

## Will You Go or Will You Tarry

Posted originally on the [Ad Astra :: Star Trek Fanfiction Archive](http://www.adastrafanfic.com/works/1552) at <http://www.adastrafanfic.com/works/1552>.

Rating:	<a href="#">Mature</a>
Archive Warning:	<a href="#">No Archive Warnings Apply</a>
Category:	<a href="#">Gen</a>
Fandom:	<a href="#">Borderlines</a>
Character:	<a href="#">Ensemble Cast - BAN</a>
Additional Tags:	<a href="#">Found Family</a> , <a href="#">Border Patrol</a> , <a href="#">The Lost Era (2293 - 2364)</a> , <a href="#">Deltans</a>
Language:	English
Series:	Part 3 of <a href="#">Borderlines: Book III - Visigoth</a>
Stats:	Published: 2024-05-01 Completed: 2024-06-19 Words: 20,310 Chapters: 8/8

## Will You Go or Will You Tarry

by [B\\_Radley](#)

### Summary

Reeling from a loss, the Banshees muster around each other to find out what happened to one of their own. The search will take them into forbidden space, into a maelstrom of a world.

A new arrival, an old friend. A mother receives news that no mother wants. There are always possibilities.

### **Prelude: Arrival**

*Triangle Protection Zone*  
*USS San Sebastián (NCC-3230)*

Lieutenant Meghan Emma Rosewarne stares at the sparking debris and energy discharge. Her XO, Haveka, a Western Hemisphere Tellarite comes up beside her command chair on the bridge. She closes her eyes, knowing what she is going to tell her.

“We can detect no sign of the *Aerfen*, Captain,” she says in her deceptively mild and quiet voice. “There is nothing but debris here. We haven’t been able to determine whether it is hers or not. The sheer volume tells me that there is something else out there.”

Emma nods. *Chandra is going to hurt on this one*, she thinks, her mind on her Academy classmate. *Along with her new Deputy and her flag captain.*

Scarcely had the *San Sebastián* arrived at Merlin, before the distress call had come in. Her own squadron commander hadn’t arrived yet after their shakedown exercises. Chandra had given her a quick greeting, as well as a kiss that few subordinates would receive that hadn’t been part of their Academy bond, then sent her here, promising backup of some sort. In that brief moment, she had felt Chandra’s familiar taste in her Link. She’d also felt the weight of Chandra’s regard for the younger missing officer. Perhaps another prelanka-soné, a bond of all, was on its way to being formed.

She’d also felt, in another brief burst, the weight of Chandra’s pain and responsibility as CAG.

She knows a little bit of what that might feel like. A grave Rigelian’s multicolored face flashes in her mind—just as quickly sent to the recesses of her mind, where the memory of a destructive battle in a Nebula against a madman resides.

“Captain,” says another voice from the speaker below. She recognizes her new tactical officer, Lieutenant j.g. Jenny Morksogian. Her slight Philadelphia accent comes through in her words. In spite of everything, Emma thinks about her own pride in her Boston Southie accent. Her heart falls at Mork’s next words.

“We’ve got the signal of *Aerfen*’s log buoy,” she says.

“Where away?” Emma asks after a moment.

“At the edge of the debris field.” There is a noticeable pause there.

“What is it, Jenny?” Emma prompts gently.

“Some strange readings here. There’s a great deal of energy discharge around it. As well as debris that is non-Federation.”

“Any idea what that debris is?”

“No, ma’am,” Jenny replies.

“Is it safe?”

Another moment. “Radiation levels are kind of high, but we can bring it into an isolation hold.”

Emma looks at Haveka. “See to it, Number One,” she says.

“Another ship coming in, Captain. Can’t tell the signature right off hand,” says another voice at the Cohort table.

“Shields are still up, Cap,” Jenny says.

“Very well. Switch from standby mode on the Cohort.”

“Acknowledged, Captain.”

She feels Haveka looking at her. She moves her eyes to Haveka calm, but resolute features. The one remaining broken tusk giving her that resolute cast.

“What have we gotten ourselves into, Em?” she asks.

*Your guess is as good as mine, Veka*, she thinks, but doesn’t say.

### **I. Notification**

Rear Admiral Mary Decker rubs her forehead as she reads the reports on the progress of the newest *Excelsior*-class being constructed in the yards. She reaches in and pulls out a small hypospray, making sure that she has the right dose for the massive migraine that splits her head.

She holds it up to her throat and presses the discharge button. The pain eases a little, but not too much. She replaces the injector in her bag and rises from where she leans on her elbows on her stand-up desk. She closes her eyes, seeing a slideshow of two faces in her mind's eye.

The first, is of one who had come from her body. Decker's bright smiling features, from a time before she had made an ass out of herself where her daughter was concerned. When she had pressed Decker to follow her into the engineering field. Instead, the stubborn young woman had opted for the command/pilot/weapons track that Mary's own grandfather, father, and older brother had taken.

All of whom had died in the line of duty. At least two of them in the orbit of Jim Kirk, Starfleet's premiere starship commander.

She had held a grudge against Kirk for that, from the time that Matt Decker had died on the *Constellation*'s shuttle, to the time that Will had 'merged' with whatever alien presence was threatening Earth. Matt's death had already encouraged her to continue her rebellion against the command track, following in her maternal grandfather's footsteps, with the encouragement of Montgomery Scott, her mentor in the Engineering field.

Her aptitude, as well as Scotty's interest, had propelled her into her life's work. She'd shared the Scotsman's love of fixing and building things. His respect for Kirk, as well as gently pressing her to open her eyes and her heart to heal, sometime after Will's disappearance, had gone a long way towards healing that grudge against his captain. She feels a stab of grief shove its way into her chest.

It had been two years since Scotty had disappeared. The loss was incalculable, particularly since he had told her in no uncertain terms, after a talk with her daughter, to let Decker make her own path. She had been angry with him, as he had revealed that he thought that while Decker was smart as hell and could do most anything she set her mind to, her heart was in commanding a starship, rather than fixing one.

The same thing that had caused a schism with her own wife, who had practically raised Decker, even though they shared no blood.

Mary grits her teeth. She'd called Kim to talk, after they had laughed together at Decker and Chandra's medal ceremony. She'd found out that her now ex-wife was no longer on Earth, but on her way to an assignment to Chandra's group as CMO. Her furniture from their formerly shared apartment in storage.

Mary exhales.

The hatch to her office opens. She looks up at the interruption of her reverie. Her Chief of Staff, Commander (E) Joelle Grayson walks in. For once she isn't wearing the thick-framed screens over her dark eyes, feeding data to her in real time.

Mary opens her eyes to address the intrusion when she sees the look in those dark eyes.

A look of pain.

"Joelle?" she starts. She falls silent as two men in service dress-Alpha uniforms step in from behind her aide. She recognizes the Tellarite Gavek, the full Admiral over Starfleet Engineering Command.

The other is a Rear Admiral, carrying a swagger stick.

The chief of staff for Starfleet Special Operations Command, Lawrence Styles.

Her heart seizes. She closes her eyes, seeing the dry prose of the official Starfleet communiqué that is suddenly in her future.

*The Admiralty regrets to inform you of the loss of the USS Aerfen (NCC-1794). All aboard are missing and presumed dead.*

## II. Backup

Emma wakes from dozing in her command chair as she waits for the ship that jumped into their area to further identify itself. It looks like a Romulan dartship—a mothership, but doesn't have any Romulan signals or even signatures of the usual singularity driven warp engine of a Warbird. Any of the raptor-like skin of a Romulan fleet vessel had been scoured away, leaving only the sigil of a flaming Klingon skull.

She keeps her breathing even as she wakens. Jenny Morksogian is on the bridge now, while Gaveka is elsewhere. She realizes that the seven-hour second 'overnight' watch from 0000-0700 had changed to a five hour 'day' shift and that the full starboard watch is at battle stations.

"What are you doing here, Mork?" she asks, her eyes narrowing. "You should be asleep."

"I will when you do, Skipper," she says. "I've got Ensign Stokes on watch in CIC. I can take the bridge, as well. Haveka needed her beauty sleep so I'll take this one and let her get back up here."

Emma stifles an eyeroll at Jenny's good natured dig at the surprisingly agreeable Tellarite. One who only seems to demonstrate her genetic argumentative nature with her own kind. Particularly those from the eastern continents.

She'd had her zingers for Morksogian, as well. Particularly well-researched zingers about ancient and revived Philadelphia sports teams. Still beloved after three centuries and two world-conflicts.

Just as they are in her own Boston.

She finally nods under Mork's obsidian stare. She gets up and moves towards the woman, a year behind her in the Academy.

"Any change?"

“Nope. Don’t seem to want to let us near the log buoy. We’re keeping our shields up and at Condition III.”

Jenny nods. “They’re just moving to keep between us and the log buoy right?”

“Captain,” comes from Stokes in CIC. “Ship is powering up weapons!”

“Sounding General Quarters,” the comm tech says from the CIC. The alarm gong starts in.

“Some sort of displacement between us, Captain!” Stokes shouts.

“Calm yourself Mr. Stokes,” Morksogian says as Haveka climbs up to the bridge. She and Mork exchange an old-fashioned fist bump as they pass.

“The ship is opening fire,” Stokes says more calmly.

Emma shakes her head. “Power up weapons,” she says.

She sees a flash of light in the middle distance. There is a full, soundless explosion of light, fire, and gas.

A distinctive shape can be seen for a moment, before it disappears into the ball of fire.

“A Klingon Bird of Prey,” Haveka says.

“There were no Imperial signals, Skipper,” Stokes says.

“Signal from our new friend, Captain,” comms says.

There is a pause.

“Well, Comms?” Emma asks.

She hears the start of a word. She exhales sharply, but doesn’t intervene.

“It’s a code I’ve never seen before. I had to look it up. It’s Federation. Computer ids it as an idiosyncratic code for a Federation Free Agent.”

She didn’t expect that. An agent who answers only to the Federation Security Advisor, on the authority of the President. She didn’t even think they were even around anymore.

“What do they want?” she asks.

“To beam someone directly to the bridge.”

Emma purses her lips. “Any other ships around?”

“No, Captain.”

“Lower the shields.” She nods at Mork, who pulls out a phaser from a small-arms locker.

Another two seconds and the figure is on the bridge.

Emma stares at the figure. Memories surge through her mind at the familiar opalescent eyes and auburn-gold beard. Another one who had been closest with Roged Meeliy, their Rigelian classmate.

The gray hair and the uniform are not familiar. She feels her eyes widen as she sees the olive green reactive camouflage uniform, with an assault phaser pistol strapped to his lower right thigh. On the left side of his chest is a subdued patch. Showing between the two lower arms of a Starfleet delta is a pair of ancient crossed rifles superimposed over an anchor. Below it on a scroll are the words, *Per Astra, Per Terram*.

*By the Stars, by the Land.*

The muscular bulldog with a spiked collar holding up the rifles and delta is probably unofficial. The black compass rose-star of his rank on a flap buttoned to his chest might still be unofficial.

“Jesus, Croft,” she says. “I didn’t know you’d turned into a jarhead.”

He gives that crooked grin, so familiar to her. “They had to find a place to put me, somewhere,” he says. The grin turns even more devilish, if that is possible. “I’ve apparently developed a taste for crayons.”

The eyeroll can probably be felt in the Triangle. “So you’re a Federation Free Agent now?”

He snorts. “Guess they’ll have to change that code, now that somebody hacked it and abused it.”

### **III. Aftershock**

Chandra sits at her desk in her ready room. She fights to keep her Link under control as the crushing grief threatens to overwhelm her. She stares at the text on the PADD in her hand. A report from another of her classmates, just arrived in-theater.

The first one of her first *Lancer* squadron. Just one ship commanded by a woman who had suffered her own incalculable loss at Mutara. A loss of the one who had grown closest to her and one another among those of their bond.

A loss, as well as her own injury, that had sent her from Starfleet for two years.

She exhales, looking at the decanter in its stable cabinet. No, she thinks. I'm needed.

Chandra refuses to sink into the mourning rites of her people. Not just because she doesn't have enough evidence of Decker and her crew's deaths. She chokes as she thinks of those words.

*I also can't find her in the Link of the bond we had started forming*, she thinks. Her heart sinks at the reality that a young life, full of promise as a person, as well as a Starfleet officer, had been snuffed out.

She stands up and moves out of the ready room. The crew in the CIC rise and gaze at her. She nods to them, then moves through to the main passageway.

There are two others on this ship whose grief probably outstrips hers.

She moves into the Sickbay.

Dr. Kimberly Sinclair rises from her desk. Chandra sees a hologram playing over her PADD on the desk. The image of a younger version of Decker Sinclair. No more than six years old, her hair more blonde in this holo.

Until the image changes and she sees Decker in the dress whites, with the gold sash under her sword belt of the Cadet Captain of the latest Starfleet Academy class to graduate the newest crop of officers. Her eyes and smile shining almost as bright as the six thin gold stripes and star on her shoulder boards.

