became clear that Suzette had an ulterior motive for being here and, as became her habit, she spent the afternoon with Jack. Typically, they would go off for a walk and picnic and disappear for hours at a time.

When they were finished and laden with groceries, Susanna watched Suzette walk off with her beau and said

to Manny: "I'm worried about her. She practically vanishes for most of the day with him. Who knows what they could be getting up to? Do we really know this guy?"

By this time, Manny had become much more comfortable talking to her Captain as a friend. She offered: "Have you been listening to yourself?"

At that, she started. "What do you mean?"

Manny pointed off in the direction Suzette had taken. "You're worried about what might happen to another version of *you*." She gave her a wry smile. "If there's one woman on the planet who can handle herself in virtually any situation, it's you. *She is you*. If you doubt her ability to look after herself, it's really you you're doubting."

With that said, Manny turned and walked down the street to the bar to find her possibly inebriated husband, leaving Susanna to consider her words.

Four weeks after the Pipers arrived, they were ready to try the thrusters. The impulse engines, which were used for sublight travel in space, could not be tested in the atmosphere without shattering every window within a five mile radius. As they wanted to remain on good terms with the locals, they saved that for later.

With Jason sitting in the pilot's chair, the rest of the crew stood outside at a slight distance.

Crash flipped open his communicator. "Ready when you are, Jason," he said hopefully.

With only the slightest squeak, the twin thrusters

which were mid-mounted, one on each side, turned on their axis so they pointed downwards.

In the cockpit, their pilot opened his handwritten manual and went over his procedures one more time. “Don't screw this one up, Jason,” he muttered to himself. “Or you'll never live it down.”

Meticulously, one by one, he threw switches and made adjustments. Through the walls, he could hear the thrusters come alive once more after decades of neglect.

Standing a hundred yards away, the rest of the crew felt the wash of the thousands of pounds of thrust being shoved into the ground.

Nearby, the horses were getting spooked so Susanna sent Carman and Manny over to secure them.

Inside, Jason watched the gauges, looking for any sign of a failure. He wiped away a drop of sweat that was threatening the corner of his eye and grinned. The old girl was working like a charm.

He eyed one part of his console and wondered what it was for. It was clearly marked: Do not use in atmosphere, but aside from that, he had not been able to divine its purpose. Soon.

He turned his attention back to the thrusters, which were operating at a mere 20%. He only needed 50% to lift her off, so he gradually pushed harder on the throttle.

He knew he had achieved his aim when the deck shifted under him and the *Pterodactyl* lurched.

Outside, Scanner looked on in alarm as the ship started to lift off. “Shut her down, Jason!” he yelled into

his communicator, partly in panic, although he'd never admit it. "We're not going anywhere in her today!"

At the controls, Jason sighed. He was itching to take the metal eagle for a flight. All the same, he trusted that Judd knew when she would be ready. Today wasn't it. He eased back on the throttle and powered the engines down.

As the turbine's whine ran down, the rest of the crew cheered and gave one another high fives. The cheering and jubilation went on for a while.

Susanna flipped open her communicator. "Great test, Jason!" she said. "We'll be flying her in no time!"

Standing next to her, Crash muttered: "I'm glad he knows this ship as well as he does." It was a sound of regret, not delight.

With a glance back at the ship, she drew him off into the bush and started walking. She wanted this discussion to be private. "Okay, Captain Crash, spill it."

Without slowing, her friend turned his ears behind him to listen for sounds of company. There were none. Before he divulged any secrets he said: "Please don't call me that in front of the crew when we get back. I'll never live it down."

Piper chuckled. "You're right about that," she said with a grin. "We can't have people refusing to serve under you because they're worried you can't even get out of Spacedock." At that, she laughed heartily. She then fell silent and let it speak for her.

The moment of levity had passed and Crash was

saddened with having to share the burden of foreknowledge. "We know that, when we return to the future, Jason won't be coming with us."

The Captain jumped to the wrong conclusion. "He's going to die?" she said a little too loudly. For all the youth's annoying traits, he was still part of the *Millennium* family.

Crash hissed quietly. Even though they had put some distance between them and the ship, sound carried in the woods due to the lack of wild life. "No, he's not going to die. In fact, he's going to live a long and fruitful life." As the connections were remade in his head he confided: "His daughter serves on our ship."

At this point Piper was thoroughly confused. "Huh?"

Crash arched his whiskers forward in mild amusement. "He's left behind by the Guardian for some reason. I guess so he can carry a message for us - from you in particular." He went on to detail his conversation with the older Jason on Argelius and his revelation of Gillian's identity.

"I always thought Gillian was an odd name for an Argelian." She tipped her head to the side and added: "Now I know where her work ethic came from." She turned and looked her compatriot in the eye. "And why you've been pushing Jason so hard to know this ship so well." She rolled her eyes and stopped. With eucalypts all around and decaying foliage underfoot she realised she could easily get lost out here. All the same, it reminded her

of home.

"All right, then," she said, thinking out loud. "You were absolutely right to keep this to yourself - and from Jason."

"Well, he did say not to tell him," he replied. It was small consolation. "He made his own way well enough."

"And gave us our bartender."

"There is that."

"C'est la vie," she said suddenly feeling tired. Once again she was feeling manipulated, as if she was the marionette and the Guardian was the puppeteer. It was clear it had an agenda. At this point she was committed to the course, but she was determined to have a long talk with the circular stone when she returned.

Piper turned back towards the *Pterodactyl* and took up a brisk pace. "Back onto the stage," she said, frustrated.

Later, in the ship's miniature engineering room, Scanner gave his equipment a once over, making sure that all was well. He had no doubt about his anti-matter engine, which was working brilliantly. He tapped the gauge that registered their fuel supply and was delighted to see it was well over 50%.

With his wife watching from the door, Judd went from dial to dial, making certain all was as it should be. He checked everything off on his clip board, confident that all would work as designed. He turned to her with a huge grin. "You know, I think we should take her up tomorrow," he said. "I don't see any reason why she shouldn't fly."

Manny knew her husband better than to take his claims at face value. "After you check everything over one more time," she said with a twinkle in her eye.

Scanner stepped over and took his wife in his arms, nuzzling her cheek. "You know me so well," he said. He sighed. It was a sound that came from the depths of his soul. "I miss them, you know."

Amantasandage knew exactly who he meant. Although it had been a consolation that their children would have no time to actually miss them, the fact was that it had already been two months since they had left their children behind and she missed them dearly. "It's weird," she said. Sorrow welled up within her. "We're going to get home and the kits will be no older, even though a year will have passed."

Scanner held her tighter. "I know, my darlin'," he said roughly. "I keep thinkin' how they will have grown while we've been away and yet..." His throat tightened up completely as he thought of their missing family members.

Manny squeezed her eyes shut hard. "I know, they won't miss us, but I know that I miss them." At that point, she gave in to grief and the two of them wet each other's necks with tears for their absent children.

After a time, Scanner led his wife back to their room and they talked for a while.

"The way I figure," he said as he shared some thoughts that he had been dwelling on. "Our lives were meant to be spent raising our kids and seeing them grow up into adults. That's what we're here for. I mean, generally."

Manny, whose head rested on her husband's chest, just looked up at him quizzically. "Parents are meant to live to raise their children. When we're not doing that, it's like our time is being wasted somehow. I know I'd like to be using the forty-fourth year of my life seeing Drallah and Lila mature, not fixing this old derelict." He gave the wall a thump with the side of his fist to punctuate his statement.

His wife wiggled her whiskers as she considered his words. "I think I understand," she said.

Scanner reached down and scratched her head lovingly. "Sweetheart, you're still young," he said quietly with great introspection. "You're only twenty-five. You've got a lot of years left to you and you're nowhere near middle age. When you get a little closer to that, you begin realising just how precious the time you have has become."

"Sage advice from my elder husband," Manny said, with only a hint of cheek. "You think your time would be better spent raising our kits."

Judd sighed. "Yeah," he said, his thoughts many years in the future.

Manny wiggled her whiskers again. "No. We're doing the best we could possibly be doing for them by saving the world they will live in." She pushed herself up so she could look Judd in the eye. "We're doing this to make sure our kits *have* a future. I know it's hard, but right now, there's no place I'd rather be."

"No sacrifice too great." When his wife just stared at him, Judd elaborated. "It's something my Dad once told me when I was a kid growing up in Tennessee." In his

mind's eye, he returned to that moment when he was sitting in his father's boat fishing for catfish. They hadn't caught anything, so his father had taken the opportunity to give his son some words of wisdom. "He told me that one day I would understand that, for a parent, no sacrifice was too great for their children. Even if it came to giving your life up for them."

It was the first time she had ever heard her husband talk about his father. Up to this point, he had only mentioned he had died when he was young. *How* young she had yet to learn and, while she was curious, she was willing to be patient. She didn't have to learn everything about her husband *now*. All the same, she was not about to let the opportunity pass. "What happened to him?" she asked gently.

Judd looked her in the eyes. The pain in them was clear. "To put it simply, my darlin', my Pa ran off with his girlfriend and my Ma chased him down and shot him dead."

Shocked, his wife's eyes went wide. She knew he wasn't pulling her tail. "Who raised you?"

A smile came over Judd as he remembered. "My Ma's Ma, my Gran. Grandpappy was dead from Rigellian Fever, but there was no way my Gran was going to let me and my sister go into foster care." He nodded to himself. "No way. She was far too good a woman to let that happen."

A mite confused, Manny tilted her head to the side. It was clear to her that Judd held no real respect for his

father. "If you don't care for your "Pappy", why do you quote him?"

Judd gave her a wry grin full of years of resentment for his father. "Because, even though my father was a low-down skunk of a man *he was right* in what he said." He pulled a small photograph out of his pocket and showed it to his wife. It was a candid shot of the two of them and their kits fooling around near the Teacher's mound on Cait.

Even though she was familiar with the shot, Manny still took the time to lovingly run her fingers over the images of her family, yearning to do so for real. She looked up at her husband when he began speaking once more.

"There's *nothing* I wouldn't do for you and the kits, darlin'. *Nothin'.*" It was said with total conviction.

Although Manny knew her husband's heart, it still touched her deeply to hear those words. She glanced once more at the image and knew she shared the same sentiment. She would die for her family if need be. Willingly.

In that moment she felt an even greater connection with her husband than she had felt before. They were joined not only by their love for one another, but by their total devotion to their family and, while they had always known it on the surface, voicing it had drawn them even closer. She moved up into his arms and wrapped hers around him, squeezing him tightly. "I understand, husband," she said. Without a second thought, she asked: "What happened to your mother?"

Judd suddenly looked like he had just eaten something particularly sour. “I’ll tell you later,” he said, being clear that he would – but definitely not enjoy it.

Later that evening, the crew of the *Pterodactyl* got together in their small lounge area to compare their outfits. Tonight was one of the town’s great attractions as they were having their annual B&S Ball – short for Bachelors and Spinsters. It was a tradition that went back centuries and it gave some of the locals who lived further out a chance to come and meet and get to know one another and perhaps renew old acquaintances. In a planet bereft of social media this was how young men and women met.

Although none of them – with the exception of Suzette – had any interest in a romantic liaison with the people of Merrijig, it did give them a chance to let their hair down. It was also a way of congratulating themselves on a job well done. Their ship was nearly ready.

The Pipers had dressed in identical black leather outfits they had bought from the General Store that hugged their very fit forms. Their newly cropped hairstyles had been dyed a deep burgundy and, aside from their obvious facial differences, it was difficult to tell them apart. They stood in black, high heeled boots that added to their already respectable heights. Together, they looked dynamite.

Scanner, who was dressed in an old-style tux, along with Judd and Carman, just stared at the women as if seeing them for the very first time. “You two are going to turn a few heads tonight,” he said, admiring.

“I think that is the plan,” Carman said with a grin. He looked at them curiously. “Is there a message here?”

While the Pipers looked to one another, Manny quipped: “Only that they're tall, strong and beautiful.”

At that, Suzette blushed. It had been some time since she had been referred to that way. She accepted the compliment graciously. “Thank you.”

Crash adjusted the collar around his neck – a simple white cardboard arrangement with a bow tie attached to it. With his jet black fur, he fit right in.

Next to him, Manny sat in her pure white fur having washed herself until she fairly shone. She reminded Judd of a snowflake.

“Let's get going,” Susanna said, looking at the chronometer. “I don't want to be late.”

On the way out, Crash checked with Scanner. “Is she set to power down?” They had decided to give the ship a rest for the night before her flight trials the next day by shutting down the warp core. It only left the batteries to run the basics.

Judd nodded. “In five minutes she'll be as cold as a July morning.”

Not certain as to the meaning of the reference, Crash decided to take what he said as a “yes”. “Good,” he said as they stepped out into the night air. They could not help but pause and take in the night sky which was perfectly clear and full of not only stars but galaxies that looked close enough to touch.

Graham and Norman, two of Merrijig's moons,

were high in the sky, reflecting the sun's rays and lighting up the terrain around them. It only took them a moment to adjust to the gloom and find their way to the path and down to Eureka Creek.

“What do you expect from this shindig?” Judd asked Crash as they walked.

Crash grinned to himself. “My guess, it's an opportunity for mating, excessive drinking and overly loud music.”

In the dark, Scanner chuckled to himself. “You mean: sex, drugs and Rock 'n' Roll.”

Without turning, Crash said cheerfully: “I believe I said that.”

At the bottom of the hill someone was waiting for them. Jack stood wearing an older, but well kept, suit and tie. His leather, heeled boots shone in the moonlight. His hair neat, he looked dapper. He saw the twins coming from a distance, but until they were closer he couldn't tell them apart until he saw the soft glow of Suzette's artificial eye. “Hi, honey,” he said casually, yet meaningfully. Once she had appeared, he only had eyes for her. “I'm glad you could join us.” For a moment, he seemed a little out of sorts when he realised she was taller than he in her boots. He simply decided to get over it.

“Good evening, Jack,” Jason said, giving him a shake of the hand. “Thanks for inviting us.”

Their host tore his eyes away from Suzette and alighted on Jason, ever so briefly. “A pleasure always, Jase.” He turned and took Suzette's arm under his and

guided her into the night. “Let's go, sweetheart,” he said. “We're gonna have a good time tonight.”

The town's “Memorial Hall” was one of the older buildings and had been used by the original settlers for a number of different functions since the first days. Grain barn, council chambers, storm shelter, it had been a home for everyone at one stage or another. It had even been used by travelling minstrels – both local and alien.

Tonight, it had been decorated with coloured paper ribbons and bows, and balloons of various sizes and shades. There was also tasty food of many different varieties. Just outside the side entrance, a BBQ was going preparing beef sausages, burgers and steaks. As soon as he laid eyes on it, Judd headed straight over to it, with Carman and Jason following closely.

There were two running the stall. A local lady, who wore a simple cotton dress over her ample frame, was handing out the meat – on rolls or sandwiches if they asked – while her husband cooked. Like so many others he had seen, this woman sported a nasty scar on her arm.

Judd turned his attention to the chef and watched him for a moment and saw a man who was completely at ease and very much in his element. It was clear the older, muscular man enjoyed filling this task. Scanner turned his attention back to the woman who was looking at him with open curiosity.

She put out her hand. “I'm Margaret Lonergan,” she said pleasantly. She jerked her thumb over her

shoulder. "Useless here is my husband, Roger." Judd realised she wasn't being mean, just cheeky.

"Good evening, Mrs Lonergan," he said politely. "I'm Judd, and these are my friends, Jason and Carman." A white, furry being appeared under his arm and brought herself upright.

"Don't forget about me!" Manny said cheerfully. She was eyeing off the uncooked steaks.

As the grey-haired, slightly plump, middle-aged woman's eyes widened Judd introduced her. "And this is my wife, Manny."

Startled, Margaret took a step back. "Honey!" she said fearfully. "The big cat talks, *and is married!*"

While Manny simply gave her a baleful glare, Scanner sighed. He knew he was going to see a lot of this in his life. He gave her a tired, but polite smile. "I gather you've never heard of the Cait," he said quietly. "They're tall, clever, and beautiful. Never mind they've been members of the Federation from the year dot."

Roger Donaldson slowly put down his utensils and stepped past his wife and put out his hand to Manny. "You'll have to forgive the missus," he said amiably. He had the air of one who apologised for her often. "She doesn't get out much." Manny took the offered hand and shook it. Roger said: "I *have* heard of the Cait, even though I've never met one. Thanks for the education."

Not to be outdone by her husband, Margaret got over her fears and came forward and offered her hand. "I'm sorry, Mrs..."

Desiring to maintain their anonymity, she replied: “Manny will do fine.” She took her hand.

Margaret was surprised at the softness of her finger pads and the fur on the back of her hand. She also noticed the claws she was keeping to herself. Local convention required they referred to married couples by their surnames, it was why she had asked the question. However, a nudge from her husband reminded her they had every right to keep that to themselves.

Deflecting, she nudged him back and said: “Don't rag on me about not getting out, Roger. You never take me anywhere.”

Roger swung his arms about him, taking in everything around them. “Aside from the pub, where else is a bloke supposed to take his wife in Eureka Creek?”

“You could take me into town sometimes!” she growled, her arms crossed.

Her husband looked at her incredulously. “Mansfield's fifty clicks from here. It'd take us a whole day's ride to get there, and another one to get back. All *for the sake of a meal?*”

“I take it there are no flitters around here,” Jason asked.

Roger patted his pockets comically. “I seem to have left it in my other jeans.”

Jason got the message. “What happens if you get into trouble out here, then?” he asked with a little heat. He didn't feel he deserved the sarcasm.

The question left Roger a little uneasy. “Out here,

son, we take care of our own business. The people in Mansfield don't have a clue.”

Margaret scoffed: “And they couldn't help us if they wanted to.”

The security officer in Manny was curious. “So, what happens when you do have a problem requiring force?”

Trying to put her off, Roger said: “We cope as best we can.” He turned and flipped the meat on the cook top. “Who wants a burger?”

The humans put up their hands hopefully. Manny simply said: “I'll have mine extra, extra rare.”

Roger looked at her with raised brows. “What does that mean?” he asked.

Judd interjected: “She'll have hers still mooing.” He wore a broad grin. “She wants it raw.”

The four of them rejoined the rest of their group who were seated at a trestle table against the far wall. Thoughtfully, they brought extra food and it wasn't long before the beef was digesting and sauce was being mopped up. Most chased their food down with beer, except for the Cait, of course.

Susanna remarked on the music, which was coming from an overhead speaker and which was largely sung by one man playing an acoustic guitar. She looked at Jason curiously. “What does True Blue mean?”