Chandra reaches out with her Link, keeping the physical manifestation of the Threads to nil.

Kim looks up. Her dark eyes show her pain, but she is calm, otherwise.

"Kim," Chandra says.

Kim rises and walks over to Chandra. She pulls her captain into her arms. Chandra lets her tears flow, as she feels the wetness on her own shoulder. They hold each other for a long moment. She wonders if this would be the right time to start the mourning rites in her Link manifesting in the Threads.

The door snaps open. They both turn and look at the young woman standing there.

Siobhan Lincolnton stares at them. There are tear streaks on her freckled cheeks; her mass of copper curls are unbound and wild. She is clad in a tanktop and her underwear, as if she had been sleeping.

Chandra's eyes widen as she sees the small creature attached to Siobhan's wounded right shoulder.

Or her formerly wounded shoulder.

Chandra moves over to her captain. She stops when she looks into Siobhan's eyes.

The brown windows aren't filled with grief, as Chandra knows that her gray versions are. As Decker's mother's are.

They are filled with certainty.

"Captain," she starts. "Chan."

"What is it, Shiv?"

She takes both of them in with her gaze. Her voice is calm, but with some urgency.

"I think Decker's alive."

A threat revealed, but to who? Protestant whisky in the ship's night. A new kind of Link? Knives in a San Francisco night.

#### IV. Conspiracy

Commander Daina Reese looks up from the report that she is studying. She glances around her office with its slight view of the Golden Gate Bridge. Ostensibly, she is the Flag Lieutenant of Rear Admiral Lawrence Styles, the Chief of Staff to the Commander, Special Operations Command.

In reality, a Chief Yeoman handles all of that work. She has nothing to do with Styles or his boss, Samuel Harriman, except for the pressure that she exerts on both of them, one directly, the other indirectly. She cocks an ear, hearing a slight vibration. She gets up and pulls her jacket from the rack and pulls out the small black insignia from a hidden interior pocket. She punches a button on her computer console; the office darkens slightly and she feels the shimmer/hum of a compartmentalization field.

Unconsciously, she looks around, then shakes her head. She inserts the black delta into a custom-made slot in the computer console.

The Vulcan male stares at her expressionless. She manages to keep her own genetic expression of loathing off of her face.

"Captain Stivek," she says, nodding her head slightly.

"Commander," he replies. He wastes no time, as is his want. "One of the 17th's ships stumbled onto something in the Triangle sector. The ship is now missing, presumed destroyed, but there is already a Federation presence there."

"What did the ship stumble onto? What happened?"

"We are not sure. I do not think there are any of our operations there, but we cannot be sure."

"Which ship of the 17th's?"

"The *Aerfen*," he replies. "Brevet Lieutenant, junior grade Decker Sinclair in temporary command."

Daina exhales sharply. "She is the daughter of Rear Admiral Mary Decker. Superintendent of the Utopia Planitia dockyards."

"I see," Captain Stivek intones.

*Do you?* she thinks. "What do you want from my end?"

"Interference. I think it should be strongly suggested to Rear Admiral Styles that the 17th be recalled from the search. In fact I think that the search should reveal that the ship was lost with all hands. In a natural occurrence."

"Admiral Decker has a great deal of influence. I don't think we'll be able to do that, especially since there is a *Lancer* already on scene.

"Deal with it, Commander," he says imperiously. "I'll have the *Constitution* travel to the area. That should get us the story that we want."

He clicks off.

"Prick," she says to the empty air, using an Earth euphemism she had picked up.

She pages through several screens on her computer, until she comes from her so-called superior's schedule. She curses as she sees that he and the Chief of Starfleet Engineering Command have already left for Mars.

She closes her eyes, then gets up, hurriedly pulling on civilian clothing. She signs out of her calendar, taking leave for the few hours left in the day.

As she exits from the air tram in the Old City, she walks purposefully towards a tube station. She doesn't see a young human woman of about thirty follow her at a discreet distance, her gray eyes locked on Daina's back.

If she had seen the young woman, she would've recognized her as a bartender/stage performer at a certain Deltan Link-club she had attended to blow off some steam a couple of nights ago.

The young woman is wearing considerably more clothing than she had been, but still might be recognizable by the nose ring she wears, as well as a tattoo on her left forearm. One of many on her body that Commander Reese, or her alter ego might have noticed, while 'blowing off steam.'

Special Agent II Greer Josephs of Federation Security's Counterintelligence Division, in the Investigations Directorate, follows her quarry.

#### V. A Perfect Yarn

Emma Rosewarne narrows her eyes at James Blackthorne. *Croft*, she tells herself, thinking of that long ago misadventure that had given him that nickname. They sit in her cramped ready room off of the CIC, a bottle of Bushmill's Single Malt Irish opened between them, two mismatched glasses with just a touch in the bottom of each in front of each.

Emma glances around the compartment; she was so new in command that she hadn't had time to put her own personal touches on it.

Only a single picture of a small boy, his features marked by dark patches around his inquisitive blue eyes, his nose, and his mouth on pale gray skin. Bronze curls like hers halo his face.

Croft notices her looking at it; he draws his eyes towards the holo. "How is he?" he asks quietly.

She smiles. "He's good. Growing like a weed. He'll probably be taller than me."

He smiles and nods. "With his father, no doubt. Any health issues?"

She looks at the picture for a moment. *You mean any of the dozen or so health issues that a Rigelian h'vast and human hybrid could have, especially since his mother was injured severely by a madman nearly blowing up the ship she was on before she found out she was pregnant with him? A ship that his h'vast'er had died on?* she thinks. "No," she answers. "He's healthy as a horse."

Looking into Croft's eyes, she sees that he knows her thoughts. Any of those other three women would have asked the same thing.

With equal care and sensitivity.

"Issa and Alexa are taking good care of him," she finishes. "His grandparents on Rigel V are in his life, as well." She reaches over and touches his cheek. "How are you doing, stud?" she asks, making her tone as light as possible. He leans into the touch, closing his eyes.

"I'm okay," he says after a moment.

"Have you talked to Chandra?" she asks softly. "I haven't had a chance since I joined her group."

"No," he says simply. His eyes snap open, revealing that he won't speak any further. "What's the latest on this?" he asks in an airy tone.

Emma grits her teeth at his peremptory manner. She jabs her finger at the rank title on his chest. "You may outrank me, *Major*," she says, "but until I receive orders to the contrary, you're not in my chain of command. So button up the attitude."

He looks at her, then snorts. "Some things never change, Prickly," he says. "Please," he says almost sweetly.

She exhales and shakes her head at the sudden activation of the Croft charm. Charm that had in the past had dropped the pants on four other cadets at the Academy of at least two genders. None of them who had any trouble putting him in his place with word or deed, even as those pants were dropping.

"We've detected the *Aerfen's* log buoy at the edge of the debris field. We're getting some strange readings around it. We were about to grab it when you and your merry band showed up."

"What's keeping you?" he asks.

"Sitting here entertaining a jarhead, with my twenty-one year old single malt."

He lifts his glass, then drains it. He holds it out for more. "Protestant whisky," he says with an air of mock disdain.

"Me mother swears by it at the Orange lodge," she retorts. He shakes the empty glass, gently. She sighs and pours more.

"Your turn," she says, when she had downed and refilled hers. She deliberately puts the cap back on. "What the hell are you doing in what looks like a surplus Romulan dartship?"

He exhales.

"And don't give me that classified 'bullshit'," she warns. "We go way back. And we've spent enough time picking up the pieces for each other that you know that I can be trusted." She smirks. "Not to mention being without clothing and 'up to something' with you on a semi-regular basis."

He gives that crooked grin at the southernism. A grin that at certain times had melted her and those others of that bond they had formed. He looks down and to the left, before bringing his eyes up to hers. She hides her smile at that particular movement and look.

"There are a lot of moving parts to this. At least two. One that I can give you some limited knowledge of. The other could impact your life and your career, so I'll keep that to myself."

She looks at him, then nods. She touches the intercom to the bridge.

"Haveka here," comes the XO's gruff voice.

"I'm going offwatch. Have Mork continue scanning that debris around the buoy."

"Aye, Captain," she replies. "By the way, the jarhead's ride jumped away. We're tracking it."

"Understood," she says, "Rosewarne out."

“My ‘ride’s’ driver ain’t going to like that you’re tracking her.”

She rolls her eyes at the pronoun. “Oh, I’m sure that you’ll kiss the butthurt and make it better.”

She gets up. He raises his eyebrow at her. She manages to keep the eyeroll in check.

“Come on, pitiful,” she says. “You can rub my feet while you’re spilling about this gak-rope you’re leading us into.” She sees his reaction to her using the Rigelian word.

Later, the memories cascade as he gently enters her, along with the light that builds in her head. She can tell that the memories come over him as well.

Memories of a time when all of their loved ones were alive and well.

And happy.

## **VI. A Connection Made**

Chandra looks at Siobhan, trying to keep her expression even. Kim releases Chandra, then moves over to Siobhan. “Oh, honey, I want her to be alive, as well. But the news from Chandra’s ship isn’t good.”

Siobhan looks at Chandra. “They’re still sifting through a lot of wreckage. But they’ve found the log buoy; they’re waiting to see if any other attackers might come in before pulling it in,” Chandra says.

She joins Kim in hugging Siobhan as well. She notices that Siobhan’s copper eyebrows are drawn together. She reaches out with the Link, to their connection that had been established on Vostus, when Chandra had taken it upon herself to help at least her two officers with their emotional health.

Chandra raises her left eyebrow then brings herself from Siobhan’s opposite shoulder where George is doing whatever George does. She gazes into Siobhan’s eyes. “Where did that come from?”

Siobhan smirks, then lets it fade, looking away. “When you were, uh, getting your broken ass fixed by Doctor McCoy, apparently you were spilling out the old horny. So much so that I actually saw Decker in my mind. After I got out of sickbay, we, uh, did some conversatin’ in our quarters.” She grins. “All in the interest of emotional health.”

Chandra sees Kim roll her eyes. Siobhan looks back at her, her face now serious. “Is it possible that I could pick her up?”

“I don’t know,” Chandra says. “It would usually happen if the two of you included me in your ‘conversatin’. But I didn’t—“

She stops. Siobhan grins broadly at Chandra’s discomfiture. She nods. “Let me guess. When y’all went to Earth,” she observes.

Kim looks at Chandra in mock anger. It fades when she remembers that Decker may be lost to all of them.

“What happened? Why do you think she’s alive?”

“I just got a feeling. She’s in my head. And it feels real, like when we were together.” She looks at Chandra. “What happened in the sickbay?”

Chandra shrugs after a moment. “I dunno. I’ve got a lot of issues, from this,” she says, lifting her hand to the nasty scar on the right side of her bald head. “I can’t control things, and I get weird sensations. I might’ve done something to connect the both of you.”

Kim is looking on her datapad, as well as scanning the both of them with her medical tricorder.

“Anything, Doc?” Siobhan asks.

“Nope. Nothing out of the ordinary. But I don’t think I’d be able to pick anything up.”

Chandra exhales. “Maybe I somehow inadvertently formed a prelanka-tere when I was giving Decker the screaming thigh sweats.”

“She wasn’t the only one,” Siobhan admits.

“Prelanka-tere?” Kim asks.

“A bond of the mind,” Siobhan replies, before Chandra can. “One of three parts of the Deltan soul. The mind, the heart, and the body.” She smiles and reaches over to kiss Chandra. “We formed the bond of the heart on Vostus.”

They all fall silent for a moment, when they absorb what has been said.

Of the possibilities.

Chandra feels the tickle of someone else in her mind about to weigh in.

## **VII. The Gold Rush**

Greer watches as the woman boards yet another tube train. Between air trams, tube trains, and plain walking, Greer is sure that she has traversed the length and breadth of the city. There is a sneaking suspicion that the woman in the bright, flowered sundress was toying with her.

Leading her on a wild-goose chase.



The sundress was part of it. When she'd left Starfleet Headquarters, she'd been wearing trousers, a man's shirt, and good walking shoes. Reese had ducked into a shop and come out with only the shoes the same.

Greer looks up. It had already started to get dark a couple of hours ago. She wonders when the hell the Romulan is going to make her move.

Whatever in the galaxy that is.

Greer realizes that they are moving once to the area around the docks, a place that they hadn't been all afternoon. They are also moving away from well-lit, well traveled areas. She touches the phaser pistol concealed on her hip, under the flowing top that she'd chosen for this job. Flowing enough to conceal certain tools of her trade, but loose enough to move, with a tanktop underneath to change her appearance when needed. Neutral enough not to call attention to herself, which the little clothing that Greer wore in association with her cover job would definitely do.

She sees Reese duck into an alley. Greer looks around her. It has suddenly grown quiet; she realizes that she has followed Reese into a dead end alley Greer feels the hairs on the back of her neck prick up. She swings behind a small outcropping, drawing her weapon.

She curses under her breath as a large wharf rat stares at her from where she'd thought that the threat would come.

Her world lights up in pain, centered on the lower right side—the exposed side—as she twists. She feels the blade of whatever had entered her sliding out. She tries to bring her phaser up, but it is suddenly too heavy for her nerveless fingers. She hears it hit the ground.

Daina Reese stares down at her. Oddly, she concentrates on the exceptionally warm skin against her bare arm. The woman's dark eyes gaze into hers; there is a hint of recognition.

"Ahh, the bartender," she says. "A pity." Greer sees the bright red of her own blood on the blade as the traitor pulls it up, then wipes it on Greer's flowing top. As an afterthought, Reese reaches down and kisses Greer.

The warmth of those lips, centers Greer in her blinding pain. She gives into the kiss, but lets her own tongue move away from the woman's. She finds what she was looking for with her tongue, then pushes it away from the back of her teeth. She bites down on it with her back teeth as Reese releases the kiss. She feels the comforting single pulse of the beacon activating as Reese pulls away.

Her left hand moves from her waist. Her hands closes on something that an ordinary Security officer, responsible for keeping order wouldn't carry.

A counterintelligence cop would. She pulls it and thrusts upward.

Reese screams. The last thing that Greer sees when consciousness eludes her is bright green splashing on her top, melding with her scarlet.

# Three

## Chapter Summary

A first job offer. The cops investigate. More pieces of the puzzle. Scary threats.

### VIII. Story Time

#### *The Past*

Jamie Blackthorne, known as Croft since his Academy days, puts his empty beer mug down on the table. The shotglass sits next to it, empty after he he dropped the Aldebaran whisky into the beer.

He makes a face. Whisky from Aldebaran doesn't make a good boilermaker. He wonders if his digestion will pay for it later.

*Probably*, says the voice in his mind. A voice present for the last month. Since the owner of the voice and the presence in his brain had choked out her last on a shithole planetoid in supposedly neutral space. A Klingon dagger in her pulmonary artery; green froth on her lips. A green liquid that had transferred to his face, when the fingers had spread into the mindmeld positions.

The same on another beloved's face from the other hand in the same position.

He looks up as a shadow comes over his table. A very tall shadow. He wonders if he can get up and move to a bar that wouldn't let someone of the tall man's class in.

Jameston McCall stares down at him, his blue eyes hard. Without invitation, he slides in across from Croft.

"You going to drink yourself to death?" he asks.

"Or screw myself to death," he says.

"I don't think either T'Varilyn or Chandra would want that for you," he observes, his voice softening, if not his visage.

"Not my problem. One's dead and the other probably wouldn't piss on me if I was on fire."

McCall says something. "You haven't reported in," he says. "Technically you're a deserter."

"Then arrest me," he replies.

McCall's mouth twitches. "It's tempting. But in spite of your colossal case of 'poor, pitiful, me,' you still have some use in the universe."

"When you figure out what it is, feel free to share it with me."

"I got a job for you. Do it well, and I'll keep giving them to you. It'll help if everybody thinks you've disappeared."

"So I guess I'll stay a deserter?" Croft asks finally.

McCall grins. "Yeah. I think so. We'll find you a place other than Starfleet." The grin widens. "How do you feel about the marines?"

Jamie comes back to the present. Emma lies against him, her body warm as her fingers move through his chest hair. He is conscious of her breasts lying against his arm. Her heartbeat is regular as she listens to him recount this story

### IX. Most Wanted

The woman known as C watches as a medic attends to the young Federation Security Special Agent. Greer Josephs lies on her belly on the stretcher, while the medic works to staunch the blood from the knife wound.

She turns as McCall walks up.

"How is she?"

The second medic looks up from where she runs a tricorder over Greer's back. "We need to get her to a trauma center. I think her kidney got nicked. We get her to the medcenter, she should be okay."

A tall ornithoid woman walks up. "I'm Yer. Chief Inspector from Counterintelligence Team One. What the hell are you doing here?" the Betelgeusian asks.

McCall turns to her. C grins as the blue eyes flash. She waits for the storm.

"I'm doing your fucking job," he says. "Trying to track a Romulan sleeper agent who you couldn't seem to fucking figure out was on our planet. When you're the ones that supposedly vet even Starfleet Intelligence."

C watches as the woman colors; the obsidian flush clearly a product of anger.

"It was my officer who discovered the infiltrator. We will take care of this."

"No, actually you won't," Jameson says.

Yer starts toward him, but thinks better of it at a look that C gives her. McCall stares at her; both of them are of a height.

She turns back to C, but directs her words to McCall. "You have no authority. This is a civilian matter."

McCall shakes his head. "Nope. Our little spy is a Starfleet officer. Starfleet will investigate."

"By rights, if that is the case, it should be investigated by Starfleet Security. Intelligence has no authority to investigate on a Federation world." She turns to C. "Neither do your funny people."

Storev turns as a minion comes over. She leans in, then nods. "Looks like it may be a moot point. SFPD found a body with Romulan blood all over it.

"Is it her?"

"No," says Yer. "A Klingon male. Massive blood loss. Down a ways on the Embarcadero."

There is a groan as Greer Josephs attempts to rise. C smirks as McCall averts his eyes when she succeeds. "I guess I could've stabbed her harder," she manages.

C moves over and places hand on the bare shoulder, easing her back down to the stretcher. The medic touches a hypospray to her throat.

McCall looks at Yer.

"How far to where he was found on the Embarcadero?"

"About a kilometer or so," she replies, checking her PADD.

C watches as Greer, now sleeping, is loaded into a medical transport. "I guess I need to let Issa know." She grins at Yer. "After all, it was an agent of the Dai'has'set who actually discovered she was a Romulan."

The woman's face grows cloudy as C and McCall turn away to follow an SFPD uniform to the new scene.

## **X. A Clue, If You Can Keep It**

Emma deactivates the intercom. She turns to Croft as she starts the sonics in the shower. He starts to massage the cleaning catalyst into the skin of her arms as the vibration lightly scours her skin. She keeps her breathing even as he makes sure that her front is clean.

She repays him by focusing on one particular part of him for cleanliness.

"So I saw you reading your PADD," he says idly as he starts to run the cloth over her back.

She closes her eyes at the touch of his skin. "Yeah. It wasn't just the buoy," she says. "We're still working on getting a sense of the data."

"And the wreckage?"

"Consistent with a Klingon light cruiser of some sort. Something old." She opens her eyes to see him taking this in.

"Anything Federation?"

"Yeah. A lot of wreckage and residual radiation from a photon torpedo. Not enough for an entire *Goddess*-worth. As well as a strange warp signature."

"What do you mean strange?" he asks.

She exhales, gritting her teeth as his hand drops down below her back. She endures the gentle touch for a moment, then reaches up and turns the sonics off. She rolls her eyes at his apparent disappointment. Both of them exit the shower. She reaches over to a table and takes a pair of clean underwear. She pulls the garment up.

He doesn't bother with clothes as he stands there, his arms crossed, waiting on her answer.

She lifts up the PADD, consciously bringing her eyes way from him. "The energy output ratios are wrong. I had my engineer look at them. He transmitted them to someone else who might be able to read them better. But near as he can tell, it looks as if *Aerfen*, or someone might've been thrown into warp, rather than entered it."

He knits his brows together. "How could that happen? My engineering courses at the Academy didn't really cover something like that." He looks down and to his right, then brings his eyes back up to hers. Another familiar gesture from the past. She keeps her expression even, but waits for what comes next.

"Guess I should've paid more attention," he finishes.

*Very mild, for him, as bullshit goes. Although still self-deprecating,* she thinks.

She looks back down at the PADD, hiding her smile. "According to my engineer, this would be an uncontrolled entry into hyperspace. And

there's no guarantee of survival."

Emma sees him visibly slump. "So they could be anywhere," he says. "Or they could be nothing but subatomic particles spread all over the galaxy."

She nods, but adds, "Maybe. But this particular entry leaves a distinctive trail. If you know where and how to look."

He stands straighter. "Does your engineer know how and where?"

"He thinks so," she says.

"Then I need to borrow him. You need to stay here, for any prying sensors. I'll take the ship I came in and find them."

Emma feels her heart twist. She and others had learned that when he set his mind to something, there was no taking him off of his path.

He and one other.

She moves over to him, then lifts her hands to his face. She kisses him, before turning to pull the rest of her uniform on.

## **XI. A Pirate's Life for Me**

Croft sits down in a corner of the CIC and opens up the computer console. His eyes move over the screen. He opens a second screen, tapping in a certain code that he had lifted from his boss's boss's office.

When he had gained access to the Admiralty and infiltrated McCall's complex.

At McCall's own request.

Croft shakes that memory away. He gazes at the second screen, as the data streams. He stops the stream when he sees something. He looks around, then pulls an earpiece to his ear. He moves the cursor to click on the link.

A young woman's face comes on the screen. He feels a smile come over his face as he recognizes the freckled features from the description that he'd heard about, as well as her official holocapture from the Academy. She takes a deep breath. He realizes that her forehead is bleeding and her eyes don't seem to be as focused as he would think as she opens her mouth.

"Captain's log," she says. She closes her eyes. "I have no fucking idea what stardate it is. We've completed the transfer. We'll continue to update as we can." She closes her eyes and leans back. He realizes that she is being supported by a large, young Andorian male with a broken antenna. He shakes his head, then closes the pickup.

Croft is silent. He turns to the other screen. Haveka comes down and looks at it. "We've got a rough course, or at least a direction, from the remnants of the subspace echo of being shoved ass-end frontwards into a warp bubble."

Emma comes into the compartment. He looks at her. "So we know where to go?"

"Generally. We've got it narrowed down to a parsec," she replies. She says nothing, but just gazes at him.

"And?" he asks, his eyes locking with hers.

She doesn't look away, but shakes her head. "We can't follow them," she says.

"And why the hell not?" he says, standing. He feels his feet lock to the deck. Croft sees that Emma notices and lifts one side of her mouth slightly.

"Because it's in Klingon space. On the other side of the Triangle."

"So what? Looks like to me they were attacked by Klingons."

"We don't know that," she replies. "That BofP had no markings. We can't seem to find an origin of the non-Fed debris."

"That's enough for me," he says. "I've been months in Romulan space. Not a credit's worth of difference between one and the other."

"But I don't think you went in there wearing a goddamned neon sign that says, "Starfleet scout ship. Won't somebody please end me?"

"You'd be surprised," he retorts. He stops, then lets a slow smile come over his face. He points at the viewscreen.

She sighs as she sees the flaming Klingon skull. "Shit," she says.

An hour later Croft watches as the woman known as Targsbane gestures to her helmsman. He feels the powerful rumble of the dart mothership's warp engines building. *Much more powerful warp engines than a ship of this size usually has*, he thinks.

"So you've shared all the data with us to find your lost little lamb?" Targsbane says dryly. Croft glances at Ael'a. The young Romulan officer gazes at him impassively.

"As much as I can, Bane," he says.

She smiles. "I like that," she replies. "No one's ever dared call me that before."

The warp drive engages. "We're tracking that residue field that you gave us. Anything else?"

He pulls out the PADD and opens a screen. As he starts to scroll through the data, his eyes catch something over on the side of the small screen.

A glowing word that pulses with green light, with so many possibilities, in any instance. He isn't sure what it means for Decker Sinclair and her crew.

NEW.

He moves over to that side of the screen, calling that bit of data to the forefront. His eyes widen. He spreads his thumb and forefinger, magnifying it even more. He releases the breath he had been holding as he reads and tries to absorb the data.

He feels Ael'a's eyes on him. He turns and looks at her and Targsbane. "They're somehow updating the log buoy," he says.

Ael'a's eyes widen. "What? How?"

"I dunno," he says. "But this log entry is dated an hour ago."

"Is there position data?" Targsbane asks.

He punches a couple of tabs on the screen, but doesn't get the result he wants. "I'm a little rusty," he says.

Ael'a and Bane exchange a smirk. "It's a good thing that you have a nice ass, bud," Bane says. She gets up and takes the PADD from him, handing it to a mousy-looking young Orion man with screens over his eyes.

"Hey," he exclaims. "I got other skills." That retort sounds lame, even to him.

"Ain't what I heard from the captain of that scow you were on."

He rolls his eyes. "I know for a fact she doesn't kiss and tell. At least not with strangers." Croft realizes that Bane had just handed the PADD to someone who is probably a hacker, from the 21st century term.

"Hey," he exclaims. "Don't be paging through everything."

"Why?" the young man idly says. "Did you film you and Captain Hotpants?"

"Why?" Croft reflexively echoes. "You want some pointers?"

"Apparently you need some," he replies without missing a beat, handing him the PADD.