Jason finished his glass of beer, not realising he was sporting a froth moustache. “It means are you a fair

dinkum Aussie?" he said, as if that answered everything.

He decided to clarify as he caught his Captain's scowl. He thought back. "The song talks about a time when Australians had forgotten that you got what you needed – you were able to look after yourself and others – only by putting in a hard day's Yakka (work). For a while Australia's government had convinced everyone that we'd all be better off if we could be a socialist paradise. Everyone knows how that idea always pans out."

They did. They knew the term was an oxymoron.

"Anyhow, it's a call to get back to thinking that there's no such thing as a free lunch. If you want something, if you want to be well off, you have to work for it." He looked around him at the large group of people who had already gathered. "These people get that."

Susanna followed his gaze and saw he was right. There wasn't a man or woman in the hall who looked like life had been easy on them. They had what they had because they had earned it. Their lifestyles showed in their bodies that were hard and often scarred.

In fact, as she looked around the room, she noticed there wasn't a single woman of child-bearing age that *wasn't* scarred somehow. Life on Merrijig must have been more hazardous than she thought.

As they enjoyed the evening many stopped by their table and introduced themselves. The crew were surprised by the number of people who were genuinely curious about them and just how welcoming they were. The children were especially curious about the Cait twins and they were

plied with many questions about their lives and culture.

“What do the kids on your world do?” one little girl asked as she looked up at Crash with big, doe eyes.

“They go to school, run and play, just like you do,” he said fondly. He found she reminded him of his niece, Lila.

Her slightly older brother, a boy who sported a large bruise on his leg just below his knee asked: “Do they have horses, too?”

Manny's whiskers twitched in mirth. “No, we don't.”

“Then how do you get around?”

Manny glanced at her brother, who simply said: “We run a lot.”

The boy accepted the answer and added excitedly: “I bet you'd be good at it, too!”

Crash tilted his head to the side. Yes, they could run fast when the need arose. Concerned, he asked about the boy's leg. “How did you get that bruise?” He wished he could take him to see Merete.

The boy shrugged. “My horse kicked me,” he said in a way that said it meant no more to him than a pimple. “I'll heal.”

Their mother called to them and they disappeared into the crowd. Crash turned to his sister and quipped: “Thank the Teacher he never gave us horses.”

Manny smiled. “You have my complete agreement on that count, Shrallal,” she said. Then she frowned. “You know, there's something that's bothering me about this

party.”

Ever on the lookout for trouble, Crash asked: “What is it?”

She whispered in his ear. “Ever since we got here, it's like everyone's looking forward to having fun, but they're also afraid something will mess it up.”

Crash's eyes narrowed. “On a scale of one to ten?”

“Eight,” she said. “If it was one or two people, I'd dismiss it as typical paranoia. But it's *everybody*.”

Just then the local band got up on stage and introduced themselves as “Pyrites” before launching into a song straight from the late twentieth century that had so much bass the tiles were rattling on the roof. On the other side of the room, Judd jumped for joy as the band played an old favourite of his from the “Who”. He immediately felt the need to dance and looked about for his bride. He quickly spotted her and made his way over.

He took her by the paw and dragged her out onto the dance floor. “I've wanted to to this with you for years,” he said. “Come on and dance!”

Manny was torn between her desire to please her husband and her duty to her Captain. She looked back at her brother, who gave her a knowing nod and gestured to her to have some fun. He would take care of it.

That done, he disappeared into the crowd in the direction he had last seen the Captain.

A part of Manny wished she had resisted as she did her best to “dance” with Judd. To her, it was not much more than gyrating to the beat in a rhythmic fashion. All

the same, she enjoyed the way her husband was having fun, especially the loving way he was looking at her.

When the song ended and the band elected to play a slower, more romantic tune, Scanner drew her close and gently guided her arms where they needed to be.

He looked into her eyes and the look he gave her practically melted her heart, he put so much love into it. "Where have you been all my life, sweetheart?" he crooned.

Manny had learned not to take her husband always literally. She realised what his true meaning was and purred. "Waiting for you, Judd," she said as she rubbed her cheek against his. "What took you so long?"

Judd chuckled and drew her even closer.

It took some time, but Crash finally caught up with Susanna, who was busy keeping an eye on Suzette, who was presently caught in a slow dance with Jack out on the dance floor. She was trying to be subtle, but the annoyed glare Suzette threw her way told her otherwise.

"Ca...., Susanna," he said, his tone clearly urgent. "Can I have a word with you?"

Piper was well attuned to her Third Officer's manner and knew he had something worthwhile to report. She drew him off behind a tower of speakers where peculiarly it wasn't quite as noisy.

"What is it?" she asked.

Crash put it into as few words as he could manage. "Manny tells me they're all afraid of something."

She grimaced. She had picked up on an undercurrent of fear as well. Something was bothering these people. “Any ideas?”

Krashtallash could offer nothing more than a shrug. “Wait and see is all I can suggest. They may like to have a laugh among themselves, but they're generally too proud to admit there may be a problem.”

Piper nodded. “Or that they might need help,” she said absently. She sighed. “I've never liked the waiting game.” She gave the room a dour look, then gave her friend a brief smile. “Let's just hope Murphy stays home tonight.”

Crash's fur bristled at the mention of the one who brought bad luck. “He is certainly not welcome here tonight,” he said. He caught a whiff of something tasty, gave his Captain a quick nod, then turned and bounded through the crowd towards the BBQ where a raw steak was waiting for him.

Piper watched him go and caught the eye of her sister who was still dancing with Jack. For a moment, their minds touched and they shared the situation at the speed of thought. Suzette told her she would pump Jack for information and was mildly surprised when Susanna told her to have fun.

I should stop being jealous of you, she shared.

Suzette let her feel her gratuity, then tucked her head into Jack's shoulder during the slower song.

Jack appreciated the gesture and drew her in a little tighter.

No time like the present, Suzette thought. “Do you have any idea why everyone's on edge tonight?” she murmured, not losing a beat, staying with him.

Even through his thick, woollen shirt Suzette felt his muscles tense. With their skin touching, and her mind open, she could sense the lie that was coming.

“No idea what you're talking about, love,” he said offhandedly, hoping that would put an end to her questioning. He should have known better.

Suzette stopped swaying, leaned back and looked him in the eyes. “That's the first time you've lied to me, Jack,” she said sadly, but with a hint of steel to remind him who he was talking to.

Her date grimaced. The last thing he wanted to do was upset Suzette, but the casual lie came too easily, one of the habits of a lifetime. “Sorry, love. It's nothing you need to worry about. You'll have the ship fixed soon and be out of here. It's our problem and there's nothing you can do about it.” He kept his voice low, but it was enough for one man from a passing couple to hiss him into silence.

Jack watched him go out of the corner of his eye and spoke quickly because the song was about to end. “Get your ship fixed and get out of here while you still can,” he whispered into her ear. It was a voice full of concern for her – and for himself.

With the song now over, Suzette took him by the hand and drew him outside into the darkness. She took him into the shadows of the next building and asked again: “What are you all so afraid of?”

Jack looked up into her eyes and knew he couldn't hold out on her, not if he wanted her to still respect him.

Inside, Crash had just finished eating his steak when the children he had spoken to earlier appeared before him once more. "Can I help you, kits?" he asked, doing his best to sound friendly.

"Would you like to play a game with us?" the little girl asked, all innocence, her blue eyes flashing in the soft light.

Still getting used to being a father, Crash decided now was as good a time as any to learn to play again. "What do you call this game?" he asked.

The boy answered this time. "It's like hide-and-seek, but we only play if the green men show up," he said, matter-of-factly.

Green men? Crash wondered to himself. Realisation came in a flash. *Orions*. They were known *slavers*. No wonder the children had been taught to hide.

It also answered some other questions that had been rolling around the back of his mind. "Sorry, children," he said politely. "Maybe later." He got up with every intention of telling Piper, but he could see it was already too late.

Susanna stood bolt upright as the thought came to her, loud and clear. Suzette, as soon as she had been told, alerted her sister to the danger. However, she had already heard the sound of many horses pounding down the street,

headed for the Hall. She relayed this as well.

“They're coming!” Jack said nervously. “Come on!” Taking charge, he took Suzette by the arm and tried to drag her to safety in the darkness behind the buildings, but she would have none of it. She slapped his hand away and darted back inside.

Torn for a moment, Jack erred on the side of caution and slipped away into the night.

Inside, all was mayhem as realisation had struck the crowd they had uninvited guests. The crowd was doing their best to disperse, but they were too slow as the Orions took up position at each exit, blocking their escape.

Susanna quickly took stock of the situation and called her people over. Although she wanted to help these people, it wasn't their fight. They were in this time for a whole other reason on a mission that went way beyond local issues. Jason, Carman, Manny and Scanner quickly joined her, but Crash was nowhere to be seen. As well as Suzette.

There was nowhere to go. Crash looked about frantically for a place to hide the children. The doors were blocked and they were nowhere near a side room of the kitchen.

Then Crash noticed they were standing on a raised platform – the hall's stage. He wondered if there was a space underneath it. His eyes darted around the floor, looking for something, anything that might help.

On her way back inside, Suzette was beaten to the door by an Orion male who jumped from his saddle at full gallop and rolled into the doorway where he stood. However, he wasn't expecting resistance.

Running up behind him, Suzette slowed, spun, and knocked him out cold with the heel of her boot to the back of his head. Taking advantage of the situation, she stooped down to pick up his weapon when something connected with the back of her skull and everything went black.

Chapter Eight

“Well, well, well!”

To Susanna's ears it was a voice full of confidence, one used to being obeyed without question with a natural cruelty that more than hinted at a rather unpleasant alternative if one chose to defy him.

To her eyes, he was unremarkable for an Orion. Not muscular or handsome. In fact, she would say he was a little short for one of his kind. However, there was no mistaking the intelligence in his eyes. He was able to measure people up very quickly.

The little green man walked up to the stage – the last place she had seen Crash. However, now he was nowhere in sight.

“Did you people decide to have a party and not invite us?” he said, doing his best to bait the crowd. While some stared at him angrily, most watched the floor. “I am most disappointed.” He spoke as if he was lecturing a room full of errant children.

He shrugged to himself as if it was no matter that he was terrorising these people.

Susanna knew that Orions could be completely indifferent to the suffering of those not of their species. It was known that Orion males held little regard for aliens, only that they could sell their women to them as chattel.

However, Susanna got the impression he was here for a completely different reason.

“What do we do?”

Susanna started at the sound in the quiet room, but then realised the sound had been in her head. Manny had her paw over her hand and had spoken to her telepathically.

“Nothing,” she said. “We can't fight these people's battles for them.”

“But we're Starfleet. Isn't it our job?”

Piper sighed. It wasn't the time to get into a debate about temporal ethics. “Don't interfere. Let the others know.” Trusting she would be obeyed, she let go of Manny's paw and leaned to the side so she could get a better view of the stage.

“Mister Loneragan!” the little Orion called out. “A word, please!”

From his place by the BBQ, Roger reluctantly put down his tongs and apron and stepped forward. The usually cheerful man had lost his smile. “Yes, Kriton?” he asked.

“Kriton's” voice became even more sinister as he gestured to the side. “Are you hiring mercenaries?” he asked as Suzette's unconscious form was dragged into the hall. “This one tried to overpower some of my men.” He smiled sadistically. “She failed.”

Susanna's heart pounded in her chest as she watched her double dumped unceremoniously on the floor.

Roger looked at Suzette, lacking of recognition. They had not been introduced. “I've seen her around, I think. But as for her being a mercenary, I have no idea. I think she's just a trader. Perhaps she didn't like your people's manners.”

The remark brought a few mutters of support and even a few bowed heads came up with a smile.

Kriton wasn't about to let these people find their pride again and turned and sent Roger reeling with a back-handed swipe. As Roger lay on the floor holding his face, Kriton squatted next to him and handed him a kerchief. "Here, wipe up the mess you're making," he said. "You know, for that comment, you can add another ten head of cattle to your bill for this year." His eyes narrowed as a thought came to him. "If you have one stranger in town, there's every chance you have more." He reverted to his native tongue and quickly barked out an order.

The locals didn't understand it, but the *Millennium* crew had been outfitted with subcutaneous Universal Translators. He had ordered his men to look through the crowd for strangers.

With nowhere to go, it took only a moment for the Orions to locate them. As they found themselves surrounded, one of the Orions took Jason's elbow. The younger man said: "Steady on, mate! I'm not one of them. Can't you tell by my accent?"

Piper understood the younger officer's intentions. There was no advantage to them all being captured.

The Orion guard looked to Kriton for confirmation. The little man nodded and Jason was released.

The Captain, Crash, Manny and Scanner were ushered forward at gunpoint and they willingly obeyed. The crowd parted and Piper could not help but wonder what kept these people so cowed.

Standing at over six feet in her heels, Piper had to practically crane her neck to look down at Kriton. She did so without pride or haughtiness. In fact, she was doing her best to look guileless.

“Can I help you?” she asked.

Kriton looked up at her as if she was nothing more than a piece of meat at the butcher before turning his attention to the others. “Cait,” he sneered. “Useless.” He looked at Judd. “Too old.”

He looked back at Piper, then down at Suzette and realised their similarities. “You're twin sisters, aren't you?”

The truth was beyond his comprehension, so she simply agreed. “Yes, we are. I'm sorry for my sister's behaviour. She never did like bullies.”

It was true. It was also true that these Orions were nothing more than petty extortionists.

Kriton was tempted to slap her, but he wasn't tall enough and he realised how ridiculous it would seem to the others attempting to do so. As he gazed up at her, he also saw that she was anything but stupid. Her manner was simple, but her eyes were incredibly complex. He had only seen such mettle in Starfleet officers. However, Starfleet was far from here, so this woman remained an enigma.

Regardless of her intelligence, she did have an immediate use. Even though it was clear she was no longer a youth, she was still beautiful by human standards. She could fetch a good price. Let her new owner beat her attitude out of her.

He wondered about the sister lying before him. He

put out a boot and rudely kicked her over to discover the twin was damaged goods. The surgery on her face was crude, and there was no profit to be gained from her. He leered at her in disgust and considered for a moment what he should do with them. Defiance was a disease that had to be cut out quickly lest it fester.

The problem with killing the locals was that there were barely enough of them to bring him a worthy tribute as it was. If it wasn't for the mine, this place wouldn't be worth his time.

Thinking of the mine brought him back to the others of this woman's little group. He quickly discounted the Cait, they made lousy miners and had proven difficult in the past to keep under guard. The older human was fit, but he quickly wrote him off as past his prime. No use in the mine. Unless..

“Human,” he asked Judd, not knowing his name. “What do you know of mining machinery?”

Scanner's response was honest and dead-pan. “Nothing,” he said. “Ah wouldn't know one end of them from the other.”

Kriton was tempted to believe him. However, it wasn't Judd that gave him away. Manny had tensed at the question and Kriton didn't miss it.

The little green tyrant considered her coolly. “Either *you're* an engineer, or the human is and you're afraid for him.” He glanced once again at Judd and realised what was going on. The two of them had pair bonded. He pointed at Judd. “Take this one and put him to

work on the machinery. It would use some work and somehow I think he's more capable than he's letting on.” He shrugged. “And if he's not, we can just kill him.”

The fire in Manny's eyes gave Kriton reason to pause and consider her. This one could be a problem. Manpower still being a consideration, he decided on psychology. “If you give us any reason to doubt you, I won't waste any time on your mate. I'll take him apart – fingers first.”

Amantasandage wanted so badly to reply with an even deadlier retort, but she knew Kriton wasn't bluffing. So she simply glared at Kriton and kept her peace.

To his credit, Scanner realised that he had value to the Orion and would more than likely be left alone. It was Piper he was worried about.

Kriton turned back to the tall human female and came to a decision. “We'll lock this one up and sell her at our earliest convenience.” He glanced at an aide. “We're due to transfer our latest shipment tomorrow night. We'll give her to them and let them worry about her.”

As Kriton looked up into Piper's emerald eyes, he expected fear. What he got was cool confidence and it unsettled him momentarily. He discounted it as misguided hope. He decided to dash her hopes. “I might sample the merchandise before it's shipped,” he said with a leer.

Piper spoke, and it was a voice of absolute certainty. “You might try, but you'd never get another opportunity to father children if you did.”

Kriton took a step back, out of reach. This human

female was a force to be reckoned with. Perhaps it would be better to kill her, but the part of him that was greedy – the totally dominant part – argued for profit. He pointed his phaser pistol at her and ordered her and the rest of his party: “Let's go.”

The town's folk gathered at the door behind Piper's people as they watched her and Judd prodded onto some extra horses. Carman and Manny caught her look of confidence in them before they were led off into the darkness.

Once they were out of sight, Carman, Manny and Jason re-entered the Hall, considering their options.

“What do we do?” Jason asked Manny, his concern for the Captain clear.

Manny took control and fired off two simple statements. “First, find my brother. He disappeared at the start of this mess and I'd like to know why. Second, let's see if we can get Suzette off the floor.”

The first detail was taken care of when a trap door on the stage suddenly flipped up and open and a large, furry, black head popped up, then disappeared once more into the floor to be replaced by the two human children Manny had talked to before. Her “There you are!” was drowned out by the delighted squeal from the children's mother who dashed over to retrieve her offspring.

Manny dropped to all fours, sprang and just beat her to it with three quick leaps. She pulled up short as she heard Crash say: “Get off my head!”

She looked down to see the young female trying to step up out of the hole with Crash's help, her feet madly pawing the air. Her mother came to her rescue by hauling her high in the air. "Thank God you're safe, Sylvia, Jeremiah!" She clutched them to her tightly, afraid to let them go.

With the children taken care of Crash took a simple leap up and out, then closed the trap door. "How is everyone?" he asked. "Are the Orions gone?"

Manny nodded. "They are, but they took the.. Susanna and Scanner." Her barely contained fury at the taking of her mate was clear.

Crash's eyes widened at the news. "Not good. We'll get them back, though," he said with all certainty. "The Orions don't know they've bitten off far more than they can chew." He looked about him for a moment, taking in several things at once. "Where is Suzette?" he asked.

Still not her favourite person, Manny pointed over at the floor where Carman was nursing her still unconscious form. "She was knocked out when she took on one of the guards," she said with only a modicum of sympathy.

Knowing he could do nothing more for her at this time, he turned and his eyes narrowed as he caught sight of Roger. Fur bristling, he stalked over, growling. "Mister Lonergan, you and I need to talk."

The aging human looked about him, seeking an exit. The other towns people nearby wanted nothing to do

with the angry cat, so they got out of his way, leaving Roger the sacrificial lamb. He was mildly surprised when the jet black feline pulled up short and simply glowered at him. He had expected to be torn limb from limb.

The growling grew in volume until Crash snarled: “We have been with you for two months and in that time we have enjoyed your company and friendship. We have hunted and eaten meals together and in that time you kept the fact that there are *Orions* mining nearby from us?” His tone was a mixture of angry and incredulous. “That's like offering a guest a room to stay without mentioning there's a snake in it!”

Roger found a little of his courage and snapped back: “What do you expect us to do? They've got phasers and all we've got is rifles! I've notice you blokes don't have a hell of a lot in the weapons department, so I know there's nothing you can do about them, either! So get off by back!”

Any further discussion was put on hold as Jack appeared in the doorway, clearly looking for someone. “Where is she?” he asked. Before anyone could answer, he caught a glimpse of Suzette still lying on the floor through the crowd. He hurried past them and knelt next to her.

As Jack enquired about her, Crash turned his attention back to Roger. He considered whether it would be worth his while continuing the argument and realised it was pointless. There was nothing to be gained by yelling at each other. A thought came to him and he remembered his own actions.

“You're afraid the Orions will take your children, aren't you?” he asked. He glanced over at Jeremiah, who was still at his mother's side. “That's why you're hiding them from the Orions!”

On the floor nearby, a familiar voice added: “And that's why the women are scarring themselves.” Suzette pushed herself up into a sitting position and looked around her. “Sharon! Eliza! It's true, isn't it!” she cried. “That's why you won't have children, either. You're afraid!”

Hidden by the crowd, Sharon could be heard bitterly muttering: “Who wouldn't be?”

Manny stepped up next to her brother. “I'm not!” she said angrily. “My husband has been taken. Unlike sheep, I don't run off when I'm threatened. I fight back and make sure they can't do it to me again!”

Nobody doubted her sincerity, but none believed they could win against the Orions. They were simply too well armed. Silently, like the sheep Manny had compared them with, they began filing out. The festivities were definitely over.

“Don't turn your backs on me!” Crash roared. His voice thundered for attention as he caught as many as he could in his glare.

“You know. Since we came here, I've heard you all telling me that, if you had a problem, you'd take care of it yourself. *The Orions won't go away*. They will not leave unless *you* make them!” For a moment, it seemed like he was getting to them, then they turned once more and began to leave.

In the quiet of the room, Jason said: "That's the way it's always been with my people, Crash. Bugger it and let it take care of itself." His even voice carried no mocking, only sad acceptance. "She'll be right, mate. Don't worry!" His local accent attracted the attention of most and they paused to hear one of their own.

He walked over to Crash's side. "You know, I've never been ashamed to be an Aussie until now." He said it to his superior, but he knew everyone was now listening. "Australia has a proud history of saying no to the aggressors in the world. Gallipoli, Belgium, Afghanistan, Mars. When our boys were needed we never shied away. And we never left a mate behind. Not like this lot." He kept his voice level, but the disappointment was unmistakable. "If you want me, Sir, I'll be back at the *Pterodactyl* getting her ready. There's no way I'm going to leave our friends in the hands of the enemy."

With that simple statement, Jason turned, his face set in stone, and walked out. Nobody got in his way. Nobody said a word to him. In fact, Crash noticed, nobody even looked at him. Taking the younger man's cue, he turned and beckoned Suzette over and led their group into the night.

It took over an hour of riding in the dark, but Piper noticed the Orions knew the way well. The path they were following was well worn, the spaces between the trees wide and the way was reasonably clear of rocks. If she didn't know any better, she would have thought this a man-

made road.

Orion made, perhaps, she thought. All the same, it was leading them further and further away from the rest of her party. She glanced to her left and considered herself grateful that Scanner was still with her.

How long that would be, she had no idea. Kretin, as she had come to think of him, had made it clear he had very different ideas for both of them. She considered herself fortunate that neither of them seemed destined for the mine, but she wondered to herself how successful she would be keeping the Orion's paws off her. She hadn't liked the lecherous eye they had all given her at one time or another.

As the horses clopped along on their shod feet, Piper looked skyward and saw all three of the planet's moons were in ascension. Their reflected light was making it easy to see the way, and yet things were beginning to get lighter.

Their little troupe, Piper counted ten male Orions among them, soon wound their way down a short ravine into a large, open space lit by hundreds of portable lights. On the north facing wall was a large, open shaft that led underground. A short rail line led out of it that teemed with cars carrying an odd coloured ore. She couldn't be sure what colour it was in this light.

As she watched, the cars moved up a raised platform, stopped, and tipped themselves to the side, delivering their cargo onto a conveyor belt that led into a large, nearby building. Another belt led out the other side

that dropped the useless soil, the tailings, onto a slowly growing mound.

All around them were children. Hundreds of them. Kept in line by about thirty Orions carrying whips. Curiously, Piper noticed they weren't carrying phasers.

Those on horseback came to a stop out the front of a large, nondescript building that looked like a left-over from a cheap catalogue. The doors hung loosely and the light shone only through the crack in the door. There were no windows.

Before Piper could ponder the situation any further she was rudely shoved off her horse. On the way down she tucked and rolled, coming up in a defensive position, but before she could do anything else she was roughly grabbed by four Orion guards and dragged inside.

Scanner watched her go, worried sick but knowing full well he was powerless to stop what was happening. He could only hope that Crash could get them out of this before it all went to crap.

Kriton swaggered over with two of his lackeys. King of his little hill, Judd thought. Tiny little hill. He took a glance around him. More like a hole in the ground. Cool. Easier for him to get to Hell when his time came. He hoped it was real soon.

Judd wasn't the tallest of men, so he found himself pretty much at eye level with the green skinned devil. The image would have been complete if Kriton had red eyes. Pity they were black.

It was this image that helped Judd from worrying overly much. He found that he couldn't quite take the Orion seriously. "What can I do for yer?" Scanner asked, getting in before Kriton could open his big mouth.

Kriton stopped and regarded the human for a moment. It was amazing to him that the female's companions did not seem to realise how much trouble they were in. He could have killed him right there and then. Did the human not see that?

"Our equipment needs maintenance and there are some systems that are in need of repair. You will make them function again or you will suffer." There, Kriton thought. He had used just the right tone to induce terror.

Judd wasn't buying it. His gaze was on the children. As a father himself, he felt for them. "I'll do anything to help these kids suffering any more than I have to." He had already decided to fix the systems that would lessen the children's burden first. He met the gaze of the Orion once more, a hardness in his eyes that was rarely seen. This man had offended him in the most acute way possible. Threaten his family and hurt kids. "You'd better hope my friends kill you quick, Kriton. They're not as forgiving as I am."

Furious, Kriton back-handed him. Scanner's head snapped to the side, but he didn't fall. His deadly gaze simply returned as he met Kriton's eyes once more.

Almost desperate to have the upper hand, Kriton played his trump card. "If your people cause me any trouble, I'll have you know that I have placed bombs

throughout the mine that I will use if necessary.”

There was something in his tone that bothered Judd. There was something he wasn't saying. “What kind of bombs?” he asked, his eyes narrowed thoughtfully.

Indirectly, Kriton answered: “It's all around you. Figure it out.” He snap turned and headed back to the building with one of his guards in tow. The other remained to guard Judd.

As Judd sized up the stocky Orion beside him, he set his mind to work on the puzzle he had been left with.

Half an hour before, Crash, Manny, Jason, Carman and Piper Silayna came together in the *Pterodactyl's* cargo bay and considered their options, which they were fast coming to the conclusion that there were few.

“What do we have in the way of weapons?” Manny asked.

Their gaze was drawn to a bench against the wall that contained their only rifle and three phasers. No explosives. Nothing particularly impressive.

Crash spoke then. “Before we do anything else, we must establish a clear chain of command. I believe Captain Silayna not only has the rank but the experience to lead us.” He turned to her, fairly radiating confidence. “I know that during the last month you've come to know us and our strengths. We are yours to command.”

Suzette/Piper Silayna gave him a grateful smile. She knew she had the rank to lead, but without the respect of those under her command she may as well go home.

She looked from one to the other and realised that, even though some of them didn't exactly approve of her, their loyalty to Krashtallash was solid, and if he thought she should lead she would.

“All right, then,” she said confidently. “When you don't have much in the way of phasers you have to use your most important weapon.” She tapped her temple. “If we can't win the day through strength, we'll have to use our brains.” She considered for a moment. “We need more intel, for a start.”

She was interrupted by a tapping at the hatch. They each looked to one other for a clue to who it might be, then Manny vaulted over to the door and looked through the small window. Her eyes widened in surprise. “What do you want?” she called out.

Jack's voice could be heard through the metal. “To help.”

Five minutes later a group of ten of the local men and women had joined them in their mini conference, each carrying a rifle slung over their shoulder with pockets full of ammunition.

“What do we know about their location?” Silayna asked.

Jack, who had been pleasantly surprised by Suzette's commanding tone and presence, suddenly realised there was a whole lot more to his girlfriend than he had guessed. In fact, her manner reminded him of a Starship Captain.

A local woman, Lynlee, put up her hand. “They

took me to their mine a couple of years ago. I think they were thinking of selling me, but when they saw the scars on my legs the leader told me to “go home and make babies I can use”. I told him to go to Hell. He slapped me around a bit for that, then let me go.” She cast her eyes about for a moment. “Do you have a pencil and some paper?”

Carman left for a moment to source some and returned with what she needed. She started to draw while they continued to discuss.

“They're in a box canyon, that much I know,” Jack said. “That way they're harder to spot from the air.”

Piper's eyes narrowed in thought. “Do they keep their ship in it as well?”

Lynlee nodded. “Up the back.”

The Captain nodded. “That gives us an advantage.” She stomped the floor in frustration. “We may have got this thing flying, but it won't do us any good without phasers.”

An older farmer, Mike, put up his hand. “I seem to remember it has a grappler. What if you could grab their ship? You don't have to destroy it to bugger it up.”

Manny's lip curled in pleasure. “I like the way you think,” she said.

“Speaking of thought,” Silayna said, lost in her own. “Manny, do you think you can communicate with them if you could get close enough?”

The Cait's blue eyes dilated as she considered. She took the moment to open her mind to them. “The best I

can tell you right now is that they're alive.” She closed her eyes and concentrated. “I just told Judd I love him, and he got the message. At this distance I can't get more than feelings through. The... Susanna is OK, but right now she wants to kill ... what's a cretin?” She focussed on Silayna. “She's thinking that word over and over. It's hard to miss.”

Piper Silayna nodded. “That's Susanna for you.”

Jason chuckled. “Yeah, a dragon could swallow her whole and she'd kick it in the guts until it chucked her up.”

The joke brought a much needed laugh from their little band. Silayna looked around her at the faces of their volunteer army, a feral smile playing around her lips. “Do any of you have any explosives?”

Cretin. The Orion leader was the focus of all Piper's rage as she stood manacled to a wall inside the building. She was in a drab, small room whose only piece of furniture was a long, low slung table with a pair of manacles at one end. It didn't take much imagination to divine its purpose.

She also didn't like the intent of keeping her in this room. Two meanings came to mind. One: psychology. To break her spirit by instilling fear in her that she could be molested at any time without actually doing so. Two: practical. She was in here for their pleasure. Which, no doubt, would be none for her.

At least she still had an ace up her sleeve. She knew a little about how Orions thought. They fought and pillaged in packs, but they kept their private stuff to

themselves. If their intention of molesting her was more than a bluff, then they would come in one at a time.

She didn't have long to wait. Kriton opened the door and came in as if doing so was just a part of his daily business. He closed the door, put a small valise on the table, then stepped over and took hold of the bottom of Piper's t-shirt.

Her eyes widened as he produced a small knife and for a moment she feared he meant to gut her alive. It took all her self-control to not tense up. However, to her partial relief, he slipped it under her shirt and zipped straight upward to her neck, parting the garment neatly and exposing her supple flesh. Without preamble, he slipped his fingers under her bra, pulled forward and cut it as well.

“You know, you could have simply unhooked it. Good bras are so hard to find,” she said calmly. There was no way she was going to let this little slug think he was in command of the situation.

The comment gave Kriton pause. He was not used to such behaviour from his slaves. They were usually begging him to stop at this stage. Instead, this female was treating the situation as nothing more than a medical examination.

She continued. “I wouldn't try impregnating me, if that's your plan. I don't think you could reach me if you tried.” The touch of mirth was meant to demean his manliness and he caught the slur.

Kriton did not appreciate the insult. He'd had every intention of sampling the goods, but it was quickly

becoming clear to him that there was no way she was going to participate. He remembered her threat from earlier and stowed the idea. He tried to bluff his way out. He reached up and pushed aside her destroyed clothing, revealing a fit and unscarred torso and chest. "Not bad. You will fetch a fine price, soon." He did his best to sound sinister.

He made no move to cover her, just left her exposed. Piper saw the lighter side that at least it wasn't a cold night. She didn't want to catch a chill. "Hopefully the next Orion I meet will be taller," she said in a slight she knew would be felt. Generally, Orions were no bigger than her captor.

Kriton scowled at her. "Enough, woman. You will stay here until we're ready to ship you out."

The Starship Captain did her best to shrug given her hands were manacled above her head. "Whatever. I can't say much for the service around here. Will there be a continental breakfast included in the package?"

The Orion looked at her incredulously. He had her life in his hands and all she wanted to do was joke. "You must be mad," he said as he turned on his heels, picked up his valise and headed for the door.

Piper watched him go with slitted eyes. With the fate of the Universe on her shoulders, she was furious this little man was getting in her way. "You have no idea," she muttered as he closed the door behind him.

Alone once more, Piper shrugged her shoulders several times until her leather jacket covered her once more. She had no intention of giving anyone a free

sample.

Scanner worked for a couple of hours before he became too exhausted to work. To his disgust, but complete lack of surprise, most of the mining equipment was at least second-hand and held together with chicken wire and chewing gum. It was a miracle that most of it worked at all.

Never mind the tools he was being asked to use left him wondering if his tetanus inoculations were up-to-date.

The guard posted to watch him seemed disinterested in his complaints, but he eventually relented when the children were also given permission to get some sleep.

As they were led to the barracks together, Scanner asked one teenaged boy: "How long have you been here?"

The young man just looked at him blankly. "Not sure," he said in an undernourished haze. "A long time."

Judd was tired, but he was still strong. Yet he stood among children who were forcing their emaciated bodies along by sheer force of will. The sight of them tugged at his heart with sympathy for them, and when a guard mistreated one little boy it was all he could do to not pound the man's head into the ground. He had to satisfy himself with an angry: "You'll get yours."

The Orion looked at him blankly, then ushered them onwards. They soon came to the makeshift barracks for their slumber, but Judd soon discovered there was nothing more to sleep on than old rags. Yet, as tired as he

was, he realised it was better than nothing. Within seconds of closing his eyes he was asleep.

Sleep was far from the minds of two individuals who moved almost silently through the night. Although they were physically and mentally tired from the day's adventures, the Llash twins were running on adrenaline.

Normally, Amantasandage would have stood out like a sore thumb in the moonlight with her white fur. However, these days she packed one of the midnight black bodysuits she had souvenired from her people's Assassin's Guild when they had dispatched the group. As a Security Specialist, she never knew when it might come in handy. These days, she was a staunch believer in being prepared. So, whenever she travelled, she kept one with her.

They had ridden horses to within a mile of the mine, then tethered them to a tree well off the road before proceeding on foot. It had taken them a little while to run it, but when they arrived they did their best to move stealthily and scope out the operation. From the top of the canyon, they split up and circumnavigated the camp. It was hard for them to watch the children being mistreated, and even harder for Manny to watch as her husband was herded across the yard along with the rest of the inmates. He looked so helpless.

She knew from experience that he was exactly the opposite. This was a man who had made an atomic bomb from scratch.

It took an hour of walking and watching, with one

close call that had Crash nearly discovered by a patrolling guard who had literally walked right past him. Crash had breathed a sigh of relief that the guards were not equipped with night goggles.

Once done, they had all they needed and met up back at the horses.

“How did you go?” Crash asked his sister.

“I can't tell you how many times I wished I could have thrown at least *one* of the guards off the cliff.” She gave him a brief smile. “I was good, though.”

Crash curled his lip in pleasure. “You *are* good, Shrallah. He would not have known what happened to him! He would have simply taken his next step straight into Hell.”

Once back at the ship, they reported all they learned to Suzette, who was acting more like a Captain again, but less like her old self. She was beginning to remind them of their own Captain Piper.

“Okay, everyone,” she said. “You know what you need to do tomorrow.” She looked at the chronometer on the wall. “You've all got four hours to sleep before I need you back here in the morning. Take advantage of it.”

As she dismissed the troops, she turned to head upstairs to her own room, but a hand on her arm held her in place. She had expected Jack to want to talk to her, but his timing was lousy.

She turned to him, showing him with her human eye that she wasn't really interested in what he had to say.

Neither of them noticed that the room emptied out very quickly. Nobody else needed to see what was coming.

“I know I acted like a jerk,” he said with all the humility that he could muster – which wasn't much. “I'd just hate to see us throw everything away over a difference of opinion.”

Piper Silayna knew what he meant by “everything”. One lovely, sunny Sunday afternoon they had taken their relationship a big step further than was appropriate for a married woman. She still remembered how soft the grass was on the hillside – and *everything* else.

She felt guilty about it for a number of reasons. She rationalised that, as they were taking steps to collapse her native timeline, her Brian Silayna would cease to exist. Their marriage would never have happened. So, to all intents and purposes, she was a free woman.

Yet she still felt guilty. As if she was still betraying the memory of him.

To top it off, she had kept the liaison a secret from Piper. Since they had met, she had come to know, respect, and even love her like a sister. Yet she had been unable to share her joy with her because she was afraid of recrimination. It was a peculiar dichotomy in that Piper was an echo of herself that was still different enough from her that she was unsure of her reaction. Either way, she didn't need the rejection, so she had kept it to herself.

Now, she looked at the man she had allowed herself to come to love and take as a lover and remember all too

quickly how he had abandoned her and her friends in their time of need.

The truth of the situation dawned on her then. She realised why he had pursued her and not her sister.

She put a hand on his chest and kept him at arm's length. "I can't forget that you left us, Jack. I needed your help and, because you weren't there, I've got this egg shaped bump on the back of my head." Which still hurt like blazes, she failed to add. "You're a coward, and I can't be with a coward."

Jack's head snapped around as if slapped, yet to his credit, he didn't retaliate. "I guess I deserved that," he said in a low voice. He made as if to take her hand, then stopped himself and gave her her space. "I'll just have to prove to you I'm not a coward." The corner of his mouth twitched up in a small attempt at humour. "Perhaps then you'll reconsider."