Croft grins when he sees what the young man had produced. "Here you go, Captain," he says, handing it to Bane, after clearing it of all but that product.

She look at the numbers and letters on the screen. "That's not far from here. Just in the edge of Klingon space. She hands it to Ael'a, who nods. "Kh'rodos. It's a gas giant."

Bane relays the coordinates to the helm. Croft feels the shift in course. He takes a deep breath, wondering what they will find.

He gets his answer in about fifteen minutes. His heart sinks.

The little black triangular shape, with a crimson phoenix on its dorsal and ventral side. His heart sinks as his eyes fall a large rent traveling through the middle of the ship. Just forward of the bridge.

*Aerfen* appears to be missing an entire section on the ventral aspect, amidships.

He finds that he can't speak.

A loud alarm sounds. Bane rises and moves over to the helm console.

"Targets," the helmsman says calmly.

The speakers activate. A gruff voice intones. "Unknown vessel. You have just entered space claimed by the Klingon Free Systems. Prepare yourself for a slow and painful death."

Submerged reflections. The fog of war. Pirate debate. The local yokel and a not-so-stranger calls.

### XII. The Object of Everyone's Attention

Communications Technician 3rd Class Karl Havarti looks out the port at the dull, cloudy glow of their hiding place. He makes sure that he keeps his breaths shallow. So far, the air recyclers in the several escape pods, all bound together by the framework of their housing, had been working fine, but they don't know how long. The life support systems are supported by the fact that there are only four to six of them in any single pod. That and the extra airhandling unit that had come with the section of the ship with the pods. An idea that had been born after they had jumped here and fought off a Klin scout ship, from something their captain and the engineer warrant officer had come up with, based on something the captain had discussed with her mother, an admiral of engineering.

Three pods were in use by the living. The fourth pod houses their dead, and one of them houses their most seriously wounded crew member, the XO, Ensign (Midshipman) Madison and the medtech. The young woman is mercifully in a medically induced coma; he doesn't know how much longer she will last.

Most of her body is covered in second- and third-degree burns. If she survived, it would take many months, possible even years to regenerate that much skin and tissue for her to heal completely.

Karl closes his eyes, thinking of one of those in the fourth pod. Comm Tech 2nd Class Hank Dougherty. A fellow comm tech with an easy manner, one who had instantly accepted Karl when he had come aboard.

A new start after his ignominious failure as a midshipman, only two months into his one-year probationary period, the same for any graduate of the Academy with a degree and the demonstrated technical skills, who hadn't graduated in the top 1% of the class. A top 1% who would immediately be ranked as a full ensign immediately after graduation.

He hears a slight moan beside him. His eyes travel down to the young acting captain. He reaches down and wipes the bruised, freckled forehead.

When she had first reported aboard, Karl had been skeptical. She, like him, hadn't graduated in that coveted top 1%. She, also like him, had been very close. It hadn't helped that Sinclair had assigned him a duty that was, in his mind, someone else's. Merely because he had reminded her of the fact that it wasn't his job.

It had been during the trip to Earth for Sinclair's and Captain Chandra's investiture, that Hank had taken him aside. He had gently and firmly told him that it wasn't his job to debate assignments that the captain of the ship gave him, after a battle. No matter what he thought of whether she was qualified.

He'd seen Regit Th'rolev, the Andorian Ops midshipman speaking to Hank, who was the leading comms tech on the ship before Hank had given him the talk.

"You need to let it go, Cheese," he had said, using the nickname that had been coined way back in his plebe year. "It ain't about you and whether it was fair or not that you got DOP'd."

*Dropped on probation*, he thinks, closing his eyes. The official term. Final, unless he'd been willing to repeat his fourth year.

His pride wouldn't allow him to.

He senses movement into the escape pod. He looks up as Th'rolev steps in. He stumbles slightly, the product of the the broken antenna that Karl carries in his pocket, in an insulated coldpak.

Th'rolev moves down to his knees, then moves in behind Sinclair. He gently pulls her up and lets her rest against him. Th'rolev had lifted Decker after she'd been thrown against the after bulkhead of the bridge.

Th'rolev looks at Karl. "You done good, Cheese," he says. "It was a good idea to get the log buoy to keep talking to us."

He looks down. "I'd been working on that in my spare time. I didn't think she'd let me, since I'd bucked her a bit."

Regid shakes his head. "That's why she's a captain a few weeks into her service. She used what she had to keep us alive.

*All with six broken ribs, a punctured lung, and a concussion*, Karl thinks.

Karl falls silent. He looks down at the impossibly young face, only a year behind him in the Academy. He shakes his head, thinking of what Hank had said.

Of the chance that Sinclair had given him to prove that he wasn't a failure.

Sinclair, *no, Captain Sinclair*, moans again. He can see her eyes moving beneath her lids. He reaches down and takes her hand, as Th'rolev

holds her tighter in his arms.

### **XIII. Brain Dump**

The darkness fades in an instant. Decker fights to focus. As she does, she sees something on their position. She can hear the grinding of the two hulls. The *Aerfen* shudders as it travels along the Klingon battlecruiser's boom, turning slightly away.

Covering the escape pods on the starboard side. "Belay that," she yells, her voice sounding like someone else's through the fog. *Brain injury*, one part of her brain shouts. She moves to the helm and sits. She doesn't have a great deal of time, as her Ops officer has moved to help Madison who is screaming in the Cohort pit. "Th'rolev," she continues in a calmer voice. "I need you on the weps. Stand by aft torpedoes."

He instantly obeys. She finds what she is looking for on the navigation screen. She punches it in, then waits for the *Aerfen* to continue her swing.

"Torpedo armed and ready, Skipper," Th'rolev says. "Target?"

She sends him a text to the console. He nods as her hand moves to the warp drive controls. "All hands," she says, taking a breath against the pain in her side and back, "brace, brace, brace! Weps, match bearings and shoot!"

The world turn translucent and slows down as the stars twist in a manner not usually seen in entering hyperspace. Idly, her mind focuses on the fact that she had just created an unstable wormhole.

Her vision comes into sharp relief. As it does, she releases the contents of her stomach on the console in front of her. She sees the scarlet in the vomit; she can feel stabbing pain in her side with every breath.

"Damage report," she hears Th'rolev say as he comes over to her. With surprising gentleness, he lifts her from the chair. She tries not to cry out from the pain, as he lays her flat on the deck, pulling her legs out.

Voices speak words, but her brain can't translate them for a moment.

"Life support failing," someone says. "Warp drive offline. We left the right nacelle somewhere back in hyperspace."

"Two targets! Klingon light scouts."

"Get me up," Decker manages. The pain returns with a vengeance. "Salvo remaining torpedoes," she says. "Target the lead hawk."

She hears the *tchunk* of the releases, or at least four versions.

"Got her!" another voice shouts. "She didn't have her shields up."

"The other one is turning to run."

Decker focuses on the screen. She is about to find her voice when there is a flash of light in front of the Klingon. The crew watches in dumb fascination as their wayward right nacelle enters realspace.

And collides with the Klingon with a secondary burst of light.

They all stare at the screen.

"Sometimes it's better to be lucky than good," she manages. She turns to see the warrant officer engineer moving slowly towards her, his arm hanging loosely.

"Life support still failing, Captain. We're dead in the water."

Her mother's face flashes into her vision.

"I got an idea." She stares at the large gas giant that now fills the screen with their drift.

### **XIV. In Too Deep?**

"Get us the hell out of here," Targsbane says.

"Belay that!" Croft shouts. He whirls on her. "We're not leaving them, dammit!"

"They're dead," she shouts back.

"We don't know that!"

"Maybe not, but I ain't getting dead to prove it!"

"Yes we are, A'lanna, if we have to."

Both of them turn towards Ael'a, one seated, one standing. They stare at her.

"You don't have a say in this," the pirate starts.

Ael'a moves over to her. She looks down at her childhood friend, sitting in the center seat. *The one time she's able to*, she thinks.

As if thinking the same thing, Targsbane rises and uses that height.

“Yes, I do, if you want to get paid,” Ael'a says quietly.

Out of the corner of her eye, she sees one side of Croft's mouth curl upward as Targsbane stares at her. For a moment, she thinks that A'lanna is going to order her tossed from the bridge. She feels a familiar smile come over her face.

She sees A'lanna start with recognition as she sees the smile. She rubs her jaw absently. A memory flashes in Ael'a's mind. A smaller, full Romulan standing over a taller Romulan-Orion hybrid, her hand smarting from where it had connected with her jaw.

“Shields,” she says. “How many assholes are we looking at?” she asks her pilot.

The woman turns to her and asks, “Besides you?”

Croft and Ael'a snort as A'lanna stares at her. “How long can you tread water in space?”

The woman smirks. “Only if you learn how to fucking drive,” she says. She looks back at her screen. “Three Birds of Prey,” she replies. “They just cloaked.”

“Great,” A'lanna says. “Go ahead and cloak us as well.”

Ael'a feels the strange sensation she always gets a cloaking device is engaged. She looks at Croft, probably the one that has experienced this sensation the least, but he gives no sign of discomfort. She notices that he is looking at the Federation gunboat.

She exhales sharply as she sees the damage for the first time. The Aerfen, as Croft had called it, floats between their ship and where the Klin were last seen. There is a rent in the hull about midships, just aft of the bridge that goes through all of the decks, but not all the way across the hull.

Hull plating is missing all over the ship, including a few that might have been lost when they had arrived here.

“Neutrino buildup approaching closer, Captain,” the helmswoman says. Ael'a searches her memory for her name. *Tardris*, she thinks.

Ael'a sees her stop. “Okay, the neutrinos are back to normal.”

A'lanna looks at her. “What do you mean?”

Tardris whirls on her. “It means we can't track them,” she says forcefully.

“Torpedoes inbound,” says another crewmember.

“Evasive,” A'lanna says.

The ship turns away. As it does, there is an explosion of matter from the gas giant. Ael'a sees the matter mark the three predatory shapes.

“That ain't natural,” Croft says.

“Got target locks,” says the weapons officer.

“Fire torpedoes. Full spread!”

Ael'a looks at Croft as the torpedoes impact the Klingon ships, shattering the center shape, while sending it careening into the other.

His expression says the same thing as hers does.

*Where did the gas discharge come from?*

## **XV. An Inspector Calls**

Inspector Liz Torbert of the San Francisco Police Department steps out of the transport. A uniform makes a note of her arrival as the homicide investigator of record. She moves into the alleyway, careful of where her feet go.

She stops as the hovering floodlights illuminate the scene, staying on this side of the crime scene holo indicators. Her eyes take in the body kneeling on the cement.

Her eyes move up the body, taking in the staring yellow eyes.

Until they fall on what looks like the hilt of a sword sticking up from the right shoulder, shoved where it would impact the heart and other major organs.

She sees another wound on the left side.

“What have we got?” she asks the uniform guarding the scene.

“A mystery. He's not apparently registered here. The Klingon consulate denies knowledge of him.”

“And the Romulan blood?” Liz continues.

The officer points to knife lying on the ground, being scanned in place by one of the crime scene units. “Apparently a FedSec officer was



attacked by someone she was tracking. Stabbed her, but the officer was able to put a knife in her. It's got the officer's prints on it. The Rom was apparently a Starfleet officer."

Liz raises her eyebrows at that, then nods; she starts to move through the crime scene holotape, checking to make sure her sterilization field is on her belt before turning it on. She hears the hum and sees the glow.

Liz senses a figure come up beside her, stopping at the holo. She turns as a tall Betelgeusian woman reaches into her tunic and pulls out an ID plaque.

"Let me guess," she says. "FedSec Counterintelligence."

She can't tell if the woman smiles or not. "I'm Chief Inspector Yer," she says.

A human woman walks up, with suit written all over her, as well as an old man in a Starfleet uniform. An admiral, if she remembers what her memory and her baby sister had told her, from the braid.

"You lose an officer?" she asks the old man.

For an instant, she wonders if the Starfleeter was going to tear her a new one. Instead, she sees a tiny twinkle in his hard blue eyes. "Maybe. Or maybe she was never an actual officer." He doesn't offer to shake hands, seeing the sterilization field over her skin. "I'm McCall. Starfleet Intelligence."

The woman doesn't offer to introduce herself, but smiles what looks like a more sincere smile than most suits have in their repertoire, in Liz's experience.

Liz starts to move towards the body. She hears the woman make a noise in her throat. She stops, then motions to a tech who is watching the evidence gathering units circle the body. The three, after donning their own sterilization units, follow her. Liz nods at the medical examiner.

She stares at the green blood on the Klingon's corpse as well.

The ME nods. "Definitely Romulan. And something else."

"What?"

"Probably some type of chemical that might mask the Romulan blood," the human woman says. "So you don't get made if you get a paper cut, but might with major trauma."

"She speaks," Liz says.

"Usually with authority, Officer," she replies.

"Inspector," Liz corrects. "So you're saying this woman is a Romulan spy?"