Piper Silayna just looked back at him blankly. The fire in her heart for him had been extinguished, but while the emotional side of her just wanted him gone, the practical Captain realised she needed every hand available for the task ahead. "Perhaps," she said, her voice devoid of feeling. "Be back here on time in the morning. We've got a lot of work to do if we're going to pull this off."

Chapter Nine

Piper was in a foul mood. She had been left chained to the wall all night and day. Her legs and feet were aching as were her wrists, she was tired, hungry and thirsty. And, to add insult to injury, she hadn't even been allowed a bucket to relieve herself in. She was still wet from the waist down and not liking the way she smelled.

She couldn't even button up her jacket. The tatters of her shirt remained fluttering in her man-made breeze and she was beginning to wonder if they would even allow her *that* dignity.

One consolation was that since Kriton left, she had been left alone. A small voice had continued at her all night that someone might try to take advantage of her situation. She had repeatedly told it to "Shut up!"

At least there was light from the dim panel overhead, but to a sleep-deprived woman, it was nothing more than a focal point for her anger.

The door opened suddenly, catching her by surprise. One of Kriton's cronies simply threw in a washer, towel, white jump suit and he put down a bucket of water. Almost as an afterthought, he stepped over and unlocked her manacles before turning and walking out, bolting the door behind him.

Piper was in so much pain she fell to the floor and couldn't even catch herself her as arms were so tired and sore. She simply tried to catch herself with her forearms and shoulders and for a moment, she simply laid in a heap

on the floor as the guard silently exited. She remained there for several minutes as she waited for the circulation to return and the pins-and-needles to end.

At that point, she was so tired she was tempted to go to sleep right there and then, but there was no way she was going to do that in her current state of dress. Slowly, painfully, she pushed herself up onto her knees and examined what had been brought her. She handled the rough towel and washer, then turned her attention to the jumpsuit. She shook it out and held it up, shaking her head in mock disappointment.

“These things never come in my size,” she murmured to herself.

She considered the situation, then dragged the bucket over to the door, put her back to it and quickly undressed. She tried to set a speed record for just how quickly one could wash themselves with cold water and a towelette with no soap. She then held up her briefs and was grateful she hadn't needed to move her bowels. Unwilling to go commando, she rinsed them out in the bucket, wrung them as dry as she could, then put them back on.

She examined her bra, then threw it aside in disgust. There was no way to fix it. Her shirt was ruined and she really didn't want to put her jeans back on. That left just the jumpsuit and her jacket.

She gave the suit a quick examination before deciding it was okay and donning it. In a final act of defiance, she returned the leather jacket to her shoulders

and zipped it up in the front.

“Susanna, can you hear me?”

The voice sounded crystal clear to Piper and she turned as if looking for an intruder. Then she realised what it was. The voice was in her head. She replied: *This had better be you, Manny, or I've finally gone over the edge.*

The edge of what?

The innocence of the question left Piper in no doubt about its origin. *Never mind. I gather you're part of a plot to spring me?* She couldn't keep the hopefulness out of her thoughts.

Yes, Captain. Captain Silayna has come up with a rather unusual plan to get you and Scanner out, not to mention the children. As she said: Hang tight, we're on our way to get you. She sent me on ahead to keep contact with you and Scanner. He's aware of our plan. Things will start happening within minutes.

Piper sighed. The sooner she was out of here, the better. *Thank God.*

Phase One was simple. Take out the guards lining the top of the canyon. That job was left to the Llash twins. Quickly, methodically, they started at one end and, taking opposite sides, they located and dispatched the guards.

When given the order, Piper Silayna had said: “Do it quickly and quietly. We can't risk them getting out a warning.”

Manny gave her a smile that crept her out, it was so grizzly. “They can't yell without a voicebox.”

Moving silently through the darkening brush – the sun was going down – the Cait warriors either snapped the necks of their surprised prey, or ripped out their throats with their razor sharp claws. Either way, they had no chance to get out a warning.

As each victim died, a member of the local townsfolk took their place, taking their jackets and helmets so they would better blend in. They also found their phaser rifles very useful.

Scanner looked up at the sky in the fading light, feeling the presence of his wife's thoughts in the back of his mind. He wasn't a natural telepath, but his wife had touched his mind enough times for him to recognise the sensation. He knew she was nearby and very busy. In fact, he believed she was enjoying herself.

He wiped his dirty hands on a rag. He had been busy greasing the bearings on one of the conveyor belts. He hadn't been permitted to shut it down for safety reasons, so he had been *very* careful.

The door to the ugly building opposite opened and he saw Piper come out, being guarded by four short, but burly, Orions. He smiled to himself as she gave them a baleful glare before she caught his gaze and gave him a knowing nod.

Kriton followed them out seconds later. “Hurry up and load the ore onto the shuttle. We'll be leaving in ten minutes!”

The information gave Scanner a start. His people

didn't have much time, and he couldn't just tell his wife. He had to wait for her to make contact. He looked back at Piper and saw she understood as well. He just wished he could talk to her directly. He had made a discovery regarding the substance the Orions had been mining.

At the helm of the *Pterodactyl*, Jason Nunn flew the newly restored ship with gusto. Although the work wasn't finished and the ship was far from perfect, it was now capable of flight not only in the atmosphere, but warp drive as well.

Now, he was keeping the ship on station five miles away from the canyon in a shallow valley out of the line of sight, hovering twenty metres off the ground.

Carman was manning the communications panel to his left. He was watching the Captain, who sat behind them in the command chair, but who didn't seem to be watching them at all. He knew she was listening for the telepathic call from Lieutenant Sandage. It wasn't long in coming.

Piper Silayna suddenly focussed on him and said: "Tell them to open fire as soon as they're all in the clear."

On the ground, Scanner smiled to himself. People had a really bad habit of underestimating him. He took a small transmitter from his picket and toggled a switch. "Stick that in your pipe and smoke it," he muttered defiantly.

Immediately, the siren calling for the mine's

evacuation went off. It was designed to warn the workers and guards alike of dangerous gas leaks, which underground mines were all too often subject to. A sparked methane leak could wipe out the subterranean population within seconds.

It was a sound unfamiliar to the children, but one the Orions were trained to respond to. Their lives were in danger so they did what came naturally. They abandoned the children and ran like Hell.

It didn't take the children long to cotton on there was a problem, so they soon followed. The seconds that separated them was what Piper Silayna was counting on.

Kriton was not happy. He was not one to suffer his schedule being interrupted too badly. He cried out: "Shut that noise off!"

Not that anyone was listening. His men were too busy running for their lives to pay any attention to what he was saying. He looked up at the canyon walls expecting to see the guards there running as well. Instead, they were all standing, brandishing their phaser rifles.

It was a trap. He knew it, but he was also aware there was little he could do about it. He pulled his phaser and decided on self-preservation. But he wasn't leaving without extending his profit. He pointed his pistol at Piper and ordered her forward. "Get into the shuttle!"

The Orion's shuttle wasn't all that different to the *Pterodactyl* except the cargo bay opened at the rear and it had no atmospheric manoeuvring thrusters. It was also a

hundred metres away.

Seeing no choice, Piper started towards the vessel, all the while being prodded on by the phaser in her back.

On the canyon rim, Jack noticed that the last of the Orion guards had cleared the mine entrance. What worried him was that some of the children had begun to emerge. Without waiting for an order, he raised his weapon and put all his target practice to work shooting Orions.

The other five townsfolk, and the Caits, began doing the same. Quickly, methodically, they began cutting down the Orions who had worked so hard to make their lives a misery. This was payback, pure and simple. It was bloody and mindless. Now, a lifetime of hunting barrits was coming in useful.

They began falling quickly and the Orions ran to take cover. For most of them, it wasn't quick enough and they were cut down as they fled.

One grabbed a child and used him for cover as he slowly backpedalled towards the main building. Over the radio Manny was heard saying: "He's mine!"

Crash didn't mind. His sister was an expert marksman. She stood, phaser beams zipping past her as she tracked the Orion for a second, then took his head off cleanly.

To her surprise, the ten year old female didn't run away immediately. Realising her captor was dead she paused for a second to savagely kick his corpse before making her way towards the canyon entrance.

Manny smiled to herself as she watched her, then instinctively ducked as a phaser blast sizzled through the air where her head had just been. “Be more careful next time,” she heard in her ear as Crash reproved her over the radio.

On the other side of the canyon, Crash was pleasantly pleased to see that none of his people had yet been killed. Singed yes; dead no. He took a moment to take stock of the situation. The canyon floor was littered with the bodies of Orions. Only a handful remained. Some were hiding behind machinery, others were making their way out of the canyon, ducking and weaving behind whatever cover they could find. Fortunately, they had learned from the mistake of their fellow and not tried to take any more hostages.

Jack stood then and called to the children who were milling around below. “Kids! Stay near the mine entrance!”

Crash hissed at him: “Jack, get down!”

He didn't need encouragement as the air around him became superheated by the multitude of phaser beams that came his way. He dropped to the ground and had to crawl backwards quickly as the bushes around him burst into flame.

Below, the children had heard him and quickly banded together to move towards the mine. The remaining Orions thought to join them, to use the mine for cover and the children as hostages, but the first two to move were cut down within seconds.

Manny's eye was caught by the lone Orion prodding a human, who could only be Piper, through the milling throng. She focussed her thoughts on the Captain, who heard her clearly.

Susanna, if you drop, I can take out the Orion behind you. Manny was confident.

No. Piper was adamant. *I won't risk the children. I'll take care of this one when the time is right.*

Enjoying himself, Jason pushed the *Pterodactyl* to her limits, keeping the aging vessel flying low, but not too low. He had no intention of having his cargo getting snagged on a tree. Under his fingers, he felt the hum of the machine and was taking delight in the way the old freighter was handling.

Ahead, he could see the edge of the canyon coming up so he gained some altitude, then pushed the ship into a dive.

Piper had just reached the rear door to the Orion shuttle when a deafening roar was heard overhead. Both she and Kriton looked up into the evening sky to see the reborn *Pterodactyl* bearing down on their position, her wings extended. Piper had the impression she was about to be caught by an enormous eagle. However, her claws held something. Something that looked suspiciously like a home-made bomb.

Instead of running for it, Kriton prodded Piper in

the back, forcing her into the shuttle. No sooner were they inside Kriton slapped the emergency close button and the loading ramp snapped shut with a clang.

Kriton pushed Piper over to the wall, making sure she stayed out of range and that his phaser remained pointed at her at all times. He didn't trust Piper one little bit.

“Put your hands in the manacles,” he said rudely.

Piper looked up to both her left and right, seeing the manacles shortly above her head height on both sides. She noticed they were self-adjusting and got an idea.

Almost lazily, she put her arms up and into the manacles, which snapped shut.

In a hurry to escape, Kriton lowered the phaser and made his way forward past the cargo, which was contained in large, metal cases, up a short flight of stairs that were as dilapidated as the rest of the ship, and into the cockpit. Practiced at the controls, Kriton began warming up the engines. He looked up just in time to get out a nasty Orion epithet before his vision was filled by fire.

Manny heard the sound of the *Pterodactyl* coming in and fired a quick, desperate thought at Suzette.

Who heard it just in time. Her hands gripped the arms of her chair in fear for her sister when she barked: “Abort!”

Without hesitation, Jason pulled the vessel out of the dive, coming close enough to the Orion shuttle to dust

it with her wake. The bomb they trailed behind them on the grappling claw passed by it harmlessly less than a metre from its hull.

Suzette's mind raced as she considered the new information. She had to do something that would keep her sister safe and prevent the shuttle from taking off.

I'm in the cargo hold.

The thought came to her crystal clear. Suzette realised her proximity to her double made it possible. It was all the information she needed.

“Bring us about,” she ordered. “We're going to bomb that shuttle's bridge.” As her crew stiffened she added: “Don't worry, she's not in it.”

Jason relaxed and did as he was told. The *Pterodactyl* performed a tight loop, then headed back to the shuttle trailing their bomb that was no more than a mixture of fertilizer and diesel fuel in a wooden barrel with a detonator.

The original idea was to detonate it *inside* the shuttle by dropping it through the open hatch and blowing it from within, but that plan had to be scratched. Now, they were improvising.

Worried about the kids, Jason brought them in on a trajectory that kept them away from them. He was glad to see they were a good two hundred metres from the shuttle near the mine entrance.

His target in sight, he swooped in on his prey.

Crash could only watch and pray as their pocket

starship swooped in and dropped its surprise package right on the shuttle's nose. There was a loud explosion and shockwave that was felt on the canyon wall as the barrel was vapourised with the concussion. The shuttle was shaken and shifted in its position, but when the dust cleared the vessel seemed to be intact.

“Damn,” he said, remembering one of Judd's favourite sayings. He called to all his associates. “Fire on the shuttle. It cannot take off!”

Immediately, the focus of their anger was shifted to the vessel as the *Pterodactyl* thundered into the sky overhead.

Crash didn't worry about the remaining Orions on the ground. They were being mopped up by the rest of their party who had emerged from the canyon entrance below and were now shooting anything green that moved.

After a moment's firing, Crash was beginning to think they were having no effect as the shuttle continued to warm up its engines. To his abject dismay, it took off with a jerk and launched itself after the *Pterodactyl*.

From her vantage point in the shuttle cargo bay, Piper could see just enough of the cockpit to know they had taken off and that the bomb hadn't been a waste of time. The windows were a myriad of spider-web cracks.

What she could hear from Kriton was enough to know he was out for blood. She worried when she heard the vessel's phaser cannons warming up.

It was time to move. She looked up at the manacles

where they were holding her half-way up her forearms which were a lot thicker than her wrists. Her gamble was that she should be able to slide her whole hand through smoothly. However, she realised the manacles might readjust, so she relaxed the muscles she had tightly clenched in her arms to expand it and whipped her arm out in one quick motion. Her left arm now free, she did the same with the right arm.

Now able to move, she tried to stand up from her seated position on the metal bench and only then realised the shuttle's grav plating was playing up. As Kriton shifted the shuttle's trajectory to follow her ship she found herself thrown across the cargo bay floor into the side of a crate.

The *Pterodactyl* shook as a phaser bolt detonated ahead of them to the right.

“Evasive manoeuvres!” Suzette ordered. It came out naturally, but she realised as soon as it was out that it was a wasted exercise. Jason was already testing the limits of the vessel's handling by swinging from side to side to avoid the enemy fire.

“Already working on that, Captain!” The comment came through gritted teeth. “High or low?”

Suzette considered his question. Try to lose the enemy in the sky or by using the planet's terrain? She thought of the damage they might have done to the shuttle and realised the best course. “High,” she said. “The higher the better.”

Jason gave her an almost imperceptible nod then

took them into the clouds. At that moment, he was grateful for Merrijig's often inclement weather as the clouds were thick enough for their pursuer to lose sight of them. He would have to follow them on instruments, and they were not always the most reliable source of information. Without taking his eyes off the sky ahead, he asked: "Carman, can you find us a nice, big storm around here somewhere?"

"Gotcha," Carman Valastro said, guessing his friend's next move. He turned and gazed into their scanner's hood for a moment, temporarily grateful to be able to concentrate on something that wasn't moving. "Come around to 032. There's a thunderstorm fifty kilometres out."

"On it." Jason used a thicker cloud to lose them in, then veered off on the suggested course. The cloud behind them was briefly illuminated by a flash that wasn't lightning. Kriton had fired on them again, jostling the ship. "I wish that bugger would hassle someone else for a change," he growled. Eager to get there was quickly as possible, he pushed the turbines to the limit.

Carman had been so busy watching the instruments that he hadn't thought about their circumstances – until now. He turned and caught Suzette's gaze. "How are we going to get Susanna out of that shuttle if we can't shoot it down?"

The Captain focussed on him and said: "Don't worry, we've got that one taken care of."

Susanna was busy enough just trying to stay on her feet as Kriton tried furiously to keep the *Pterodactyl* in his sights – to no avail. Just when he seemed to have her dead to rights, Jason fainted. The down side for her was that she was making no real headway in her attempt to reach the cockpit. It was her hope to be able to overpower Kriton and take over the ship, but it was quickly becoming apparent to her that wasn't going to happen. There simply wasn't that much time.

As the ship passed through a rain cloud she noticed some of the water seep through the cracks in the windshield. She reasoned if water could get in....

She relayed the information to her sister. If there was one thing the proximity was doing was making it easier for them to hear one another. Together, they came up with a plan. It was nuts, but it was their only hope of her getting out of this alive.

The ship jostled as it entered the thunder cloud. The updrafts threw it about and the ship was struck by lightning more than once, causing static electricity to arc around her. She felt the deck tilt as Kriton pushed the shuttle into a climb to follow his quarry.

“Just keep going you bastard,” Piper swore.

The *Pterodactyl's* wings shook under the strain, but they held fast. The interior of the bridge darkened as the ship climbed through the enormous storm. It soon became so dark the lights automatically came on. Rain lashed the windshield and lightning played over the surface of the

ship. Her Federation builders had been careful and had hardened the ship's systems against static discharge.

Jason spun the ship to the side and swooped into an updraft, letting the wind help carry them upwards. Within seconds the ship shot out of the top of the storm and, finally, the ship had enough height for Jason to be able to engage her impulse engines, which he did with elation. Like a shot from a cannon the ship soared up through the Ionosphere, the air outside becoming thinner in seconds.

Kriton was so intent on the *Pterodactyl's* destruction he didn't consider the damage to his own vessel. It started with a small whistle, but the sound soon became loud enough for him to register something was wrong.

In shock, he realised the air inside the cabin was quickly getting thinner. He began wheezing as he found it harder and harder to take in a useful lungful of air.

Yet he still refused to break off his pursuit. This was no longer about profit. He was out for blood.

He was blissfully unaware that his sole passenger had used the ship's steep ascent to slide along the floor down to the rear of the vessel. Susanna had taken hold of some mesh with her left hand and had her right hand next to it's emergency release. She hoped it was working.

It took only seconds before the inevitable happened. The air pressure inside was too great in the rarified atmosphere and blew out a large portion of the shuttle's windshield with a roar. Kriton, who was strapped in,

remained inside, however he quickly lost consciousness in the bitter cold. However, in a last act of defiance, he fished in his pocket and found the remote control for mine booby trap. He fumbled with the device, finding it hard to push the button as his fingers began to freeze. With satisfaction he depressed it, his last thought was that he hoped he wasn't out of range.