No one says anything.

Liz stares at them. "What the hell is this?"

"That's none of your business," says another voice.

They whirl as one. Two men stand there. One of them is in his late fifties and carries a swagger cane of some sorts. Liz immediately discounts him.

Another man. Erect, with a straight spine. His eyes are cold in a wrinkled face. He leans on a cane.

"Admiral Harriman," the human woman says. "I wondered when SPECOPS would weigh in. She turns towards the other man. "Seeing how Daina Reese worked for your lackey, here."

"Special Section, FedSec, and Intel can pound sand," Harriman says. "Security will take over. Just like the Border Patrol is going to stand down on looking for the missing ship in the Triangle."

"No," the woman says.

Liz sees the dark eyes flash. "What do you mean, 'no', C?"

"Just what she said, Sam," McCall replies. He looks over at Liz. She doesn't move.

His mouth quirks up in a smile that matches the twinkle.

She pulls out a PADD. She glances over at Liz as well. She gives her a wink.

"You're not taking over this investigation. It will remain a FedSec Investigations Directorate inquiry." She smiles as Liz feels her face grow hot. "With SFPD in the lead here in their jurisdiction."

Liz calms, her eyebrows feeling like they have risen to her hairline.

"On whose authority?" he says.

A new voice speaks behind them. A voice with a noticeable accent. *Some kind of Slavic. Russian maybe*, Liz thinks. "I can answer that."

All of them turn, some of them smiling.

A middle aged man in a Starfleet officer's uniform stands there. He is shorter than average, but Liz recognizes that he has a good deal of authority in his manner, from years of experience.

"What are you doing here, Captain?" Harriman asks.

"Countermanding your orders. At least on this."

Harriman bristles. "By whose authority, *Captain*?" he asks, the emphasis on rank clear.

The officer taps the braid hanging from his right shoulder. "My boss. And yours." He turns to Liz. "Hello, Inspector. My name is Captain Pavel Andreivich Chekov." His rank comes out in her hearing as *Keptin*.

"Who's your boss?" she asks, taking his hand, looking into his dark eyes.

He smiles tightly. "You can call him Mr. President."

The Marines have landed and the situation is as chaotic as it was. Admirals and Captains and an Inspector in the cold. A rescue of sorts. Spoiling of plans.

#### XVI. Per Astra, Per Terram

Jamie gazes at the gas giant. He wonders if it is possible, that the answer is staring them right in the face. He turns back to A'lanna. "So how good are your shields?"

Her eyes flash again. "Nope. We've done that before. This bucket is a lot of things, but she ain't made to dive into a gas giant. I had to replace the entire impulse energy buffering array, last time we tried it. We almost never got out of there and the risk/reward wasn't worth it." Her eyes seem to grow distant with a memory. "We lost some good people. And we nearly got crushed when we started to sink."

Jamie looks to Ael'a. Her eyes can't meet his.

Tardris looks up from the helm. "Major, we've taken some damage to the impulse drive." She looks at her captain with flinty eyes. "We didn't exactly replace the IEB array. We threw something together that looks like a Klingon took a bat'leth to it, because it was cheaper and she needed more play-pretties for her quarters. I think that's where that damned marble bathtub and shower attached to her quarters came from."

A'lanna shoots her another look of death. "You don't seem to mind when you're in there using up all of my hot water."

"More ships coming in," the weapons officer says.

"Well, here we go," Tardris says.

All eyes turn towards the viewport.

Three shapes appear, but not what they expected.

Two Border Patrol cutters, the *San Sebastián* and an *Avenger*-class torpedo boat, launchers deployed sit in the center of the port. He shakes his head at the third ship. A version of the same class that the shattered *Aerfen* belongs to.

All in black.

A'lanna looks up at Croft. "Open a channel to the lead ship, whoever the hell that might be."

The comms officer complies, but his heavy brow furrows. "They say the task force commander is inbound. With an expert."

Another shape appears, similar to the others, but perhaps a bit less streamlined.

"That's a marine ship," Croft says. "A *Puller*-class."

"Commpic coming in.

Croft turns towards the pickup, straightening his assault uniform, not knowing where a poker might be shoved on this particular jarhead.

His eyes widen as he sees a woman with red hair sitting in the command chair, wearing a Starfleet working uniform with a rear admiral's insignia. He recognizes her, not in the least from the holos and descriptions he'd seen of another, but mostly from her time spent trying to hammer basic engineering principles into his head.

"Admiral Decker," he breathes.

She looks at his uniform, shaking her head. "You really have fallen, Croft," she says.

He snorts. "Why are you here?"

"I was already on the way. I got your updates about a gas giant. I remembered something I'd told Decker years ago. About a junior engineer on a frigate who had saved a good portion of his crew by sending them into a gas giant with their pods still in the housing. The pods and assembly still had enough artificial gravity and were still light enough to keep the gravity of the giant from pulling them down." She looks away. "It's amazing what children absorb."

He nods. "Why the jarheads?"

"Careful, Croft," she says. "They're my ride. They have some skills that we'll need." A grin comes over her face. "Plus I found that junior engineer. Thought I'd go to the source."

Croft closes his eyes as a large blue figure steps into the pickup.

“You are scraping the bottom of the barrel,” he murmurs.

Agon Zh'qithiq stares at him, his bare, muscled arms crossed over his chest. “I figured the bar was already low, with you involved, Croft.” His eyes harden. “After this little adventure, we’re going to have a little conversation about abandoning my wife’s prelanka-gere.”

## XVII. When Bureaucrats Go Wild

Pavel Chekov watches as the three admirals and the civilian argue. He quickly grows bored and watches the young SFPD Inspector, Liz Torbert on a monitor, where she sits in a secure area. In his quick research, he had learned that she had served a hitch as a weapons technician, then as a security operator, finally earning a promotion as an Investigator-Warrant Officer before the hitch ended. He’d looked further into her career at SFPD; she’d only been in seven years, but had already earned the position of Inspector First Grade, equivalent to a lieutenant—something you couldn’t earn by passing a promotional exam, at least past the basic grade. In an agency that doesn’t investigate many serious crimes any more, she stands out as one of the most skilled.

He’d also learned that her younger sister, was currently in harm’s way, on assignment under Federation Command Authority sealed orders.

He himself had written those orders.

“I’m not sending any more Special Operations Command forces to that area,” Harriman intones. He glances at Styles, as if for confirmation. Chekov files that look for future reference.

Just as he files Styles’ blank look in return. Finally Styles nods.

“And what of our crew? We have credible evidence that they are alive,” McCall says.

“Credible from who? A pirate? Someone who is in deserter status from Starfleet?”

Pavel watches as McCall holds his temper, with great effort. He glances at Pavel, who says, “We believe the evidence is credible, Admiral. Also, Major Blackthorne isn’t a deserter. He merely requested a transfer to the Rapid Deployment Force, and was granted it, for a new assignment.”

He looks pointedly at McCall. *You owe me*, he sends in his mind. To his point, he sees a slight incline of McCall’s head with an accompanying curl of his lips.

“And what is your status, Captain Chekov? I checked with BUPERS and they say that you are assigned to the Board of Admiralty as staff secretary. That’s not exactly an assignment that has a lot of weight like you seem to be throwing around.”

Pavel smiles thinly. “The Board of Admiralty, as you know, is an advisory body to the President, the Federation Security Advisor, and the Secretary of State for Defense and Exploration. It is made up of some of our most experienced and distinguished retired Admirals. People like Grand Admirals Turner, Martinez, Brannigan, and Nogura, as well as your predecessor, Admiral Harriman—Grand Admiral Joka.”

He sees the point scored. “That’s where my ‘weight’ comes from,” he finishes.

A commander steps in. “Begging your pardon, Admirals, ma’am, Captain. A Klingon Imperial envoy is asking permission to join by holocomm. She says she has something to add to an ‘issue’ we may have.”

## XIII. SOS

D’aina t’Sonrees stares at the local security forces arrayed around Pier 45. She sees them milling around the door of her covert communications center. She watches, knowing what will happen if they tamper with it. She sees one of the local soldiers start to touch it.

A tall, bird-like being, one that bears some resemblance to the raptor on most Romulan warships, quickly moves up. She sees a large transport pull up and several heavily armored and padded beings get out, along with some sort of an automaton on antigrav lifts. The locals move back, especially as a young human woman with medium dark skin walks up and orders them away, to form a perimeter.

She is confident in Section 31 technology to keep secrets. No one may die when they tamper with the compartment, but there will be destruction.

D’aina moves away from the scene, already moving towards a different plan. She can’t imagine that she was tracked here the last time she used it. She wonders if she has already been betrayed. She is sure that it wasn’t Stivek, but she isn’t sure if the human captain might not be responsible. She was, after all, close to Jameson McCall, the Prince of Starfleet Intelligence.

After an hour’s walk, in which she had doubled-and-tripled back, she comes to another communications blind. It had also taken her longer as she’d had to inject herself with another stimulant for the loss of blood. The pain she deals with herself.

She pulls out the black delta and prepares to insert it into the small slot. D’aina pauses for a moment. She can only hope that Section 31 hasn’t discovered what she actually is.

If it even cares.

She senses a presence behind her. She turns and sees a shadowy figure in a hood step out. She reaches for the Starfleet phaser, but the figure holds out both hands, palms together, as if in prayer. The figure opens the hands palm up, then lifts the cowed hood away from the face.

D’aina’s heart twists as she sees the delicate, upswept brows, and pointed ears, along with a mass of dark curly hair. The woman’s brown features are calm.

D'aina recognizes the dark robes of the Qowat Milat.

The followers of the Way of Absolute Candor. Some of the best hand-to-hand fighters in the galaxy, all women. She exhales sharply as she realizes that she recognizes the woman's features.

Features that are similar to those that she had last seen looking up at her from the floor of an execution chamber, after she had been subjected to the slow execution known as the Remedy, her head readied for display.

A face beloved to her, as her Commander, and more.

There were differences. This face was younger.

"You're Tiyana t'Lorcana," D'aina says. "Grala's younger sister."

The woman smiles serenely—probably one of the broadest, warmest smiles D'aina has ever seen on a Romulan.

Or any being, for that matter.

"I've been sent on a impossible quest," she says. "Something we sisters of the Qowat Milat specialize in." Her smile grows harder.

"To keep you from making a mistake of galactic proportions, D'aina."

## **XIX. Revelations**

Captain Sandiya Prandi listens with half an ear to the other captains on the holoconference, seated around the table in the *Constitution's* briefing room.

She can see Vice Admiral Walsh's irritation grow with Captain Stivek. Captain Chandra, the commander of the Border Patrol Group and the direct commander of the missing Goddess, doesn't have to let her irritation grow. She had come in to the conference, as an old security officer of Prandi's had once said, 'safety-wired in the pissed-off position.'

"We cannot make an incursion into Klingon space," Stivek says, in his precise voice. "We have made great progress since Khitomer. We mustn't jeopardize that for one crew." Sandiya recognizes that his control must be slipping as well, if he had used a contraction.

"The reports are that the ships that attacked our client ship identified themselves as belonging to the Klingon Free Systems," Chandra says, an edge to her voice. "The holos and telemetry that were sent to us, as well as copied to Starfleet Operations and Intelligence, indicated both physical markings and virtual IDs from the House of Klinzhai—the known leading house of the secession movement."

"Known to you, perhaps," Stivek says. "But we are not sure that the totality of the House was a part of that 'secession movement' that you speak of."

Sandiya sees the anger flare in Chandra's usually gray eyes, turning them to shades of piercing blue. Sandiya watches her reach up and touch the angry scar on the side of her bald head.

Walsh turns to her. "You haven't said much, Sam," he observes.

There it is. *The moment that my little controller has been waiting for.* She lets the self-loathing rise in her mind. She pushes it away, after an appropriate amount of time, along with Commander Reese's features. "I...agree with Captain Stivek," she says, hoping that Walsh and Chandra, as well as the captain of the *Pathfinder* takes her hesitation for something other than static on subspace. "We can't risk a war, now. Not when we're especially starting to see more activity on the Romulan part of the border." She looks at Chandra. "Especially when the Patrol has been allowed to atrophy so. We're down to only eight active groups, with the shuffling that Admiral Hunter has had to do."

Chandra gazes at her. In this particular instance, Sam can't tell if the anger is now directed at her, or if there is something else in play.

Mike Walsh looks at a PADD handed to him. He sighs. "At any rate, it's a moot point. SPECOPS has gotten OPSTAR and Antares Deep Space Area Command to agree. We can't move into the area around the gas giant."

Sam clicks off with the rest. She closes her eyes, wondering how Harriman had been able to get the full Admiral with responsibility for Starfleet Operations and his subordinate area commander to agree.

Her pocket buzzes. She reaches in and pulls out the black delta. She sighs and reaches for the PADD. At the insertion of the object, a holo appears above the device, given to her by Reese.

It isn't who she had expected. Captain Stivek's face stares at her. She keeps her smile to herself.

She finally has something to give her so-called masters.

A little plotting with Starfleet Engineering Command. Preparation. A night in a San Francisco Park. Swimming for a Banshee.

## XX. Sleight of Hand

Jameson McCall watches with anger as Harriman and Styles leave the conference room, the triumph in their walks sending him into despair—something he doesn't feel usually, but now seems appropriate. That they had managed to at least get OPSTAR to agree to refrain from sending the Task Force in had been something to put a spring in their steps.

He looks over at Chekov, who appears to be calm, along with C.

"What are you two cooking up?" he asks, suspicion in his voice.

Castellan enters the room, removing the captain's jacket that she wears, along with the faux white turtleneck ascot from over her service dress black undershirt. C's eyes widen; apparently someone in his shop can still surprise the Federation's spymaster.

"We've got a way to get Chandra's full group involved," C says. "To get them into the disputed zone. The President has signed off on it, as has the FSA. The rub seems to be coming from the Secretary of State for Intergalactic Affairs' Department, who are being extremely cautious."

"So what is this secret evil plan?" Jameson asks.

He looks up as another being comes into the room. Admiral Gavek, the Eastern Hemisphere Tellarite walks in, followed by a Commander wearing operations gold and a staff officer's aiguillette that he doesn't immediately recognize.

"It's in motion," Gavek rumbles, his thick red beard—a shade that doesn't occur in Earth's nature, at least—twitching. "Commander Grayson here has confirmed. Rear Admiral Decker is enroute, if not already there."

Jameson stares at him. "Gav," he says, "how is this possible?" He looks at C. "Again, what the fuck have you got going, woman?"

"Just calm your bowels, old man," she says, with what he detects might actually be fondness. "BUPERS has signed off on it. The 17th has been temporarily transferred to Starfleet Engineering Command."

Jameson looks at Gavek, who, from the time that they were cadets, then Midshipmen, then Ensigns together, had never looked this self-satisfied.

*That's saying a lot,* he thinks.

"And Decker? This is fairly recent."

"She had requested family leave. She's entitled to it."

"Why do I think this might've been Mary's idea?"

No one says anything.

Jameson shakes his head. *Okay, then why do I think I've been playing three-dimensional chess, when I'm looking at a checkers board?* he thinks.

*Might be time to retire.*

## XXI. The Briefing

Jamie looks at the assembled faces on the *O'Bannon's* small hangar deck. He focuses on Declan Starros, the major commanding the reinforced independent company of the Rapid Deployment Force, the closest thing to marines Starfleet has. The marine looks back at him, contempt on his rugged features at Jamie's uniform.

He turns back to Agon, who is watching the byplay between them both with great amusement. Rear Admiral Decker stares at all three of them with her teeth gritted and her hazel-blue eyes hard.

"Continue, Mr. Zh'qithiq," she says.

"The pods should each give off their own signal. They're harder to find out here, with all of the interference from this particular gas giant, but with the combined power behind them, if Captain Sinclair had kept with what her mother had told her about my little party, then we should find the pod assembly when we're in there."

Jamie nods. "We're also banking on the fact that it caused that ejection of the gas that revealed the KFS ships to the pirates," he says.

"I prefer the term privateer, in this case," Targsbane says, a smirk on her face.

“So what are we supposed to do when the KFS or whoever comes calling?” This from Assisi, the representative apparently from the Institute. “A modified *Goddess*, a jarhead ship that will be attending to the gas giant, and a, what did you call it, ‘privateer’ that used to be a Romulan dart-mother, ain’t exactly building confidence, Croft.”

Jamie looks at Ava Fonseca, one of two possible adults on the *Starlight*. “Don’t worry about it, Francis,” he says. “We have a Starfleet officer on board. She’ll make up for your shortcomings.”

“Asshole,” Francis mutters. D’Shaya, the Romulan member of the crew, sticks out her tongue at Jamie.

*Okay*, he thinks, *one adult on the Starlight*.

Starros looks at Jamie. “So what are you going to be doing, Crofty?” he asks in his thick Cockney accent. He looks at the gunnery sergeant, another tall, thin Englishman with a melodious voice and a lugubrious countenance, who will lead the recon team into the soup, as if he knows the answer.

And doesn’t like it.

“I’ll be going in with the recon team,” Jamie replies evenly.

“Oh, no hell you won’t,” Starros says.

Jamie feels his feet fix to the deck, immovable. His arms cross over his chest, matching Starros’ stance. Starros pushes his green beret on the back of his head, before returning to his own recalcitrant stance.

“I’ve got the same training in zero-g combat as your troops,” he says. “I didn’t just get handed this uniform and the Beret.”

A smile quirks Starros’ lip up, made nasty by the scar through the right side of his mouth. “But I’m not putting an unknown quantity in with my team. They’ve worked together and trained together for years.” He looks at Mary.

Jamie can tell that Mary Decker is torn. She had served with him before; she probably trusted him more than the marines.

She exhales. “I want you up above. You’ve got more experience running a standup fight in space than anyone here.” She grins. “Me, included.”

After a moment, Jamie nods. He turns back to Starros. To his credit, his expression is even.

“Let’s bring our friends home,” he says.

He switches from ‘Jamie’ to ‘Croft’ in his thoughts. He feels T’Varilyn’s smile.

Amazingly, he also feels Chandra’s through the mists of the Link.

She is close.

## **XXII. The Klingon Machiavelli**

The woman known even in her own thoughts as C sits on a park bench. It had been light for a hour or two; none of them had slept during the night and morning as they waited for word. She had been drafted to meet the mysterious Klingon envoy.

She senses a shape coming out of the mist of the morning. She feels her eyes widen as she realizes that the shape doesn’t appear to be as massive as she would’ve thought. The shape also doesn’t appear to be clad as she would’ve thought either.

She—it is definitely feminine in shape—is wearing what looks like a Terran business suit. Dark black eyes gaze at her over a scarf that hides the woman’s features.

C stands, facing the woman. She sees the woman’s hands move up to the scarf. She wears no gloves; C observes a mass of triangular shaped tattoos on the bronze skin.

C is further surprised when the woman’s face is revealed. The eyes stare out of the same bronze-skinned face. Her hair is shaved close on the sides and flops down over one side of a very slightly ridged forehead. The shaved body of the dark hair, which is only marginally longer than the sides reveal delicately pointed ears.

“So who do you represent?” C asks. “The Klingon or the Romulan side?”

A smile quirks her lips, giving her a softer appearance. It also reveals a mouthful of sharpened teeth.

“Right now, the Klingon, though I have connections with the Roms,” she says. Her voice is lightly accented; C can’t place it.

“So you mentioned something you could add to an issue? Plus, I’d like to know something I can call you. You can call me Clarisse,” C adds.

The woman nods. “Of course, C, if that makes you feel better. I am Senior Force Leader K’hrella, of the True House of Klinzhai and the House of Kor. I think that we can do business.”

C is suddenly glad that she had come alone. She isn’t sure whether McCall or Chandra would continue with the interaction, with that House Name. Or the fact that K’hrella had identified herself as a relatively junior marine rank.

“And what do you want?”

“Just a connection, Kh’larisse,” she replies. Even C can hear the distinction in pronunciation. “You can give Chandra a message for me. I’m looking to punish those who caused her so much pain on Vostus.”

“In return, you can solve an issue for the Empire in the space that your ‘engineering task force’ is working in.” The softer, but still dangerous smile returns. “And it won’t cost you anything. My agent has already paid the cost for you. By a blood voyage to Sto-Vo-Kor.”

### **XXIII. Gas Diving**

Gunnery Sergeant Daniel Hagan makes sure that his helmet seal is tight, before checking the uniform seals on his Field Combat Assault Uniform. He looks at the other nine sergeants he had picked from his recon platoon of twenty-eight—the very best, in his judgement of EVA operators in Company A (Reinforced), 45 Commando, Rapid Deployment Force

He turns and looks at Major Starros and First Sergeant Forsten, both standing near the troop transporter pad.

“You ready, Songbird?” Evie Forsten asks, her ice-blue eyes gazing at him.

“Ready, Viking,” he replies.

She nods, then turns to Starros, saluting him. She reaches down and taps her ear. “We’re ready, Admiral,” she says.

“Execute,” comes Admiral Decker’s voice from the bridge.

“Escorts deploying to the rose,” Blackthorne’s voice says over the speakers. The three other ships, joined by a *Lancer*-class, the *San Sebastián*, form at four points around the *O’ Bannon*.

Hagan looks over the other nine, then nods at the transporter operator.

Starros’ face dissolves in front of him, as does everything else around him.

Chaos reassembles. He at first sees nothing but darkness, then there is a cacophony of light and color. He tries to orient himself, but realizes that he seems to be spinning some. The spinning stops as one of the sergeants pulls up on his tether.

When his stomach and brain calms, he touches a control on his gauntlet. He hears a tone as the receiver starts, then silence.

He can almost feel the other recon marines holding their breath, hoping that they can find the missing crew. Before they run out of time.

While waiting for the receiver to find the pod assembly, Daniel thinks about what he has to do. They won’t be able to use the tractor beams, until they clear the gas giant, because of the interference.

They’ll have to do it the old-fashioned way. With grapplers fired, based on their own signals.

He comes alert, shoving thoughts of their tactics away as four clear signals start to beep in his earpiece.

Daniel keys his mike. “Mother, we’ve got the signals. Homing in on them,” he says.

The point man triggers his jetpack, pulling the other nine with him. They increase speed as all of them activate the ‘packs.

It only takes about five minutes for a dark shape to show up against the backdrop of the bright, shifting colors.

There are another two minutes for them to clamp onto the assembly. Sergeant Backus comes up to hull of the assembly. There is a tiny bit of an escape of compressed air.

The first pod slides out of the assembly, enough for a port to show, while still connected to the others. Daniel and Backus move up to the port. Both marines smile at each other as they see three figures in this pod.

A large Andorian male holds a skinny young redhaired woman, while another young man, a technician, tends to her.

“Mother, this is Songbird. We’ve found them!” He sees the young woman’s dark eyes flutter.

“Tell the Admiral that Captain Sinclair is alive.”

He hears nothing but static.



All together now.

### XXIV. Unwanted Guests

Jamie Blackthorne sits next to Emma Rosewarne on the bridge of the *Sebby*.

“This is Admiral Decker. *San Sebastián* has tactical command. *O’Bannon* will cover the dive.”

“God help us all,” comes a voice from one of Croft’s charges. He can’t tell which one, or which voice on the two ‘contract’ ships.

“Settle down,” he says. “It’s all good.”

“Divers deployed,” Decker says.

“Signal, Captain. It’s the *Crusader*. Text only,” says the comms tech.

“Read it.”

The tech hesitates, then looks again at her screen at Emma’s encouragement.

“I guess I’ll have to save your asses again,” the tech reads.

Emma snorts, though the tech maintains complete professionalism.

“Take north on the rose,” Croft says.

The torpedo boat obeys. Croft knows that Torbert’s ship will come in handy if there are any interlopers, even though she’s already expended around twenty torpedoes out of the hundred she carries.

“It leaves eighty or so,” Emma says. He looks at her, wondering if there is some Deltan Link-stuff going on. “You never were good at math, roomie.” She lowers her voice even more. “You got this, sweetie. You’ve trained for it all your life; you’ve done things like it as a first officer. In spite of the silly ass little beret you’re now wearing, I have complete confidence in you.”

Croft nods, then waiting for her to turn her attention elsewhere, removes the green beret with 45 Commando’s flash on it. He sees the left side of her mouth, the side that he can see, quirk up.

An alarm goes off, shattering the low murmuring. “Proximity alert,” Haveka says. “Multiple warp signatures inbound.”

“Red Alert. Raise shields.” Emma says. “Warn the other ships,” she adds.

Three predatory black and red shapes shift into real space. “That’s not so bad,” Croft muses.

Until three other sets of three shapes each.

“You had to say something,” Emma snarks. “Engage the closest three,” she says.

The closest three suddenly disappear in another deluge of torpedoes. “Or not,” Emma adds.

“*Starlight*, maintain station on the *O’Bannon*. *O’Bannon*, engage with point defense if needed,” Croft says, punching the words into his console as well. “A’lanna, take the next in line. *Crusader*, your choice. We’ll take the scraps.”

To punctuate his words, the *Sebby* heels over, a slight explosion coming from aft on the bridge. “Damage control to the bridge,” Haveka says from below. “We’re taking heavy fire, Captain. Shields down to 60%.”

“Then shoot back, Veks,” she says.

“We’re not going to be able to take much of this, even with this lot, much less if they bring in more friends,” Emma says, her voice tight.

“Signal from the dive team, copied to us. They’ve found them,” the comms tech says. Morksogian, who is driving, looks down at her screen. “Two of the trios have concentrated on the *O’Bannon*, while the other three are headed for the boomer.”