At the sight of the blowout, Susanna fired off a mental mayday to her sister, then hit the release switch. The door next to her blew out and she found herself torn outside by the escaping atmosphere. Her first impressions as she fell were that it was unbearably cold and dark as she closed her eyes to prevent them from freezing. She quickly exhaled and resisted the impulse to suck in a lungful of something that wasn't there.

Her momentum carried her upwards for a few moments as the shuttle continued it's now mad, brainless climb to oblivion. Its course was taking it directly for the planet's largest moon where it would soon shatter itself into millions of pieces.

Susanna's last effort before she lost consciousness was to roll herself up in a ball and pray.

Above her, Suzette had gotten the message. "Seal the bridge!" she ordered. "Bring us about!" She didn't have to give them any more orders as she had already brought them up to speed on their plan.

Free of the atmosphere, Jason brought the *Pterodactyl* around in an impossibly tight turn, then aimed

for the shuttle following. Somewhere behind it was Susanna, who had less than a minute to live.

Carman quickly vacated the air from the cargo hold and opened the outer door to its limits. He then activated the emergency cargo netting in the hope it would catch the Captain. With that done he kept an eye on the cargo bay cameras.

Unseen behind them, Suzette began shivering. She could feel her sister's pain and fading consciousness. Through chattering teeth she said: "Hurry, Mister Nunn!"

Jason *was* hurrying, but he also had to do this right or there would be nothing left of the Captain but a greasy spot on the floor. He shot past the shuttle, following its flight path as well as he could. He scanned the air for anything, and soon spotted the Captain in her white jumpsuit on the black of the storm below. It wasn't the only thing he saw. The shuttle's cargo was falling out of the sky around her. He reasoned it must have come loose when the Captain blew the door. He did his best to dodge the crates as he made a bee-line for Susanna.

Once more in the atmosphere, Jason had to rely on the ship's thrusters again and he regretfully deactivated the impulse engines. The ship slowed, but not to a crawl.

Teeth gritted, he pushed the ship downward, doing his best to bring the nose of the ship over the Captain so she could be caught by the cargo hold below them.

Within seconds, he was close enough to see her hair fluttering in the wind. He knew he only had one shot at this. Imagining what was happening outside the ship, he

brought the *Pterodactyl* slightly up and over the Captain.

On Carman's screen Susanna suddenly flew into the cargo bay, dropping towards the floor under the effect of the artificial gravity, but was caught just short of it in the netting. "Yes!" he cried as he hit the control to shut the cargo bay doors before repressurising the area. He failed to notice she wasn't the only thing they caught.

He got up to go, but realised they were not out of danger yet.

The *Pterodactyl* had re-entered the atmosphere at a very steep angle and Jason was finding it hard to slow her and bring the nose up before they had a chance encounter with the ground.

"I'll go," Suzette said unnecessarily. The men knew there was no other choice. She had to wait a moment to exit the bridge as the air pressure had yet to complete being restored to the rest of the craft.

"Deploy flaps," Jason called as he continued his struggle.

"Deployed."

"Angle the thrusters plus ten degrees."

"Ten degrees, aye."

The ship plunged back into the storm. Once more she was being lashed by the elements. Jason had an idea. He looked about, and quickly found, a large updraft. He headed the ship into it.

Once she was through the doors, Suzette looped her legs over the railings and slid down the stairways. On the

way below, she grabbed a medkit from their modest medical bay and ran into the cargo bay, doing her best to avoid touching the still cold metal surfaces.

Her sister was still balled up in the middle of the netting, showing no sign of life. Her face white and her hair was full of tiny ice crystals.

Suzette rolled her out of the netting and onto the floor. She put her concerns for the ship's fate out of her mind and focussed on the task at hand.

Susanna didn't appear to be breathing. She reached out and touched her neck, searching for a pulse. She found one, but it was weak.

She considered the quickest way to get some heat back into her was to breathe for her. She'd had only the most basic of medical training, and her reliance on Merete had dulled her abilities. She took Susanna's head in her hands, tilted it back, opened her mouth, then blew into her lungs, hard once, twice, three times.

She then turned and remembered something. She opened her medkit and took out a Cordrazine pen. Like the epi-pens of the early 21st Century, this one was designed to give the system a quick jolt.

Unwilling to waste a molecule, she unzipped Susanna's jumpsuit, found the space between two ribs next to her sternum and injected it directly into her heart.

Susanna's eyes opened wide in shock as she drew in a much needed, painful breath. Her hands shot out, seeking some purchase as her body drank in the oxygen, feeding her dulled brain and senses. Her eyes took in her

sister and the pen she was still holding.

Suzette took her hand in hers and said: “Slow down!”

Her sister tried to calm herself and grimaced. “You try it with a blood stream full of Cordrazine!” she said in an almost angry whisper. However, the words masked her true feelings which her sister felt through her touch. She was just grateful to be alive. She looked into her double's eyes and said through still chattering teeth: “Thanks.”

“You'd have done the same for me,” Suzette said, and both knew it was true.

After a few moment's recovery, Susanna forced herself to sit, then Suzette helped her to her feet. At that point, Suzette noticed something awry. “You don't smell so good,” she said, her nose wrinkled.

Susanna, still shaking violently next to her, said: “Orion hospitality.”

Suzette steered her towards the stairs and their quarters where a shower awaited her. The warm water would help her recover, and remove the lingering odours from her ordeal.

Above, Jason had succeeded in slowing the ship's progress by allowing the storm's sheering wind to bouy them. Now down to Mach One, the *Pterodactyl* shot out of the clouds in the direction of the mine and their friends.

Jason finally took his eyes off the screen and said with a sigh: “My shout at the pub when we land.”

Carman shook his head, clapped the younger man

on the shoulder and said: “After that bit of flying, the drinks are on *me*.”

By the time the *Pterodactyl* had returned to the box canyon the locals had finished off the remaining Orions. Crash had organised the children into a large group near the entrance to the mine in anticipation of the *Pterodactyl's* return so they could give the exhausted children a ride back to Eureka Creek.

Manny had sent some of the locals down into the mine to search for any Orions who might have stayed inside. She had equipped them with an old tricorder she had taken from the *Pterodactyl* so they weren't taken by surprise. That was *after* she had reunited with her husband and given him a huge lick on the cheek.

Everyone gave a cheer when the aging cargo ship swooped in and hovered for a moment, it's landing struts extending, before lowering into the space the shuttle had previously occupied. It came to rest with a slight, squeaky jolt before Jason powered down the thrusters.

At the front of the vessel, which was facing the mine entrance, the cargo door creaked open and Suzette, Jason and Carman exited moments later to a cheering throng.

Scanner simply looked at the doorway and said: “I'm going to have to grease that dang thing.”

As Manny and Crash gathered around the returned trio, Crash couldn't help but pass a worried eye over them. “Where's Susanna?” he asked.

Suzette smiled at him and said loudly so he could hear her: “Hopefully out of the shower by now!” When Crash gave her a quizzical look she simply said: “She can tell you about it later.”

Chapter Ten

Piper's crew came together, assembled the children and had them board the *Pterodactyl*. As agreed earlier, they were going to give them a quick ride over to Eureka Creek where the locals would meet them and see to their needs. Scanner counted them as they boarded and he quickly came to seventy-two souls. They were all children ranging from eight years old to twenty. It tugged at his heart that so many were emaciated, nothing more than skin and bone, their eyes sunken from extended abuse.

He turned and looked back at the mine and wished he could blow it to hell. At that point, he realised what he had forgotten in the commotion. He turned to his wife, who was helping settle the children down while Crash started getting them some clean water. "I've got to check on something. Do me a favour." He tapped his temple. "Keep your mental eyes on me."

She nodded without understanding and watched him go. As he ran down the boarding ramp Scanner grabbed Jack, who had remained to see them off. "Give me a hand," he said as he went.

To the man's credit, he did as he was told. It was clear Scanner was worried about something, so he followed without question. The mine entrance was only a short distance away and as soon as they were inside its mouth Judd began looking around.

"What are we looking for?" Jack asked.

Judd didn't stop as he said, clearly worried: "For

anything that might be a bomb.”

Jack pulled up short. “A BOMB!” he said, incredulously. “If there's a bomb in here, shouldn't we be running the other way?”

At that, Judd paused and looked him in the eye. “If that bastard did what I think he did, then he's put a bomb down here that at the very least will leave a hole in this planet big enough for a new ocean.”

Gobsmacked, Jack's eyes became the size of saucers. The man inside him raged at the idea that his world might be decimated and that all he and his friends had worked for would be destroyed so wantonly. He stamped the ground with the heel of his boot. “*No!*” he spat, furious. “We can't let that happen.”

Together, they explored the tunnel.

Back on the *Pterodactyl*, Manny got the message as well as she had been listening to her husband's thoughts. She ran over to a wall comm unit and mashed the button. “Manny to Suzette. We need to prepare to leave at a moment's notice!”

On the bridge, Suzette replied immediately. “What's the problem?” she asked, thinking one of the children might be taking a turn.

Manny filled her in. Over the comm unit she heard Suzette ordered the thrusters be readied for an immediate take-off.

“Let me know the instant Scanner is back on board.”

“Will do.”

“Where the hell would he have put it?” Jack said, exasperated after finding nothing behind *another* wooden beam.

Judd kicked aside a box to see what was behind it. “If I were him, I'd have mounted it to the wall somewhere so I could reach it, but still maintenance if need be.”

Jack kicked aside a crate, grateful the mine was still lit. Nothing. “Why can't we get your people to scan for it?” he asked.

Scanner sighed. “I have to give that scumbag some credit. He made it out of the same material he was mining. It would simply blend in.”

“Okay,” Jack said, trying to collect his thoughts. He tilted his head to the side, frustrated. “All right, then. What *did* he make it out of?”

His answer came after a nasty hiss of anger from his associate. “Uranium 235. This mine is filthy with the isotope and the vein runs deep. That's why the Orions were working it. If you had enough of this stuff you could terrorise half the galaxy.” He ran further into the mine and looked all over the wall. Still nothing. Was he bluffing?

A thought came to him. The fissionable material was Uranium, but he would probably use something else for a detonator. Plutonium perhaps?

Jack suddenly jumped as his radio squawked in his ear. “What was that?” he said in reply.

“Look up!” came Manny's tinny voice.

Jack's gaze was drawn upward where Judd met it.

There, on the ceiling, was a rather large steel casing. Facing downward was a timer. It was counting down to zero. It was already at one minute thirty seconds. Ninety seconds to go.

Judd patted down his shirt, looking for a tool that he might be able to use to open the casing. By the time he found a screwdriver the timer was reading 1:20.

He began seeking something he could stand on when Jack grabbed him by the arm. "Come on, Judd! There's no time!"

"*We can't just let it go off!*" Scanner replied.

Jack could see he didn't want to leave without trying. "Go!" he said. "Get the children out of here!" He ran over to the wall, snatched up a steel rod and began bludgeoning the casing. When Judd hesitated, Jack yelled at him. "Go! I'm going to give this bastard a good beating before it kills me! Either I'll take it out or it'll get me, but I'm not going to let it win so easily!"

Judd was torn. He didn't want to leave Jack to do this alone, but he knew that he was too late, and that the man had to be given a chance to try. It was his world.

Scanner gave the man a parting, respectful nod then bolted for the tunnel mouth, being careful not to trip over. Now was not the time to break his ankle stupidly. He shot out into the evening twilight fifteen seconds later. Ten seconds after that he had mounted the loading ramp and was through the hatch, straight into his wife's arms.

The deck shifted as Jason pushed the thrusters past one hundred percent, pushing the *Pterodactyl* into the sky.

In the mine, Jack took a final swing and, to his delight, the casing tore away. Amazed, he found only a small note taped to the inside of the box next to the remains of the simple timer.

It read:

If you are reading this know that this was merely a decoy. There are five more bombs in the mine you will never find in time. Enjoy the last few seconds of your life.

“Now, that's not bloody fair!” he swore viciously. He gave the casing one final, defiant thump with the rod before he cast it aside. Defeated, he sat on a nearby rock and waited for the inevitable. He smiled to himself when he realised he did have the final victory. The children would be safe and Suzette would be all right. “I'm sorry, love,” he said to himself, his voice full of regret. “You deserved better.”

Going ballistic, the *Pterodactyl's* escape route was practically vertical. As soon as it was safe for them to do so he engaged the impulse engines. The last thing he was worried about was the shock wave induced by them effecting locals who would all shortly be dead.

The ship shot up through the atmosphere and, like the impulse engines, Jason went to engage their untested warp drive whilst still skirting the outer atmosphere.

Suzette's only order had been: “Get us out of here.” That he was doing to the best of his ability. Her mind

wasn't on the ship, however. She, somehow, heard Jack's last words in the quiet of her thoughts. In that moment, she found the strength to forgive him.

Those on the bridge were almost blinded by the intense light that seemed to shine through the very walls. The black of space before them was lit by the most intense light they had ever encountered as the bombs detonated below ground.

What Kriton hadn't taken into account was how deep and wide the Uranium vein went. The force of the explosions created a critical mass throughout the vein that in turn detonated as well. It shattered the planet not only to its core, but reduced it to trillions of separate particles that seemed to race each other on their way to oblivion.

The people of Merrijig had no time to even realise what was happening as their world tore itself apart in a blinding second. There was no destructive wave that smashed homes and businesses. The planet exploded with the force of a small supernova.

On the bridge of the *Pterodactyl*, Jason had just finished pushing the activation button to engage warp drive when the initial energy burst shone out. The warp nacelles almost instantly pushed the ship beyond light speed and out of the path of the shock wave that was moving almost, but not quite, as fast.

In the cargo hold Manny suddenly dropped to the floor, cupping her ears with her paws as if that could somehow silence the screams of the dying that had come

and gone in an instant.

Still with her, Judd took her in his arms, understanding what had happened. He knew it must have been traumatic for her to hear, so he just held her as she sobbed.

“What happened?” The question came from a teenage boy who had taken it upon himself to be spokesman for the children.

Judd raced in his mind for something to say, but came up blank. How do you tell a kid that everyone they knew and loved is now dead?

A familiar voice came from overhead on the gangway. “What you just felt was the ship going into warp,” Piper said. She was dressed in jeans, t-shirt and thongs and, while she was still weak, the air of authority about her was concrete. “We had to make an emergency exit from your world because Kriton had left an atom bomb in the mine that destroyed it.” She paused, sombre. “I’m sorry.”

The boy looked up at her, confused. “I thought Kriton was dead! How could he do that?”

Piper just looked at him, apology written all over her face. “We didn’t know until too late he had done so. If we hadn’t made the discovery we wouldn’t be here, either.”

Sadly, the boy asked again: “Did the bomb hurt Eureka Creek?” A lot of the other children nodded, wanting to know if their families were okay.

The Captain sighed with sorrow that filled her very soul. They were just kids and didn’t understand. “I’m

sorry,” she said, meaning it with every fibre of her being. “The bomb didn't just destroy the mine. It destroyed the whole of Planet Merrijig. That light you saw was it going off.”

The children erupted. “That can't be true!” some cried out. “No, it can't be!” yelled others. “It's not fair!” Piper heard. Others, especially the younger among them, simply bawled. After all they had been through, it was beyond their ability to comprehend that their freedom had ultimately cost them their home.

Leaving Jason to fly the ship, Piper called her sister and Carman down to help them settle the children. Some accepted the offering. Some were adamant that they were somehow responsible for what had happened, but fortunately stopped short of violence. Truth be told, most of them were too weak to put up much of a fight if they had.

Others just couldn't comprehend and just shut down, sitting in corners and just staring at nothing.

Those were left to Manny, who came and comforted them on a deeper level as she lovingly touched their minds. Most of them were unaware she was even doing it, but grateful that she was there for them.

Some time later after mourning with and comforting the children, it was clear that exhaustion was catching up with them all. The ship only carried one functioning replicator, so it was set to work making dinners for them. The youngest were taken care of first, with Piper Silayna ordering up chicken nuggets and chips for them all. She

pulled a fast one on them and programmed the unit to make them more nutritious without altering the flavour.

Carman brought the children into line and took care of dissenters. “Everyone in turn!” he said. “Otherwise you may not be able to choose what you get. It might just give you broccoli and brussels sprouts!”

Not that it was much of a discouragement. The children were hungry enough to eat liver burgers.

Once the children were satisfied, Carman reprogrammed the unit to start making sleeping bags and cushions. It wasn't long before the soft sound of snoring came from the cargo decking and Piper left Manny to watch over the children while she ushered them upstairs into their small bridge. There was hardly enough room for them to each take a seat, so Crash curled up under the cockpit window on the *Pterodactyl's* “dash”.

Piper still wasn't feeling well, so she left her sister the chair. She wasn't sure she should, however. She knew that Suzette was in pain and that she was doing a good job of masking it. She asked herself if she would be completely rational given the situation. She wasn't certain either way, but she counselled herself that she had yet to give her a reason to think otherwise.

As she got comfortable, Suzette opened with: “Our next problem is clear. Where do we take the children?”

At his adopted science station, Carman helpfully looked into the hood as he brought up the local star chart. “Okay,” he said. “Merrijig is the vestero planiti – sorry – second planet in the Lepus Gamma system.”

The group chewed on the information. Scanner chimed in: “You know, it's not that far to Vulcan.”

Crash sniffed. “Yeah, Judd. We're going to take a bunch of human children to a planet that's not known for its hospitality and is full of people who ask too many questions.” As he mocked his brother-in-law he gave him a light cuff over the back of his head.

“We need a human colony that'll take in the children, but not look too carefully at us,” Suzette said, narrowing things down.

Piper slapped herself on the forehead as realisation dawned. “I keep forgetting what the year is!” She thought for a moment, then a slow smile crossed her face. “I know exactly where we should take them.”

Finally, Suzette had some privacy as she curled up on her bunk, facing the wall, her back to the door. She did her best to shield her thoughts from others then allowed herself to grieve for Jack now she was alone.

Her anger at his behaviour at the party was past. The present simply felt emptier without him. Jack had made her feel accepted by a man again, something she hadn't had for years – even from her husband.

He had made her feel beautiful – both inside and out. When he had come into her life he had brought something with him that had almost felt foreign to her, she had been so long without it. A feeling of complete acceptance and even adoration.

Then came the bitter realisation that he may have

only chosen her because she was less likely to be taken by the Orions. Even though she hadn't shown it, the thought had crushed her spirit. Once again, she felt second-rate, a cast-off accepted only because she was a *viable* choice, not the preferred one.

Finally, she came to know that his final thoughts were of her. It was both a comfort and a torture. A comfort to know his feelings for her were real after all. A torture that they would never get another chance to share them.

Knowing this brought her an emptiness that she had felt before and had hoped never to experience again. When Brian had told her he needed some time away she had known in her heart that he had no real inclination to return. The fact it was mostly her fault had made it even worse.