“All ships, concentrate fire on the six near the *O’Bannon*,” Croft says.

“More hyperspace signals. At least ten signatures. No,” Mork stops. Her voice tightens and she glances back to Emma and Croft. “Twenty.”

### XXV. Friends

Emma Rosewarne fires an extinguisher at an arcing panel at the front of the cockpit. Both Morksogian and Croft are handling the other

extinguishers, while the quartermaster's mate controls their evasive jinking. Nine of the warp signatures had turned out to be Klingon Birds of Prey, like the previous dozen.

The *Crusader*, true to her power, had engaged the first three, while other two ships under Croft's command had dove in, covering the *O'Bannon*.

"Signal from Flag, Captain," comms says. "We're ready to begin rescue."

"Very well," Croft says as he sits down. "All ships, re-form on me. Protect the *O'Bannon*."

Emma reseats herself, then checks her repeater screen. She sneaks a glance over at Croft. He appears to be calm, absorbed in tracking the pitched battle that he has suddenly found himself in command of, but he can't keep the worry over the next phase of the operation from his eyes. They had heard Gunny's transmission about Admiral Decker's daughter, as well as an additional one about the other survivors.

One of the pods contains a seriously injured XO and another is filled with the three or four dead.

They still don't know where the other warp signatures were. They hadn't shown up with the dozen. Either that or they had already arrived and had cloaked.

"They're so sure of ending us, they aren't even cloaking," he murmurs, half to himself.

"Captain, another ship has warped in. It's headed toward the surface of the giant," Haveka says.

"A Klingon?" Croft asks.

"No, Major. It's a deuterium carrier."

"Like the ones that attacked the FOB. Are they headed towards the *O'Bannon*?" Emma asks.

The wait for an answer is agonizing.

"No, Em," Haveka replies. "They're going to the surface. Near where the eruption occurred."

Emma and Croft look at one another. "All ships, concentrate fire on that ship. The marines diving are unprotected."

"They're going to all try it," Emma says, despair creeping into her voice. "It'll be like whack-a-mole."

"Captain, incoming warp signatures!" Haveka shouts.

Emma hears a curse from Croft. "Of course more had to show up."

They turn their attention to the viewport. They wait for the appearance of what would seal their fates.

It would be improper to characterize the sound coming from Haveka as a squeal, but it is definitely a scream.

Of joy.

"Federation IDs!" she shouts amidst the sudden din from the CIC. "It's the 17th! The Banshees are here!"

Emma feels her stomach twist as she sees the multiple, spearlike, nacelled shapes, with half-disks on the upper bows appear. They don't waste time.

"Plenty of trade for everyone. Don't hog'em," comes a familiar voice with a mix of London and Deltan accents.

She can feel Croft's roiling emotions—maybe a byproduct of the close bond with Chandra—as her beloved face—to both of them—comes on the screen.

"Heard you both need your asses saved," she says, a warm smile on her face.

"What kept you?" Croft manages, a catch in his voice as he stares at her. He finds a little bit of his usual snark. "You were always slow."

Emma knows what is coming next. "You never complained about me being slow before." She takes Emma in with her burning gaze. "Either one of you."

They both choose to ignore several snickers from below.

## **XXVI. The Sea Shall Give Up Her Dead**

Karl Havarti carefully lifts Eileen Madison through the joined hatch on their pod. As he turns when she is secured, he realizes that Decker Sinclair is assisting with stowing her XO.

"Goddamnit, Skipper, I told you that we had it," he exclaims. He senses Thro'lev shaking his head.

"I'm okay, Bunts," she says shakily, using an ancient slang term for a signalman. The foggy look in her eyes doesn't back her words up. He reaches up with a cloth and tenderly cleans off the blood from her forehead. A swipe downward takes the slight bit of bloody froth from her lips.

So far, her complexion hasn't turned blue, but with a punctured lung, it may at any moment. Karl looks at the medtech. Her expression is guarded.

The Master-at-Arms looks through the hatch. "Everybody is transferred to these two pods, Mr. Thro'lev," he says.

Thro'lev nods, wincing at the pain in his broken-off antenna. "Very well."

"We're ready, Aerfens," comes the melodious English-accented voice of the Gunnery Sergeant leading the divers.

"Very well, Gunny," Thro'lev says. "Stand by to render honors," he adds.

There is quiet in the pods and without. Through the port, Karl can see the marines coming to a semblance of attention in their pressure suits, in the morass of the gas giant.

Thro'lev starts to speak, but Sinclair shakes her head. "Communications Technician 2nd Hank Dougherty," she says in a clear, but shaky voice, "Engineering Technician (Propulsion) 3rd Fazir Narouk. Leading Yeoman Na'ella. We commit their bodies to the deep, that they may rest in peace, until that day that the stars shall give up their dead."

She slumps back down after the abbreviated, modified service for the dead. Karl sees the tears in her eyes as they close. He wipes his own away.

"Detail, Present Arms," comes over the speaker. Karl sees the marines outside salute.

"Order Arms," finishes the command.

"Let's get you out of there," the gunny says.

"Release the two pods." Thro'lev orders.

There is a *tchunk* sound, as the pods drift away from the assembly. Another loud clang on the hull and the pods begin to rise. The assembly with the remaining pod and their honored dead, starts to sink as the artificial gravity transfers to the two pods.

As they get close to the surface, Karl looks up. He can see multicolored flashes coming closer to them.

Until they are in the midst of the lightning. Karl can see shattered shapes in the black. He is thankful that most, if not all, appear to be Klingon in origin.

"Release the grapplers," a new voice says. "Tractor them in."

"All ships, cover the *O'Bannon* as she withdraws with our shipmates," a voice that Karl vaguely recognizes says over the comms.

"Large signal jumping in," says a male voice.

Karl turns just in time to see a massive shape appear. His heart falls as he recognizes it as a Klingon *K't'inga*-class battlecruiser.

Still the biggest bully in the Klingon schoolyard.

At least his heart falls, until the ship starts to open fire.

On the remaining Birds of Prey. He can see another ship flaming in the slight atmosphere of the gas giant, as it plunges into the planet. A ship that looks like some sort of large freighter.

"All ships, execute combat withdrawal," Croft says over the comm. "Prepare for warp maneuvering".

Karl looks over at his captain, still resting and unconscious.

A smile on her pale face.

# Eight

## Chapter Summary

Healing takes many forms. A reckoning in a foggy night in San Francisco. The strike.

### Postlude: Croft

Jamie Blackthorne walks into the sickbay on the *O'Bannon*. Due to the crew size and the marine propensity for frontal assaults, the sickbay is somewhat larger than any other of the other Cohort vessels. It is occupied by only one patient, right now. Eileen Madison had been transferred to a fast medical transport to get her to Earth for serious medical care. She will have a long recovery; she was transferred in a stasis pod.

He sees Declan Starros and Daniel Hagan standing against a far bulkhead. Both of them stare at him intently. Finally, they both nod and turn away.

There are four women gathered around the bedside of the sole patient, including the doctor, who from what Croft can tell, has more of an interest in seeing this patient survive than any other.

The doctor, Kim Sinclair, stands next to Admiral Decker, looking down at their daughter. They stand next to one another, but there is a slight distance between them.

Not just physically.

Another young woman, very close to Decker's age, with red hair and masses of freckles, as well, though with darker skin, looks down at her friend and, for a brief time, her XO. She rests her hand on Decker's arm, then reaches down and finds bare skin between the bandages on her forehead and places a kiss. He vaguely remembers her from before.

On Vostus. She had helped carry Chandra to the medical shuttle.

She turns and walks away, towards where Croft stands. She stops and looks him up and down. A slow grin comes over her freckled features. "I can see what she sees in you," she says. She resumes her exit.

Which leaves him to look at the last woman standing beside Decker Sinclair's bedside. He exhales sharply. He knows that she knows that he stands there; the Link-bond that they had shared assures him of that.

Croft takes his time examining Chandra's face. His heart twists as his eyes fall on the nasty scar. This was the first time he'd seen it, healed, in person, rather than on a comm screen. His gaze moves to her small nose, above the slight smile on her full lips.

He would be remiss if he didn't look over the rest of her body. She is clad in a uniform vest, with no shirt under it. Her arms—arms that he remembers holding him, in joy and in grief—are strong and toned.

The ache in his heart wants to motivate his body to walk over to her. To hold her, or let her hold him, if she will.

He has taken a step, when he stops himself. Too soon. She has a life now. *She doesn't want me cluttering it up.*

Croft turns and is gone.

Behind him, Chandra looks back at where he had stood.

She feels her eyes well. Kim Sinclair looks at her, then reaches up and touches her cheek.

*He is rebuilding, she thinks. He doesn't want me cluttering up his life.*

*All I can say, she hears in her head, in T'Varilyn's dry, familiar voice, is that both of you are complete and utter dumbasses.*

### Postlude: Emma

Emma leans against a bulkhead outside the sickbay, wanting to check on the young captain, but not wanting to intrude on the family time, not knowing her or her mother very well. She watches as the hatch opens and Croft walks out of the sickbay. His eyes are distant; she can tell from his body language that something was weighing on him.

Most probably the tall Deltan who was also checking on her officer.

Emma had only had a few moments to see Chandra; nothing like she had wanted to, having not seen her since they had lost T'Varilyn and Chandra had been injured on that Klingon shithole. They had held each other tightly, not saying anything, only existing as two friends—maybe even still pre-lanka-sonén, if she remembered the Deltos.

"Hey, hard-charger," she says. "What's the haps?"

He looks up, as if coming back to the world of the cramped passageway of this ship. He gives that customary crooked grin, the 'sheepish version #5' as Eleanora Cavendish had once called it.

“Hey. Not much. I’ll check back later.”

“How’s she doing?”

“Healing pretty well,” he replies. “She’ll be up and saving the universe in no time.”

Emma snorts. “Yeah. Annoying, aren’t they? All those universe-savers.”

“Pot, meet kettle,” he says dryly, giving her a hooded look.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about. Just a mustang ship-driver,” she replies.

He smiles warmly. “And a mother. Don’t forget the most important part.”

She looks away, feeling her eyes prickle. He and the others could always bring those emotions up, whenever she needed them. To remind her of what she had.

“So are you and Chandra going to find more than five minutes to gaze longingly at each other? Maybe fifteen minutes to talk about what you both lost? About how you’re doing?”

He shifts from foot to foot, looking down and watching the motion. “I dunno. Just got a call from Ael’a. The Praetor-Prime is getting antsy. Wants a report on this whole thing.”

She stares at him, sensing a dodge. She reaches up and touches his cheek. “Fifteen minutes. Maybe even a half-hour. You don’t even have to spend any time doing anything but talking. Even if it’s getting acquainted again with each other’s Link-signature.” She grins. “Without even any of the physical manifestations of that.”

She reaches over and kisses him gently. “You both need to heal,” she says gently. “Together, as much as possible.”

Emma turns and leaves him standing there with his own thoughts.

#### **Postlude: Kim**

Kim tries to stretch her tortured shoulder, but gives up once she realizes that Mary doesn’t seem to be waking up and moving to another medbed.

Her ex-wife also appears to have drooled on her shoulder. All of the others had left, as Decker hadn’t shown any sign of waking up. She was out of danger, but apparently had no real desire to wake up yet.

Kim knows the feeling. She eases Mary’s head down to a more comfortable position. Mary gives a little moan as she shifts. Kim looks down at her. She sees so much of Decker in her mother, but with some from her father as well. She also sees what she fell in love with almost twenty years ago. Even asleep, Kim can see Mary’s intelligence, her passion—even her loving and caring nature.

It is when she was awake that she had seen what she had fallen out of love with.

There is another moan. She sees Decker stirring on the bed next to where her mothers lie.

She swings her legs over the side of the bed, then gently lays Mary back. She moves over to the bed as Decker’s eyes come open.

She gazes at Kim, then smacks her lips. Kim lifts some ice in a cup and lets her take a couple of chips. Kim, ever the Doctor, looks up at the medbed’s readouts, particularly those dealing with brain function.

There is no evidence of a brain bleed or any type of fracture. Kim checks the orthopedic matrix that covers her right side under the medical gown. The ribs are already starting to mend under the combination of energy waves and medication. The same with the punctured lung, once pressure had been relieved.

She notices that Decker is focused on her. She smiles softly and says, “Hi, Mom.” She looks over at the bed and sees Mary. She rolls her eyes, turning back to Kim. “Please tell me that the two of you didn’t fuck in a sickbay bed on one of my Group’s ships. That you didn’t have ‘makeup sex,’ or whatever the hell you two wanna call it when you fight, one of you feels contrite, you get naked, then you go back to fighting and not talking for awhile.”

Kim feels herself flush bright red. Decker looks over at the bed in question. Her birth-mother is awake, staring at them both.

“I didn’t know that you knew about that.” She looks hard at Kim. “Did you tell her?”