At first it had been easy to blame him. She recalled a time, not that long ago, when she had gotten falling down drunk at a bar with Merete. She had heaped the blame on her absentee husband, that he had never been there for her, but she remembered the look in Merete's eyes. She had forgotten they had all been friends at the Academy and the Doctor had known Brian before they married. Merete had resented her attacking Brian, but was too loyal to her to voice it.

Perhaps that's why she had been so distant recently, she thought. The unintended sleight against her friend only added to her misery.

She didn't hear the door swing open and her mirror step into the room. She didn't even know Susanna was

present until she felt her arms encircle her from behind.

At first she struggled against the uninvited intrusion and twisted, but she momentarily relented as she heard her sister's voice in her mind. *I'm just here to hold you*, she said. *Don't let me stop you getting it out.*

Yet she still struggled. *I just want to be left alone!* she cried out in her misery. *You just don't understand!*

Suzette started as she felt a dark chuckle from her sister. *What was that about?* Susanna asked.

Suzette felt her sister shake her head behind her.

Piper continued: *When I look at you, so often it's like looking in a mirror. I never have been very good at reaching out for help when it comes to personal matters. Save the galaxy – no problem. Take all the help you can get. Save myself – not so much.* Her grip around her waist tightened. *We're always so busy helping everyone else with their problems sometimes I think I've forgotten how to ask others when it comes to my own. The Piper is the one who leads. She's the one out front. The trouble with that is that there's nobody there when she falls.*

Instead of arguing the point, Suzette considered her words. She *had* been out front for a long time. “*I isolated myself,*” she muttered truthfully.

To keep from being hurt, I know. The problem then is that there's nobody to help us when stuff happens. And all too often, if someone does try, the wall of Command comes between us. Contrary to popular belief, the Captain isn't all powerful.

They were words that spoke from experience, but

there was something extra she hadn't noticed before. A longing. Not wanting to break their contact, Suzette straightened out and rolled over so she could look Susanna in the eye. The new line of thought was a welcome distraction. *You miss him, don't you?*

There was no way to lie to her sister, she would only be lying to herself. *I do.*

What is Sarda to you?

It was a subject she had tip-toed around for some time. When they had contact Suzette had free access to her memories, but like any tourist, she needed a guide in the unfamiliar territory. Susanna had, until now, done a fairly good job of keeping her away from her Vulcan first officer largely because she didn't want to explore her feelings herself.

He's my First Officer and my friend.

The reply was deserved. *Duh! Tell me something I didn't already know. What is he to you.*

There were few words to describe their relationship, so she took her sister on a quick journey through their history. Starting with the Academy, their early service together on the *Enterprise*, then their separation as they followed different paths that eventually led them back together on the *Millennium*. Naturally, since their minds touched and linked during their encounter with the Romulan, Commander T'avik, they had come to develop an even deeper friendship and understanding of one another. They could finish each other's thoughts; anticipate one another's needs; work together as a highly efficient team

and lend moral support when needed.

But he's not someone you're romantically interested in. I see that. He's like a twin brother you miss when he's not around. Suzette blinked a tear from her eye. It was the latest of many, but this one had been shed for her duplicate. *If I knew him as well as you do, I'd miss him too.*

Susanna wiped away a tear of her own. *It's not just that. He's become a part of me – a part I miss dearly.* Before Suzette could say another word she pulled her to her and held her tight. *I'm just so glad that I have you here instead. You're not Sarda, but you're the next best thing.*

Suzette accepted the offering gladly. For a moment she was overwhelmed by the feeling of love and acceptance from her other self. It wasn't new, she had done it before, but she found within herself an emotional glacier that was melting each time she did so. It was becoming easier for her to accept her own sense of self worth and the fact that she *was* someone worth loving.

Thanks, Sis, Suzette said, putting all the love she could into the thought and squeezed her right back. *You make missing Jack tolerable.*

Susanna kissed her forehead. *That's what sisters are for.*

That night, as Manny lay curled up on the floor watching the children sleep, her head popped up as she heard the sound of someone coming down the stairs from above. She wasn't afraid, just attentive. Out here among the stars, there was nobody on board the ship she needed to

be concerned about.

She cocked her head to the side a little to hear better and realised it as her husband. She put her head down once more and began purring, anticipating his loving caresses.

He was doing his level best to keep his bare feet from making a noise on the steps, but there was no sneaking up on Manny. Her feline ears and security training had seen to that. Shortly, he stood next to her and gazed down at the white snowball he was married to.

“If you keep staring you're going to singe my fur,” Manny whispered.

Scanner smiled and lowered himself down to the floor, crossed his legs and nestled in close. “I was finding it hard to sleep without my furry pillow,” he said in like manner.

“Someone had to watch the kits,” Manny said, knowing he already understood this.

Her husband simply nodded his agreement. “Thanks for coming to get me.”

Manny's eyes opened as she considered what he said. They had been serving together for long enough to have had a hand in saving each other many times over, and yet each time Judd felt the need to thank her. She didn't understand why, but she didn't question it either. It was simply part of being Judd. She replied with her usual line: “It's part of the job.” She added: “If I don't save you I'm going to have to endure a pay cut.”

The comment made him chuff and desperately suppress a chuckle. One of the children nearby shifted

then settled down once more. "Don't make me laugh," he whispered. "Besides, I don't think we're going to get a single credit for our year in the past."

Manny simply wriggled her whiskers in mirth. It certainly wasn't about the money.

Not willing to disturb the children further they sat in companionable silence for a while. For the sake of the youngest among them the room was dimly lit so Judd could make out the forms of the children lined up in rows, tightly packed in as they were. He knew that some of the older girls were sleeping in their small infirmary for privacy's sake as well as taking over Captain Silayna's room. The Pipers would be hot bunking for a while.

All the same, they needed more room. His eyes cast about for items they might be able to stow elsewhere and alighted on a crate that was unfamiliar to him at first. He didn't recall it from all their time preparing the ship. Then the penny dropped. It was one of Kriton's transportation crates. It would be full of Uranium.

Concerned for the children's safety, he got up and made his way over sleeping bodies to the black crate. It was a cubic metre in size, lending him to believe there as enough fissionable material inside to create a sizeable nuclear device. He did some quick calculations in his head and came up with ten megatons give or take a megaton or two.

He gently tapped on the casing and heard a hollow thud. Lead casing. Good. They should be protected from any of radiation's nasty side-effects.

However, he was not the sort to make assumptions. He crept back to his wife and asked her to retrieve one of their aging tricorders. He had to be sure.

His wife realised why he had asked her. She would be less likely to make a noise. She got up, jumped over several children and quickly walked on all fours through the doors and headed for Engineering where they were kept. She was back momentarily and handed him the device.

The first thing he did was toggle the mute button. The older models tended to make a high pitched squeal while they operated. It had been added to simply indicate to the user that it was in operation. He then aimed it at the crate, adjusted the parameters and scanned.

It took only a moment to register only background radiation in the room. Scanner didn't realise he had been holding his breath and he let it go in a rush. "Thank God," he said. He'd had nightmares that the children had been irradiated as they slept.

Curious, but unwilling to disturb the children, Manny got her answers by looking into her husband's mind. She noted on a subconscious level that this was getting easier with time. What she saw caused the hackles on her neck to rise. Having such materiel on board was dangerous. She made a mental note to stow it away safely the next day. Another thought came to her and she projected it into her husband's mind.

You know, this could be exactly what we needed.

Judd had already considered the prospect. He

reached over, put his arm around his wife's neck and drew her close enough to kiss her cheek. *My thoughts exactly*, he replied.

The next day, as the children bustled about playing games or watching old movies from Judd's video collection, the Pipers stood and looked at their unexpected cargo as Judd and Carman attached anti-gravs to it so it could be stored more appropriately. Crash was upstairs piloting the ship.

As one, they turned and looked at Scanner. "When the time comes, do you think you could make something out of this?" they asked together.

Judd noticed they were holding hands and, when they did so, they tended to think as one. He found it a fascinating and somehow daunting notion. One Piper was a force to be reckoned with. Two of them operating as one would be unstoppable.

The funny thing was, when they were doing it, he didn't know which of them to address. He usually deferred to Piper, but he was also a gentleman and didn't want to exclude her sister, so he had a tendency to look back and forwards from one to the other.

"Yeah, I can build another one."

While Piper Silayna was unfamiliar with his first attempt, she was filled in at the speed of thought by her sister on the spectacular job he had building a device that shattered a comet.

"What do you need?" The sound came out in two

part harmony.

Before he could answer, a notion popped into their collective thoughts that wasn't their own. *You know, you creep Scanner out when you do that.*

The Pipers knew Manny's friendly voice anywhere and gazed over the crowd of busy children to where the feline was gazing at them with a small smile on her face.

In deference to Scanner, the women let go of one another and separated their thoughts.

Piper Silayna spoke first. "I might be able to help you with it's construction. I took a course at the Academy."

Her sister looked at her with a cheeky grin. "Who'd have thought you were a nuclear physicist?"

"There's more to the universe than history," Suzette replied.

Piper nodded. They had discussed their time at the Academy and found to their surprise that some of their electives had differed. Their separate histories had become a source of fascination to them and they had often spent time going through each other's memories and seeing how their life would have turned out if their circumstances had been different.

They noted that, once Piper Silayna had married Brian, she had visited their family on Proxima much more infrequently. As Brian's family was earth bound and Starfleet had its home there, they tended to visit them more often.

Piper shared her memories of Christmases at their family home, surrounded by their siblings and relatives;

Christmases Piper Silayna had missed. They were typical memories filled with crackers, food, laughter and games yet they had been enough to bring a tear to her eye.

Scanner caught Silayna's eye. "I could use the help. I've never been fond of working with this stuff."

Their collective gaze returned to the case as it disappeared through the doorway headed for its new home. The *stuff* made them all feel uncomfortable. It's destructive power was legendary.

Later that day, Jason was taking his turn at the helm, keeping a watchful eye on the gauges regarding their recently reactivated warp engines. They hadn't been operational for years, and yet they seemed to have weathered the time sitting around well.

He was alone on the bridge, which was really nothing more than a glorified cockpit. Sitting centrally on the forward console, he could see everything he needed to. The science station was keeping an automatic watch for dangerous objects or hostiles.

The nav computer, limited as it was, informed him they were still on course. The navigational deflector systems were working fine as well.

His gaze turned to the panel that had been bothering him for months. Labelled "Do Not Use in Atmosphere", he had been reluctant to try it. Since everything else on the ship functioned as necessary, he had found it redundant. All the same, it left him perplexed.

"What the hell," he said to himself. He put his mug

of Irish Breakfast Tea into the cup holder and dropped the ship out of warp.

The action didn't go unnoticed. Judd's voice came through immediately from Engineering. "What's going on, Jason?"

"I'm going to try the "Do Not Use" panel," he replied matter-of-factly.

There was silence for a moment as Judd considered. "Hold on. I'll be up in a sec."

Jason shrugged. If the Commander wanted in on it, who was he to argue?

In less than a minute, Judd stood next to him, along with his shadow, Manny. "Go for it," he said, rubbing his hands together, fascinated.

Jason leaned over and flipped open the panel, finding within it two simple buttons. He had guessed one for on, the other for off, but it was pure speculation.

He hit the one on the left. A whirr could be heard through the bridge as the sound of the ship's wings extending was brought to them through the superstructure. Out of the side window they could see them as they reflected the light from a nearby star. However, when they were fully extended a panel slid aside on each wing and what looked like a gun barrel protruded from within.

Their eyes opened wide. "They're not..." Judd said.

"Oh, man!" was all Jason could utter.

Manny couldn't help herself. She immediately depressed the other button. Scarlet phaser bolts shot out of each cannon as if they were energy machine guns. Her

pupils dilated as she said: "Cool!" She took her paw off the button, her eyes flashing in delight. "These might come in handy."

Jason growled: "They could have come in *handy* yesterday." He picked up his mug and tossed back the rest of the contents angrily.

Judd shrugged. "It still worked out," he said, although his heart wasn't in it. His mind had never been far from thinking of the lanky Aussie who had died uselessly bashing away on a nuclear weapon.

Manny saw the look in his eye and knew what was causing it. She had seen him dream the night before of leaving Jack behind, and each time he did he blamed himself for the man's death. "You know, I miss Jack," she said casually. "He was a good man. It's a pity his relationship with Suzette ended badly." She paused for a moment, then said thoughtfully: "Perhaps that's why he did what he did. Maybe he was trying to show her he wasn't afraid and run away from his responsibilities again."

Her attempt backfired. Scanner scowled at her and snapped: "Like I did." He brushed past her and headed for their bunk, wanting to be alone.

His wife wasn't going to let him. As he stepped through their bedroom door, Manny slipped past him and stood, looking him in the eye. "I would never accuse you of cowardice!" she said, a touch angry herself. She had taken his comment personally.

Judd grabbed the only chair in the room, turned it around and straddled it. He was trying to tamp down his

feelings and not quite succeeding. "I know!" he said a little too loudly. "I know," he repeated a little more sedately. "It's just, you weren't there." He raised his hands as if reaching for the bomb he couldn't deactivate. "I should have dragged him out."

Manny sat on her haunches in front of him and took his now lowered hands. "I *was* there, Judd," she said. "You asked me to watch you and I *was*. There was no time to overpower him. There was no changing his mind. He did what he wanted to because he believed he was right to do so."

She continued: "Remember that we barely got out of orbit alive. If you had taken a second longer we'd all be dead."

Her message got through. A tear tracked its way down his cheek and Manny wiped it away with a loving finger. "It's just that he's dead," he said tightly, quietly, sounding a little lost.

Suddenly, Manny got the insight that Jack's death was simply a symptom of a greater loss the whole crew would have to deal with. They had all witnessed the death of a world. The mass extinction of people who they had come to think of as friends. No-one more than she, who had heard their death screams as their spirits had been yanked away from their bodies in that sudden moment of release. She just hoped it was to a better place.

It was at moments like these she was grateful that she had rekindled her faith in a greater power. In the notion there was a loving God out there who took care of his

children. Although times like these left her wondering if there was a greater cause for good when so many had died.

All the same, she took hold of her faith as one drowning would to a life-preserver. It meant the world to her to know there was a possibility for continuation after this mortal life. That, somewhere, Jack and his mates could be sitting together at a pub knocking back a cold one and sharing a joke.

Manny stood up, took her husband by the hand, led him over to their bunk, then spent some time sharing their grief in one another's arms.

That night, once the children had been fed and put to bed once more, the crew came together in their mess. Piper Silayna spent some time cooking the old fashioned way. She made omelettes with a mixture of herbs, spices and replicated vegetables mixed in. She said it was good to practice.

Even the Caits liked the smell and, pretty soon, they were all tucking into their meals with gusto.

Scanner nudged Piper and indicated her double. "I thought you were the sort who burned water," he jibed.

Instead of being annoyed at him, Piper Silayna said: "There's more to me than you know, Scanner. I'm a woman of many talents."

The words, the inflections, even the spirit, were so Piper it caught everyone's attention. For some time they had noted how she seemed to be the more abrasive of the two, less inclined to take a joke. What she had just uttered

could have come from Piper's own mouth.

Scanner smiled and said: "I know that about *you*, I'm just not sure about *her*!" Her pointed at Piper for emphasis.

The Captain's eyes flared momentarily in jest. "I resemble that remark!" she said in mock anger.

Scanner added with a friendly: "Suzette, you can cook for me any time."

Touched, Suzette said fondly: "Thanks."

Seated next to Judd, Manny out of the blue said: "I think we should hold a service for the children."

The chatter around the table died instantly.

"Why is that?" Piper asked. She sympathized with the notion, but she wanted to hear what Manny thought.

The Cait collected herself, took a moment to catch everyone's eye, then said: "We all were witness to something we wish we'd never have to see. The death of a world."

The silence was fairly palpable. Some didn't realise they were holding their breath.

"The children aren't the only ones who lost families on Merrijig. We lost some good friends, our horses and a place we had called home for over two months. I don't know about you, but a part of me misses our life there." Manny was speaking from the heart and baring her soul. She took her husband's hand and drew strength from him. "I think it would be good for all of us to be able to have some way of saying "Goodbye" to them."

Scanner added, his voice rough with emotion: "We all need closure."

Piper shared a meaningful look with her other. It was a thought that had occurred to her and she now saw it was mutual. They nodded their silent agreement. It was a good idea, and while it was Manny's notion, they knew it fell to them to them to perform it.

They wasted no time. Memorial services for the dead were not an infrequent occurrence on board a ship of the line, and the crew members present were all aware of what was entailed. Although there was no body to consign to space, they took the time to lament the passing of the people of Merrijig.

They were assembled in the largest area on board: the Cargo bay. Piper and her officers stood at the front behind a small lectern and faced the children, who were now all dressed in clean clothes that they had managed to replicate for them. Carman had happily recycled the old ones.

Piper, who had recovered sufficiently enough to address the crowd without leaning on something, said: "I speak, not as a stranger to Merrijig, but as a friend, one who shared the lives of the townsfolk and the occasional drink at the Eureka Creek Pub. I'll miss the jokes and friendship. I'll miss the Lonergans and their cooking. I'll even miss Jack. But what I will never forget was how bravely they fought for you children. They did everything they could to win you back, and they did. Even Jack, who had no kids of his own, made the ultimate sacrifice to give you your freedom." She stepped back from their makeshift podium and said formally: "They will be

remembered.”

It had been agreed that Manny would speak at that point. She moved forward and said simply: “Let's pray.”

The children were surprised, but a number of them had been raised Anglican and they obediently lowered their heads.

“To the Creator of the Universe who made us all in your image, we ask that you receive our friends and family. We thank you that you made us all to enjoy the benefits of love, of family, of happiness. May they live forever more in Your presence in a place of joy and peace.” For the sake of the children, she added: “Amen.” It was a word she knew they would recognise.

She looked up and took a small delight in the fact many of the children were smiling at her. For some of them, she knew, it was the first time they had in, at the very least, days. It was good to see the healing process begin.

“I'm going to open it up now for anyone who might like to say something.”

At first, the children looked at each other. Some had nothing to say. Some didn't know what to say. Some simply didn't want to talk in front of the others.

One teenage boy, a tough kid with jet black hair called Matt, stepped forward and looked back at his friends. He looked a little lost for words for a moment before he opened his mouth and said: “I'll miss my Dad. He was good at teaching me how to fix things. I'll miss my Mum.” A smile touched his lips. “She was a great cook.” He seemed about to finish when he looked to the ceiling

and said: "Thanks for all you did for us. I'll never forget ya."

Slowly at first, children came forward to speak. Each offered a little word of thanks for their parents and it soon became clear to the adults that most of them had only dim recollections of them. They had been imprisoned for so long that their memories had waned.

One little girl came forward clutching a tiny rag doll and said: "I want my Mummy."

Those four words broke the floodgates of emotion that had built up in the confined space. Grief poured out from many of the children while an almost equal number did their best to console them.

Piper decided that the service was concluded and left the officialdom at that. She, along with her friends, began moving through the crowd and spent some time talking with those who needed someone to relate to. She came to one young, blonde girl who looked like she was about sixteen. She noticed the girl seemed to be all attitude, even given her ordeal.

"Hello," Piper said.

The girl sat on the floor and looked up at her without raising her head, leaving only the top of her head and her eyes visible. What Piper saw was challenge. "Hi," she said curtly.

The Captain wasn't certain the girl wanted to talk. In fact, she got the clear impression she wanted to be left alone. She had just decided to leave her when she said: "Thanks for what you and your people did to rescue us.

Our gutless parents did nothing for years, but when you guys showed up you managed to get them off their arse and actually do something.” She suddenly stood and wrapped her arms around Piper's waist, nestling her head between her breasts. “If there's someone I'll always be grateful to, it's you and your people.”

Piper was gobsmacked. She didn't know what to say.

The girl continued. “I heard your people call you Piper. It's a nice name. If I ever have a daughter, I'll call her that.”

Without volition Piper reached out and gently stroked the younger woman's hair. She returned the embrace and held her for as long as she wanted.

Suddenly feeling a little embarrassed, she let go of her and moved off to spend some time with her friends.

Suzette caught up with her a few moments later and found her staring into space. “Nice of you to spend so much time with that girl,” she said. She had only seen the back of her head as Piper held her. When Piper didn't respond immediately she tapped her arm and asked: “Did you catch her name?”

“Rosanna,” Piper said numbly. She caught her sister's eye. “I was just holding our mother.”

Chapter Eleven

Seventeen days later, the *Pterodactyl* blazed its way through the atmosphere of a world called Proxima Beta. It had only recently been colonised by a large group of Protestant Christians who had decided to create a colony on a lush, green planet where they could enjoy God's creation unhindered.

It was populated by a group of people who would never turn away needy children. Their faith demanded it.

Piper also knew they would help the children find their extended families if they wanted to. Many were old enough to make that decision under Federation law.

Seated in the command chair, Piper advised her sister: "There should be a small field next to the main settlement."

Suzette, who was giving Jason a spell, shook her head. "I know, I know. You *do* realise we both came from here, you know." She wasn't being mean, just reproofing. "I can't believe you've brought us here. Aren't you worried about us creating a paradox?"

Susanna looked at her incredulously. She was way past worrying about such things. After what had happened to them in the preceding months, not to mention the last couple of weeks. "We just met our *mother* on the trip here and you're worried that *we're* causing a paradox? This is the woman from whose womb I – I mean we – will spring?"

Suzette looked at her with a weak grin. "All right, it

was a stupid thing to say. I suppose that the notion has truly dawned on me that, by going back in time it's possible to be part of your *own* history.” She sighed, her teeth still clenched. “Predestination paradoxes are a pain in the ass.” She clutched the yoke a little tighter. “I'm just afraid that we're going to screw this up somehow.” The admission was not easy.

Susanna took a moment to reflect on her own feelings. “My fear of messing things up is not as strong as what would happen if we *don't* try. We're here for a purpose. They're manifold and convoluted, to say the very least. I just know that if we didn't act when we did things wouldn't have worked out as they have.”

“Like bringing Mum to Proxima.” Suzette simply stated the fact. “I remember she never talked about her past. Whenever I asked her about her childhood she'd say that was...”

“Another lifetime and you shouldn't worry yourself about it,” Susanna finished. A notion came to her. “You know, it's possible for us, knowing what we know, to find out what her family name was and trace our lineage.”

The notion held some appeal. Suzette, like Susanna, had always been curious about their mother's non-existent side of the family. But as quickly as the flame of the idea was lit, it was extinguished as she said: “It's not what Mum would want. If it wasn't important to her, it shouldn't be to us.”

Susanna nodded. They had seen the suffering of the children up close; also the bitterness many of them carried

towards their own people who allowed the Orions to keep them cowed and powerless. She took in a quick breath and let it out through her nose in a sigh. "All right. We're agreed. We won't ask."

"Agreed."

A thought popped into her head. "I wonder what happened to Mum's accent."

Suzette shrugged. "Who knows? At least I now know where her love for beers came from."

The women laughed at their shared memory. Their mother was a god-fearing woman, but that didn't prevent her from indulging in the odd drink.

All things being equal, it still bothered her that she had no recollection of Merrijig's demise in her timeline and neither did her sister. On the flip side, neither had even heard of the place before their arrival there. "After all that we've been through recently, I can't help feeling like we're manufacturing a whole new timeline."

Suzette rolled her eyes, but couldn't help agreeing with her on some level. It had bothered her that their time on Merrijig had ended with the planet's destruction, that they may have altered the natural flow of history. The thing that annoyed her most was that, collectively, none of them could recall knowing *anything* of the world and that included their ambassador of all things Australian: Jason Nunn. "I think we're just going to have to wing it and hope for the best."

"True." Susanna looked up as the ship passed into the Ionosphere, fire still flaring over the ship's nose. The

roar of atmosphere penetration could be heard all around them. "I've always loved this part."

Suzette looked up. Landing on a planet was always a favourite for her as well. "Yep, it never gets old." She disengaged the impulse drive, extended the wings and fired up the thrusters. Suddenly, the *Pterodactyl* had gone from starship to aeroplane and handled as such. The ship began bucking as she passed into the Stratosphere. The air was clear and their flight smoothed out quickly.

Susanna opened the intra-ship comms. "Hello all. This is your Captain speaking. We're passing through twenty-thousand feet as we come in to land on Proxima Beta. Please fasten your seatbelts and observe the no smoking signs."

Her sister shot her a look. "Are you going space happy?"

"Nah." Susanna grinned broadly. "Just trying to have a little bit of fun." She stood and looked out the side window. "Ah, it's good to be home."

Proxima's settlement was so new there was no formal landing site or even air traffic control. It was guided by the simple principle of EMFH. Every Man For Himself.

Many of the locals looked up in surprise. They weren't expecting visitors today, or any time in the near future for that matter.

The sight of the *Swallow*-class freighter flying overhead was welcome, but they were not above caution. The town's leadership had assigned certain individuals the

task of welcoming new arrivals and they did their job well. Albeit with people watching from the windows with phaser rifles pointed their way.

It paid to put on a friendly face, but neither Piper could blame them for being cautious. As they stood on the cargo ramp together, they watched as their welcoming committee came forward, all smiles but with a guarded look in their eye.

Both women simply strode down the ramp and walked up to the man they knew was the leader – from their youth. In turn they shook hands with a man they simply knew as “Pastor Leon”, the man who went on to become their planet's first “Senior Pastor Elect”. Proxima wasn't based on the average democracy. Neither was it a theocracy. The fledgling colony simply had a group of elders that were held in high regard by all, or they simply weren't given the position.

Pastor Leon gave them a warm greeting, as if he somehow recognised one of his own. “Welcome to Proxima, ladies. What can we do for you?”

The Pipers shared a look. They remembered that their people's outlook on life was keeping a watch for opportunities to bless others. They weren't selfish.

Susanna returned his smile and said: “We've just come from the small colony of Merrijig that was devastated by Orions.”

Suzette continued: “The planet was destroyed, but we managed to rescue a number of their children before it blew.”

Leon, an aging African gentleman with striking blue eyes was shocked. “The whole planet was destroyed?”

As if they were mirror images of each other, both Pipers cast down their eyes, their sadness clear. The tragedy was still very fresh in their minds. “Yes,” they said in unison.

Susanna added: “However, we have over seventy of their children who need a good home. They're aged between six and twenty.” She was pleased for their rescue, but never forgot the trauma they had suffered. It weighed on her heavily every time she saw their still sunken eyes.

Proxima's leader was no fool. He was aware the Federation had facilities for caring for the children including resources for finding the children's families. “Why bring them here?” he asked genially, but the intelligence in his eyes revealed the doubt as to their intentions.

“In all honesty, Pastor Leon, this was the first place I thought of.” Susanna laid her cards on the table. “I'm aware of your people's reputation for charity.”

Another elder, a man in his fifties asked incredulously: “How could you know that? We've only been here a short time ourselves.”

Susanna sucked in a breath. She had no idea she would face opposition. “I seem to remember that the early church was an embarrassment to the Roman Empire because of their reputation of taking care of their widows and orphans.” She scowled at the man. “If you're not doing that any more please let me know and I'll tear out

that page of my Bible.”

Suzette hammered it home. “ “Love thy neighbour as thyself” and “suffer the little children to come unto me”, I seem to remember Jesus saying that.”

Pastor Leon drew himself up straight. He knew the women had him theologically cornered. However, he wasn't without a final argument. “The only thing I'm worried about is our resources. We have little and I fear the Federation may be able to take better care of them.”

Susanna stepped forward and placed a hand on his shoulder. “Never mind that these children just came out of working an Orion mine and grew up on farms. If there's one thing they know how to do, it's work.” She gave his arm a squeeze. “Have faith, Pastor Leon. The Lord will provide.”

While Piper was agnostic – she had decided not to follow her parent's faith – she *was* aware of her people's history. Every time they had faced a hurdle they had soared over it. She knew they would do so now. All the same, a little voice inside her chided her for trying to manipulate the man by using his own faith against him.

Leon broke into a broad grin. He had needed reminding of that fact. He boomed: “Yes, He will!” He looked toward the cargo bay doors where he could see some of the children eavesdropping, along with a pair of overgrown felines. He threw out his arms wide and said: “Of course the children are welcome!”

As if the flood gates had burst the children came streaming out of the hold and down the ramp towards their

little group. Leon watched them come and was beginning to wonder if their guests had been overly conservative with their estimate of their number. However, any doubt about them dissolved as he engaged the delighted faces of the children who were looking at him as some kind of saviour. Leon's heart melted and he waved over his compatriots to help.

At the door Crash simply observed: "Methinks the children are just happy to get out of the ship."

Manny led him outside along with the rest of their crew. She gestured about them. "With a world as beautiful as this one, who wouldn't be?"

Crash took a moment to drink in the crystal clear air and had to agree. The cedar-like trees that surrounded the settlement were impressive to say the least, with native birds twittering away. He had taken some time to survey the planet and had found it was almost completely covered by lush foliage of one kind or another. Nearer the equatorial regions the forests more closely resembled jungles, yet for all its wildlife, the Captain had assured him there were no native carnivores. Only herbivores.

Once there was soil underfoot he couldn't help but compare this world with his own. There was so much about it that reminded him of the place of his youth. Still, the smells were wrong. He shrugged. Nothing's perfect, he thought.

By the time he joined the others the group was beginning to disburse as the children began exploring their

new home. He noticed the Captain took out a digital camera and take a few shots before slipping it back into her pocket. He made a mental note to ask her about it later.

Suzette was introducing everyone to the Pastor. When he strode up she said: “And this is Crash.”

Once more, he had to shrug inwardly and remind himself the humans meant nothing by the moniker. He put his paw out and shook the man's hand. “A pleasure to meet you, Pastor,” he said in his friendly baritone.

Leon grinned. “And you... Crash.” He turned to the crew of the *Pterodactyl* and said: “You must all join us for dinner!” Quietly, to Suzette he said: “Just give us a little while to figure out how we're going to billet the children.”

Piper Silayna nodded her understanding. “Of course, Pastor Leon. We understand completely.”

At that, the elder man gave her a knowing look. He realised they had just spent at least the last two weeks getting here in decidedly crowded conditions. “How did you manage?” he asked her.

She sighed. “You keep reminding yourself that it's nearly over every day.”

That night the Pastor was good to his word and the Starfleet crew were fed some of the local varieties of fruit, vegetables and fish. Someone had been thoughtful enough to point out the Caitian tastes and replicated some juicy steaks for them, served fresh off the proverbial cow.

A celebration of sorts was held and, unknown to the crew, some photos were taken to commemorate the event.

Farewells were made and the two Pipers watched from a distance as Rosanna was led away by the people who would care for her. They had kept her identity to themselves and had made a point of avoiding her for fear of disrupting their histories.

They retired that night to the ship and slept soundly for the first time in weeks. They almost had to pry themselves out of bed the next day as they saw to their imminent departure.

It had been decided to keep a low profile as they prepared for the next part of their mission and so, for the months that followed they lived in a remote part of Proxima on board their small starship.

It took some time for Judd to refine the ore and create the means to manufacture their bomb. While he worked everybody else's job simply became: help Scanner. For several weeks, due to their lack of certain resources, Judd worked hard to create their nuclear weapon.

When the time came for the final components to be installed Judd unveiled his finishing touch. The large, spherical device had a moniker: Rome.

As the crew stood side-by-side Susanna asked: "What's with the name?"

Scanner gave her a tight, mean grin. "Rome's going to burn, and this time it's going to take Nero with it."

The *Pterodactyl* tore through space on a mission. They had deliberately avoided the major space lanes so they would go undetected and their plan was clear and

concise. While Nero's ship, the *Nerada*, had to be destroyed, it wasn't the only ship they had to deal with.

Knowing when and where a ship was going to be in advance was a major advantage, but what to do with it was something else.

It was clear to the Pipers that what they had seen in their vision was the anomaly that would bring the *Nerada* into the past. They even knew when and where it would be. The problem was the anomaly would attract the attention of the *U.S.S. Kelvin* and her captain.

What to do? They considered sending out a dummy May Day signal that would distract the *Kelvin*, but Piper was concerned it would attract other starships and create an even bigger problem.

No, they had to ensure the *Kelvin* would not reach the anomaly at all.

What they did know was that the *Kelvin* had been tasked with studying another unusual phenomenon – increased solar activity in the nearby star.

As they neared the sun, Jason mused: “I wonder if the anomaly caused the solar flares?”

Seated next to him, Crash said: “There's every possibility that the flares attracted the anomaly. It's a pity we won't have time to study it.”

The reason for that was clear. Silhouetted against the star was the unmistakable outline of a Federation starship. As they neared it the sound of a hail was heard.

“This is the U.S.S. Kelvin calling the unknown freighter. Please identify yourselves and declare your

intentions.”

Susanna brushed the comm button on her chair arm. “This is Captain Susanna Smith of the freighter *Mangalore*. Sorry, our IFF is malfunctioning, as are a lot of the systems on our ship. The electromagnetic interference being emitted by this star is playing havoc with our computer.”

It was an outright lie on her part. Anticipating the trouble, Piper had her people harden the ship's electronics against just such an eventuality.

“Fortunately for us, we managed to spot you before our scanners failed. All we've got right now is passive sensors.” It was enough for any Starship Captain worth his salt to offer assistance. Without adequate sensors or computer function, navigation would be next to impossible.

The voice changed. “This is Captain Robau of the *Kelvin*. Please follow us as we assume a safer orbit. We can then dock and render assistance.”

Piper hated doing this to a fellow starship Captain, but right now it was necessary to save the life of everybody on board the *Kelvin*. All the same, she grinned tightly and put on a friendly voice. “Thank you, Captain Robau. I'll get my pilot to do just that.” She toggled the comms off. “Crash, have you managed to gain access yet?”

At the Science Station, Crash was putting all his knowledge of communications and programming to good effect. After a moment and a lot of tapping his console's controls he said: “I'm in.”

Piper sighed. “Deliver the package.” It was a good

thing they were doing this with a ship that was fifty years older in tech. Their encryption systems were not yet impregnable.

Krashtallash did as he was told. It took a fraction of a second to upload the virus, but its effect was immediate. The *Kelvin's* impulse drive flickered for a moment, then went out as their primary power systems went down. He was confident it would take them hours to find his virus and kill it, but that was all the time they needed.

Suzette shook her head. It was almost too easy. Standing at the left side of the Bridge, she stared out at the *Kelvin* as she drifted in space. "I'm with you, Sis. I'd hate to have someone do that to me as well."

Susanna tipped her head to the side. "Was I broadcasting that loudly?"

Suzette said with a slight smile: "You were."

Manny's voice echoed up the corridor behind them from below decks. "Yes!"

Mildly embarrassed, she ordered: "Let's go blow something up."

Jason kicked the ship into warp drive and they shot away from the *Kelvin*. They didn't have far to go and by the time they reached their destination they beheld a sight that amazed them.

Suzette looked up through the window in awe. "Kirk always said it looked like a "lightning storm in space"," she said. Almost incredulously, she said: "He wasn't kidding."

Coalescing before them appeared the likeness of a

huge, swirling dark cloud laced with electrical discharges. It looked totally out of place in the empty, black void of space.

“Everyone, prepare for explosive decompression!” Susanna barked. Behind her the Bridge door slammed shut in response to her order.

Below decks Carman, Judd and Manny locked themselves in their tiny engine room which was self-contained and easily sealed off. The space was claustrophobic with no viewscreens or windows, yet they had faith their friends above would prevail. They weren't David taking on Goliath. They were an ant taking on an elephant. The only thing they had in their favour was the fact they were carrying a bazooka.

Judd hit the comm button. “Secure down here!” he said with a glance at his wife. “Start the show!” He moved over to the dilithium chamber to monitor the ship's performance and was grateful that his wife remained close. What Piper was doing carried colossal risk.

Jason brought the *Pterodactyl* around in a graceful arc that lined them up with the event horizon a hundred kilometres out.

It happened very quickly. The biggest starship they had ever seen began emerging, looking like a gigantic collection of dark curved swords of unknown purpose. The first prongs were like a nightmarish spider whose legs were razor sharp. They were quickly joined by more and

more of them as the ship extracted itself from the cloud.

Knowing that what happened to the *Kelvin* took them by surprise the first time round, Susanna gave the order.

The cargo bay doors slid aside with a whoosh, ejecting not only all the air below but their surprise package as well. The ball shaped bomb shot out and flew towards the “legs”, quickly passing their outermost reach.

“Back us off! Full impulse!” Susanna ordered as the *Nerada* just seemed to keep coming. She began to wonder if their bomb was going to do the job after all considering the vessel's overwhelming size.

Jason touched the control and the *Pterodactyl* accelerated in reverse as quickly as she could at sublight. Yet the *Nerada* was still to clear the event horizon.

At his position at Science, Crash used his controls to manipulate the flight of the bomb. It had been designed to sport a few impulse control reactors to help it navigate independently. He took a deep breath to settle his nerves and maintain complete control of the device.