“She didn’t have to,” Decker says. “Sometimes I could hear the two of you after the divorce. I’ve also been to your office on Mars when Joelle wouldn’t let me in there, then I would see Kim doing the walk of shame out of a back passageway.” She smiles. “I love you both. Even though you probably shouldn’t be married to each other. I always appreciate you trying, but I’m okay.”

Kim and Mary look at one another. Mary gets off of the bed and moves over in tandem with Kim. They get on the side opposite her broken ribs and both gently pull her into their arms.

#### **Postlude: Chandra**

Chandra looks up as the ready room door slides open. Her breath leaves her as Croft stands there. She looks him up and down; he is now clad as he had been since she had first seen him again, in the Romulan version of a business suit. He doesn’t wear the gold collar that she’d

glimpsed under his shirt, she is glad of that, at least.

She doesn't like to think what that collar means, even when it is an obvious ruse. It would be too easy where he spends his life for someone to make it a reality.

Or worse.

"Hey," she says. She manages not to wince at the triteness of the greeting.

"Hey, yourself," he replies.

She gets up from her desk and moves towards him, with only a tiny bit of hesitation. He lifts his arms with the same lack of hesitation and pulls her in tight. Chandra rests her forehead against his, feeling his cooler skin against hers.

At the angle she touches him, she feels some of that coolness against the beginnings of her scar, as well as the three scars on his forehead he has earned since she had first met him. A decade ago, now, or close to it.

Neither of them close their eyes, but keep them open, focused on the other. Just as they had in the past when they had kissed each other. As if trying to prevent the other from disappearing.

As one, they close their eyes. The memories cascade through the Link. Not just the ones that Deltans are known for, but all of them.

Memories of her family, both blood, the one that had first chosen her, and one she had chosen at the Academy. The one she was thinking of choosing now. The new bonds such as the young woman lying in the medbed, surrounded by love and warmth, and those surrounding her.

They share emotions and images of those that they had lost, as well as those they had gained. T'Varilyn enters their thoughts, sharing hers with them both.

As usual when they would share their emotions in this way, any sensation of Croft's birth family is a blank slate. The emotions locked away.

None of them, after the initial questioning, had pried any further.

They hold each other, letting the warmth flow through them, along with healing.

It's a start, but neither of them will touch the reason for running away from the other.

Maybe not even one they will admit to themselves.

### **Postlude: Decker**

Decker comes awake, feeling tired from so much damned sleeping. She is ready to get out of the bed and at least move to her own quarters to sleep. Her mother—the one with the MD—had given her an emphatic 'no.'

She shifts a bit, as she does, she feels the dull ache of her ribs start up again. The thing that she is wearing has given her a great deal of relief as it heals, but hasn't totally taken the pain away. She doesn't want to ask for additional pain meds.

As she tries to get comfortable, she notices a man in some sort of civilian clothes seated near her.

She searches for a name to the face. *Croft*, she thinks. The one who Siobhan and Kaylin had said had helped them escape, then had disappeared after making sure that Chandra was under care after her grievous head wound.

"I'm Jamie Blackthorne," he says. "Just wanted to check on you before I shipped out."

"You're Chandra's friend," she says. "They call you Croft."

He grins, then looks down and to his left. His grin is crooked and decidedly endearing. "They do. You can call me that, too."

"Shouldn't I call you Commander?" she asks.

Croft shakes his head. "Nah, I'm kinda past that. Only technically a major."

She feels her eyebrows rise into her forehead. She winces as the expression impacts one of the cuts on her forehead. She takes in his clothing for the first time. "That's Romulan clothing," she says.

He nods after a moment. "Yep. Good eye."

"I'm assuming you can't talk about why you're wearing it," she says.

"And you would be right," he replies.

He looks up as a wave of warmth comes over Decker's body, as well as her heart and her mind. Chandra comes in. She walks over to the bed, then reaches down and kisses Decker.

The ache in her ribs mysteriously vanishes as she returns the kiss. Her eyes focus on Croft. He is smiling softly.

Chandra lifts up, breaking free, then moves over to stand next to Croft. There is about three inches between them, but both of them look like it could be a mile away.

“What the hell is up with you two?” Decker asks.

Both of them start at her words. She figures that either everyone has been talking to them separately, or tiptoeing around the blatant distance. She didn't feel like tiptoeing.

Chandra rolls his eyes. “I guess the afflicted has spoken.”

“She always this difficult? Asking difficult questions?” Croft asks.

“Every damn second,” Chandra replies.

Decker realizes what they are doing. She realizes what she might've done.

They're at least speaking. She notices they have moved closer.

Croft checks his chronometer. “I've got to go.” He reaches down and kisses Decker on her cheek, then her forehead. “I'll see you when I see you,” he says.

“Be careful,” she replies.

He turns to Chandra. For a moment, Decker thinks they're going to shake hands. Instead, they both move and touch lips. The kiss lengthens; Decker wonders if she should time it.

They break apart and Croft is gone.

What is left is an incredible feeling of warmth emanating from her CO.

One that touches Decker's heart.

Well, mostly her heart.

### **Postlude: Inspector Torbert**

Liz Torbert looks down at the corpse of the woman that she had been seeking for three days. Daina Reese's—she'd just learned from one of the two people here that her true name was suspected to be D'aina t'Sonrees—face is calm.

“So was this a suicide?” Vice Admiral Jameson McCall asks.

Liz looks over at the medical examiner. The man shakes his head. “I won't speculate until I can get her on the table, but I'm thinking she bled to death. I think she's been dead about two days.”

McCall nods absently. “Too bad,” he says. “I think we could've learned a great deal from her, about both of her organizations.”

Liz narrows her eyes at him, but says nothing. She has found that in dealing with him and the woman that he had called ‘C’, it was easier to just not ask what the hell they were talking about.

“So do you need the body?” Liz asks.

After a moment, McCall motions to a tall human woman in civilian clothing. “This is Investigator Casey Ambrose of the Starfleet Security. When you've completed what you need, she'll liaise with you.”

Liz smiles at the woman, whose skin is a bit darker than Liz's own. She is somewhat gratified that McCall had said what he said, instead of ‘she'll be taking over.’

“Inspector,” Ambrose says.

She looks down at the ME, who looks perplexed.

“Evan?” she asks.

“Uh, I'd like to revise my estimate of time of death,” he says, looking back down at his medical tricorder.

Liz sees McCall narrowing his eyes at the doctor. “What?” she asks. She notices that Ambrose comes over and looks down. She nods.

“You got something, Investigator?” Liz asks.

“Just Casey,” she says absently. “Yeah. I think I've seen this before. In the Triangle area.”

“What is it?”

“This is a Romulan, right?”

The doctor looks up and nods.

“Look around the eyes,” Ambrose says.

Doctor Evan Morgan pulls a scanner out and complies. He exhales sharply, then punches a button, raising the magnification on the tricorder.

All of them see the tiny lines under the eyes.

Surgical lines.

“You’ve seen the Romulans do this before?” Liz asks.

“Yeah. Once. A Romulan sleeper agent got extracted. They used another Romulan corpse. I have a sneaking suspicion that they might keep some on hand.” She stops. “This one was complicated, as it had to be surgically altered as a different Romulan surgically altered as a human.”

“Something else,” Ambrose finally says. “I don’t think it was Tal Shiar that did this. Back then, there was a Romulan phrase in a transmission we intercepted. Something we’d never heard associated with them.” She looks up at the sky as if remembering the complete phrase.

“The Way of Absolute Candor.”

### **Postlude: The Empires**

K’hrella walks out into the foggy San Francisco night. She moves to the restaurant and walks through the door. The hostess looks at her suspiciously, especially as she pulls off her hood. “I’m here with the Kla’risse party,” she says. The woman starts, probably at the pronunciation, then relaxes and motions her down the hall, to what looks like a private room.

K’hrella smiles as she sees the decanter of bloodwine sitting on the table. A Deltan woman sits watching her coolly, with one blue eye and one brown. She sits next to her, so both of them can see the door. The woman pours them both a glass of bloodwine; both down it in one swig.

The Deltan doesn’t even blink.

“I didn’t know you appreciated good bloodwine, Curator,” K’hrella observes.

“One must do what one must do,” Issa says. She motions at K’hrella’s clothing. “I didn’t know that you appreciate stylish Earth fashions,” she says.

“Now that we have sniffed each other’s ass,” K’hrella says, “perhaps we can get down to business.”

“So have you taken care of the Federation’s missing Romulan problem?” Issa asks.

“No. We didn’t actually. We were closing in, but we stood down when you found the body.”

“Any ideas?”

“The Tal Shiar’s reach is long, but I’m not sure it’s that long. I think problems of the Federation’s own probably have extracted her.”

“She’ll be no good to that problem any more. Unless she undergoes more surgery.”

K’hrella keeps her expression even. *Why can’t you just say their name?* she think. *Call them what they are.*

Section 31.

“Is there anyone else that you think? What about this group of warrior nuns? The Qowat Milat,” Issa asks.

“I’m not familiar with them,” K’hrella says. The lie rolls easily off of her tongue.

Issa doesn’t seem to notice. They sit there for several moments.

“I guess the Feds are cleaning up their problem?” K’hrella asks.

“Some of it. There’s still some work to do.” She smiles and touches K’hrella’s hands with her own. “You’re welcome to come through the back door,” she says.

“Maybe in a bit,” she says.

Issa gets up, leaving K’hrella with her thoughts.

She erects a compartmentalization field, then opens her comms.

K’hrella dips her head at the holo of the woman flickering on the table.

“My Chancellor,” she says.

Azetbur of the House of Gorkon gazes at her.

“Will we be able to complete our project on time?” Azetbur asks.

K’hrell smiles. “I believe we can. The rebels have already shown their hands. Our agent on Leelix will be initiating the next phase.”

Azetbur nods, then lets herself smile. “Come home, Senior Force leader. Kerla and I miss you.”

“When it is done.”

K’hrell closes her comm, then gets up to follow the Deltan.



## Postlude: Mike Walsh

Vice Admiral Mike Walsh turns in his chair as the door to his flag bridge slides open. His flag lieutenant walks in, followed by Saavik.

Saavik gazes at him evenly, standing at attention. He motions her to sit, then turns to the other staffers working at their stations. "Clear the bridge," he says.

The flag lieutenant remains, positioning himself at the door.

He sees Saavik's mobile eyebrow rises, but otherwise she is calm, as he'd thought she'd be. "I'm being relieved," he says. Saavik's eyebrows knit together at that, but she says nothing for a moment.

"Is this a good thing, or a bad thing, Admiral?"

He smiles tightly. "That remains to be seen, Commander. I have a question to ask you. Are you prepared to take over one of the task force vessels?"

He finally achieves being able to surprise her with the unanticipated. It spreads over her features, but just as quickly is gone. "If so ordered," she says. "Which one?"

He shakes his head. "I can't tell you that, Saavik. Not yet, at least."

Mike watches her digest this. He glances over at the holo of Michaela—Morgan as she preferred to be called—on the bulkhead below the viewport that his chair is positioned in front of.

"May I ask what your assignment is to be, Admiral?"

He exhales and looks at his impassive aide, before returning to look Saavik squarely in the eye. "Chief of Special Operations."

The eyebrow goes up again. "Congratulations, Admiral. Is that permanent?"

"As permanent as anything can be."

"I understand that will come with a promotion to full Admiral," she says.

"Yeah. God help me."

Her mouth quirks up. "I'm sure that any deity will gladly assist you," she says dryly. "So why will I be taking over a starship?"

"Because there are things afoot, Saavik. Things that could either bring down Starfleet, or ensure a bright future."

He can see that she is about to ask another question, but they are both distracted by a sound at the door.

The door explodes inward. His aide, Blankenship, is caught in the blast. Shapes dressed in Starfleet security armor start to enter the room. Walsh is up, checking on the flag lieutenant.

Saavik moves towards the nearest security guard as his phaser moves downward to cover the Admiral. Mike sees his finger tighten on the trigger.

The phaser fires, just as Saavik shoves Mike out of the way. She goes down, a grievous wound on her left side, just above her waist.

Stivek walks in with other security guards. He looks dispassionately at Saavik's crumpled form, then looks back up at Mike.

"That is unfortunate." He looks at the security officer. "I instructed you that phasers should be set on stun."

He looks at another guard, who nods. He lifts his phaser and fires.

The guard dissolves, screaming in pain, in spite of his Vulcan heritage.

"Now, Admiral. Let us discuss your future. Perhaps we can come to an accommodation. Section 31 is always looking for new assets."

Another door opens. Mike can just see the other members of his staff kneeling, their hands on their heads.

The Captain looks back at Saavik. "Take Commander Saavik to the nearest airlock," he says. "She is of no use to me."

Mike Walsh sees his daughter's face as Saavik is lifted by two guards. He isn't sure that he'll ever see Michaela again.

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!