Without warning, without preamble, the *Nerada* unleashed a barrage of missiles at their tiny vessel. Knowing it would take only seconds for them to impact their ship and afraid their bomb, their only hope for survival, would be destroyed, Susanna ordered: “Detonate! Warp speed!”

A paw and a human hand touched controls simultaneously. Once more, the destructive power of enriched Uranium threatened to douse them with hard radiation just as their ship entered warp drive, pushing the

ship past light speed and the effects of the blast that momentarily outshone the sun.

Crash watched his console, fascinated. Without looking up, he suggested: "Suzette, could you close the doors and repressurise the ship?"

It was a good idea as, in the heat of the moment, the small detail had been forgotten. Without a word, Suzette manipulated the controls to bring it about.

"Well?" Susanna was more than curious. She needed to know if the job was done. She was silently praying that their efforts would suffice. They hadn't just poked the dragon in the eye, they'd thrown a harpoon at it and run, praying it would kill it before it turned and burned them to a crisp.

"Just a moment, Captain," Crash said. "It would help if we weren't at warp."

"Ah, yes." She looked at Jason. "Make it so."

The stars ceased streaking by them and their pilot brought them about. Due to the peculiarities of faster than light travel, the flash of explosion shone out seconds after they stopped.

At warp two they hadn't travelled that far. All the same, it was harder for Crash to zoom in on the anomaly with their outdated equipment. "There's still a lot of hard radiation in the area. It's messing with our systems."

Suzette said: "I hope it didn't effect the *Kelvin*," she said, concerned.

Crash put her fears at rest. "They're still where we left them on the far side of the sun."

“That's one less thing to worry about,” Susanna said with a sigh. Her nerves were beginning to settle as her confidence rose that all was well.

Jason watched the expanding fireball and mused: “Nothing could have survived that.” He toggled the comms button to Engineering. “Judd, you certainly know how to build a bloody good bomb. If I ever need a firecracker made for me, I'll come to you.” The sense of relief he felt was overwhelming.

“We aim to please,” Scanner replied as if today was an average day.

Their hopes were dashed when the badly damaged *Nerada* warped into the space before them. The blast had ripped all the forward “blades” from the vessel, but the heart of it at the rear remained functional. Once more, it launched a barrage of missiles at their tiny vessel.

Out of their comms panel came a hail in a voice that was ominous and devoid of fear. “This is Nero. I don't care who you are, but you will die for this.”

“Evasive!” Susanna called. “Warp speed!” She mashed the comm button on her chair arm. “Manny, get up here!” She added: “Shields!”

The *Swallow*-class normally didn't sport defensive shields, only navigational deflectors, but Piper wasn't the sort to take those kinds of risks. It had taken Judd a month to build the bomb. It had taken him another two months to outfit their ship with shields.

Jason used the smaller vessel's agility to great advantage as he dodged the missiles by going up and over

them, while Manny blasted away at them with their phasers, detonating several of them short of their target. Jason then blasted the ship into warp drive straight over the top of the *Nerada*.

The problem was that Piper was aware Nero was now out for blood. He would not stop until they were dead.

What to do? An insane idea came to her.

“Take us directly into the sun,” she said. When Jason started at the suicidal order she added: “We need to skim the corona.”

Jason made the adjustments and they quickly found themselves shielding their eyes from the glare.

“Crash, are their shields still down?” Susanna asked. She mused there could be little left after the blast.

The Cait nodded. “They are.” A glance at the scanners revealed: “They're closing.”

Piper's grin grew feral as her confidence rose. “Excellent. Take us in. Polarise the viewscreen.”

The *Pterodactyl*, her shields glowing as they repelled the mass of radiation being pumped out by the star, dropped out of warp and swooped in a mere hundred kilometres from the sun. Even here, the corona shot out a number of minor eruptions – mini solar flares. However, it wasn't the small ones she was interested in.

The ship rocked, but not from the sun's emissions. Now out of missiles, the *Nerada* had opened up on them with its phasers.

“Shields down to fifty percent.” Crash's report was not good. They needed every joule of energy they had in

their shields to protect them from the sun's murderous radiation.

Manny, now next to her brother, awaited her Captain's order. She watched her expectantly. She realised the problem was the ship could only fire forward.

There was a solution to their problem. Susanna saw it through their heavily polarised portal. Two solar flares were erupting. Calmly, she ordered: "Take us between them."

Jason, his eyes wide with more than a little fear, did as he was told. Taking care to tip the ship over as her wings were extended, the *Pterodactyl* shot between the pillars of nuclear fire.

The *Nerada* was not so lucky. The ship was unprotected, it's sensors overloaded and partially fried by the sun, flew straight into the maelstrom. The fire tore through the outer layers of the ship in a second, melting seams and tearing off panels. The penetrating fire instantly cremated the crew and, now brainless, the once great mining ship tumbled into the sun where she disappeared in a ball of fire, never to be seen again.

"They're gone," Crash stated matter-of-factly.

Jason didn't need any further encouragement. He turned the ship and headed straight out of the sun as fast as their impulse drive could push them. It was hard going considering the intense gravitational force of the star.

"Shields are failing," Crash reported with a finality that stunned his fellows.

Susanna called the engineering section. "Judd, we

need more power.”

“I'm giving it all we've got,” he replied, sounding as worried as Crash.

“Can we go into warp?” the Captain asked.

“We're too close to the sun.” Crash seemed resigned to their fate. They weren't going to make it.

Still too close to the star, the shields went down. The crew were doused in high levels of alpha, beta and gamma radiation that quickly overwhelmed their senses and rendered them unconscious. Still, the *Pterodactyl* surged on, following it's pilot's final orders as it took its dying crew members back out into the stars.

Chapter Twelve

It was too bright. That much was certain. The surface she lay on was comfortable, and she found she was covered by a sheet and basic hospital gown. Any more than that she wasn't sure of.

Aside from the headache. Which was a four alarm killer. A hand touched her shoulder and she heard the hiss from a hypospray. Suddenly, the fog of pain in her head parted and she could think clearly again.

Piper slowly sat up. She took stock of her situation and found she was sitting in a sickbay on board a Starship. That much was certain. Which ship she could only guess at. However, her answer came quickly as a handsome, balding man of southern Asian extraction walked towards her, a younger male from the former United States at his side. The rank braids on their wrists gave her the final clues. She was on board the *Kelvin*.

“You've got some explaining to do,” Captain Robau said, his arms crossed, wearing his most no-nonsense look. He was not the sort to suffer fools gladly.

Piper shook her head to help her focus as she considered the situation. “Captain, I need to talk to you – Code 47.”

Robau raised a curious brow. This was unexpected, to say the least. The code was only known to Starship Captains. The message was simple. It was for his eyes only. “You'd better not be wasting my time,” he said roughly.

Piper widened her eyes as she took a deep breath. "That would be the last thing I'd want to do, Captain," she said formally. She swung her legs over the side of the bed and put her feet on the floor. It took her a moment to find her balance again. The man at Robau's side offered her his hand. She took it gratefully and allowed herself to be escorted to the Captain's quarters for a private briefing.

Once seated, Piper took a moment to consider her position. How much could she tell them? She had protocols to follow and she needed to do this right.

Robau took his seat on the far side of the desk and folded his arms once more. He seemed to be in a hurry and she was taking up his valuable time. The man at his side, his executive officer, seemed a little more amiable.

"Well?" Robau said impatiently.

Piper took in a deep breath. "As I'm bound by the Temporal Prime Directive, I can only say so much."

Both men started. It was the last thing they expected to hear.

"What I can tell you is that, if we hadn't intervened, the two of you would be dead and the *Kelvin* would be destroyed." Piper left it at that.

Robau snorted. "Time travel?" he said in derision. "You must be joking."

Piper rolled her eyes. She'd had far too much experience to believe otherwise. "Not at all, gentlemen. Before I confirm it for you, I have a few questions. One, how long have we been on board your ship?"

The answer surprised her. "A week," the XO said.

“Your ship is being towed in our tractor beam.”

“Okay...” Piper sighed. She looked over at Robau.

“How are the rest of my crew doing?”

Robau wasn't the sort of man who appreciated being interrogated. However, the circumstances were highly unusual. “They're all still out. No fatalities, you'll be happy to know. It took quite a while to decontaminate you and regenerate your cells.”

Piper nodded. They had been well and truly cooked. That much she remembered.

It was also enough information to prove her point. She looked up at the XO. “Hello, George. How's Winona?”

George Samuel Kirk reconsidered the woman before him. She seemed to know more about him than she should. All the same, it wasn't anything she couldn't have found out through channels. Even so, he was courteous. “She's fine, thank you.”

“And your son?”

At that, George caught himself. He hedged. “Sam's fine,” he said, speaking of his first-born son.

Piper shook her head. “No, the one just born to you. The one you named James Tiberias.”

George stiffened. This woman had been unconscious for a week. There was no possible way for her to know about his newborn son – especially his name as it hadn't even been uploaded to Starfleet's records yet.

Robau, however, slowly uncrossed his arms. He, too, realised the impossible that was before him. Their visitor

had proven herself. "Alright, Captain...." When Piper wasn't forthcoming, he continued: "I'll take your word for it. Our scanners tracked your battle with the unknown ship which you seemed to be prepared for. You knew where the anomaly would appear and were even carrying a very high yield warhead to deal with it. Your strategy was worthy of any Fleet Captain in the face of overwhelming forces. Never mind that ship would have taken us apart in no time at all." With great formality he leaned forward and extended his hand. "Thank you for saving our lives, Captain."

Piper took his offered hand and shook it warmly. They were contemporaries, even given their separation in time. "Can I see my people?" she asked.

Robau nodded. "Mister Kirk will escort you back to sickbay, but first I think you'll want to change into something more appropriate for a woman of your rank."

"TPD, Captain," Piper reminded. "T-shirt and jeans will do fine."

As she got up to leave, Robau had a last, parting shot. "Oh, and Captain, I would appreciate it if you don't mess with our computer again while you're with us."

Piper laughed. "You're on, Captain Robau."

A short time later, Piper was standing in the midst of the *Kelvin's* general ward where most of her people were still resting. She was now more comfortably dressed in jeans, boots, white t-shirt and leather jacket. She noticed that Jason was starting to stir and Carman was sitting on

the side of his bed. The Caits were still out, as was Judd. The person missing was Suzette.

Yet Captain Robau had insisted her people were all accounted for.

“Where's my sister?” she asked George.

The much younger man shrugged then went to find the doctor. She was pleasantly surprised when she was introduced to a woman from Altair Four named Doctor Farran EndreiBerret.

“You're of the Palkeo Est, aren't you?” Piper asked with a broad grin.

Farran nodded. “You're familiar with my people?” she asked, curious.

“One of my best friends is from Altair Four.” The pleasantries over, Piper asked: “Where's my sister?”

“Jane Doe 2,” the Doctor said, “is in regeneration booth two.” She led her over to the window. “We didn't know your names, you see,” she said by way of an apology.

George surprised her by saying: “And that's all you're going to know of their names, Doctor. These people's presence has been given the highest classification. Neither you, nor your people, are to discuss them with anyone outside this ship. All records must be destroyed.”

The Doctor balked at that. “You don't have the authority,” she snapped.

Kirk replied: “The Captain does and his word is enough for me.”

Farran glowered at him, then turned her annoyance

on Piper. "What do I call you?" she growled.

Piper gave her a small smile. "Susanna will do, Doctor." She pointed into the booth. "You can call her Suzette," she said fondly.

Farran switched to report mode. "As you're her obvious next-of-kin, I can tell you that the radiation nearly killed her." As Piper stiffened she added: "It affected her differently due to her prosthetic. The electronics were damaged and there was danger of neurological damage if we left it alone. As it was advanced tech, we could not work out how to fix it, so we simply pulled the plug." She took a breath and took the plunge. "She's in an induced coma as there was over-stimulation of the optic centres of her brain. They have yet to recover completely." The Doctor looked up at her. "Are you capable of repairing the optical device?"

Piper shook her head, no. All the same, she brightened. "However, my American friend out there is, given the right tools."

The Doctor was anything but satisfied. She had received too few answers for her liking. "There are a few anomalies, however," she said. "The technology used to rebuild her face is unknown to us, and is frankly beyond us. The thing I can't figure out is why it was used rather than using tissue regrowth which we've had for a couple of years now."

Piper regarded the familiar visage before her and almost laughed when she remembered who did the job on Suzette's face. She stopped herself when she realised their

actions had now erased that timeline and that Merete.

She went back into the memories her sister had shared with her and recalled the circumstances. “The time and place called for it,” she told Farran cryptically. “It saved her life and I'm grateful for that.”

Farran nodded to herself. It wasn't much, but she had enough imagination to realise it was a real possibility if she was away from her ship in an alien environment.

“How about the rest of my people?” Piper asked, concerned.

The Doctor was at least able to give her some good news. “They've all responded well to the treatment and will be up and around in the next few hours.” She regarded her patient. “I think you came out of it first due to your physical condition.”

Piper took that as a compliment. “Thanks,” she said with a smile. “Speaking of which, I could use some exercise.” She looked at Kirk curiously. “Do you have a rec deck I can use?”

He shook his head. “I don't think that would be wise, Captain.” He wore a knowing smile. “However, I *do* know somewhere you can.”

Ten minutes later, Piper and George stood in the cargo hold of the *Pterodactyl*. “We've decontaminated her and restocked her. The Captain was going to give her a skeleton crew and fly her to Argelius, the nearest star system at one point.” He chuckled. “He changed his mind.”

Piper nodded to herself. Given similar circumstances, she would have done the same. At that moment, she realised time was running out to organise a very important item. She asked George if he could appropriate the desired device and he told her he would take care of it.

“I noticed the names over your crew quarters,” George said quietly.

Piper shot him a look. “I'd appreciate if you kept them to yourself,” she said.

George shrugged. “Say no more. I gather that, as your people are ready to return, that you'd want them beamed right back to you to minimise contact?”

Piper slapped him on the shoulder. “I see where Jim gets it from,” she said with a grin and left it at that. It was enough to leave George wondering.

Instead of pumping her for information, he handed her a communicator, then took out his own and called his ship. “One to beam up,” he said, his friendly eyes crinkling. As the beam began to take him he said: “Thanks for saving my family.”

Piper simply watched the air where he had stood. “You're welcome.”

Two days later Piper Silayna woke up from her coma feeling groggy. She opened her eye and instantly closed it again. Everything was too bright!

She also realised something was amiss. Then it came to her: she was alive!

She felt something – a hand touching hers. She knew immediately it was Susanna so she reached out and touched her mind.

Good to see we're still here, she said, happier than she knew.

We are.

Susanna's sudden pause and flood of conflicting emotions worried and confused her. She couldn't open her eye to see her, so she asked: *What is it? Have I been crippled?* She took the moment to flex all her fingers and toes. They all worked.

See through my eyes.

Suzette was looking down at herself. She appeared normal, however she realised the difference quickly. *Why isn't my eye glowing?* Realisation suddenly dawned. Normally, her electronic eye wouldn't cause her pain if she was dazzled. It automatically adjusted for the light. *What happened?*

Susanna filled her in quickly. *I'll get Scanner to work on it ASAP. We've simply been waiting for you to wake up, Slacker. Unfortunately, you were the hardest one hit because of your prosthetic. It was damaged by the radiation.* She gave her some mental loving. *I'm just glad you're all right.*

Suzette popped her eye open and looked around her. It was peculiar not having stereoscopic vision and she knew she would have troubles with depth perception until Judd got her eye working again. Sitting up, she ran her hand through her hair and quickly decided she needed a

shower. Her hair felt like crap. *Let's get Scanner on it sooner, rather than later, thanks.* She had a change of mind. *First things first. I need a sandwich and I need a bath.*

Within an hour the two of them stood on the floor of the cargo bay, looking around them and breathing the air of a ship that had somehow begun to feel like home.

As George had promised, the ship was ready to go. He had even put some of his engineering crew to work fixing damaged systems.

Suzette took a deep breath. "I don't think we'll ever quite get the smell of oil out of the air here."

"Hey, they're back!"

The women looked up and smiled at Manny who had already leapt over the railing and landed on all fours in front of them. "It's good to have you home!" Without preamble she leapt forward and encircled them with her arms, squeezing them in a bear hug.

The rest of the crew appeared from a variety of directions and, with a laugh and a shrug, the men joined in and surrounded the women, turning the group into one large mass of loving friendship.

In the centre, Piper simply looked at her sister and said: "Just go with it."

In less time than it takes to form a thought Jason Nunn found himself alone in the cargo bay finding himself off balance and lurching forward, trying to find his footing. He looked around him in amazement, wondering where his

ship mates had gone to. Their disappearance was faster than any transporter beam that he was familiar with.

“No,” he said angrily, his fists clenched. He was filled with a mixture of fear and denial. He had a suspicion he knew what happened, but it wasn't going to be true until he checked.

For the next hour he turned the ship upside down, checking behind panels and even in every closet. His friends were nowhere to be found.

He finally went to the Bridge and turned on the scanners. They reported only one life sign and also the fact there were no other ships within range.

For a moment he continued to deny the truth, yet the young man rallied and put on his bravest face. “I'm not going to let this beat me,” he said to himself. “I am a Starfleet officer.” He repeated the two phrases several times, wiped away the tear that had formed in the corner of his eye, then turned his attention to navigation. There was little point sitting in the middle of nowhere.

The screen informed him the ship was on course for Argelius. His studies had taught him it was a generally benign world that might even give him some job opportunities.

With the *Pterodactyl* now on course and travelling at warp speed, Jason sat back in his chair and gave expression to some of his favourite and more obscene epithets. “Bloody Guardian, I know you're behind this. I don't know why you left me behind, but I *do* know that everything you've done so far has had a purpose.” He curled his lip in

anger. “I don't know what it is yet, but I'm going to *find out!*”

Several sets of feet touched the ground simultaneously on a dusty world they had thought left long behind, curiously wearing the same clothes they had left in. The former crew of the *Pterodactyl* turned around as one to gaze at the Guardian of Forever.

“What was is once more,” it said in its enigmatic bass voice. “What will be is still in jeopardy.”

As one, the group just stared at the edifice. “What could you possibly mean by that?” Piper said, rattled.

As if in answer the portal opened once more and an elderly Vulcan stepped through. “I believe I can enlighten you, Captain Piper.”

Those gathered stared at the familiar face in amazement. Piper tipped her head to the side, recognising the person before her, even given his advanced age. He should not be so old, she thought. “Spock?”

The Vulcan held up his hand in the customary v-shaped salute. “It is good to see you, Captain. We have much to discuss.”