

## A Moment of Calm

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## A Moment of Calm

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### Summary

A lull in the action as the events of the last episode are processed and the scientists work on opening a portal into the other universe. A friendship ends, new friendships and relationships are formed as we reach a crossroads point.

## Act One Laying the Dead to Rest

### *USS Valley Forge*

Bowing his head as the torpedo casings were launched towards the Coronado System's star, Soren remarked in a solemn tone to the attractive dark-haired lieutenant standing next to him, "This is one of the hardest parts of the job, Lieutenant. It's painful enough to say goodbye to people you've served with. Then there are the innocents like Orinia and her husband." His eyes fell to the turian woman wearing a formal turian dress, "They were on their anniversary cruise. They should be dancing and celebrating. But instead, he's dead and she's grieving."

"I know, Sir." Ashley responded as she briefly took the Fleet Captain's hand in hers before releasing it. "I still see the faces of my old squad. Nirali...Evans...Bates...all of them. And I remember watching Shepard pacing up and down the hangar deck as she tried to find the words to tell Jenkins' family that he died."

"It's never easy, Ash." Soren whispered as he returned his love interest's gesture, momentarily taking her hand in his and then letting go. His gaze once again falling on Orinia, the Fleet Captain sighed, "Now, I have one more task."

"If you want..." Ashley proposed, again taking her beau's hand, "I can come with you."

His lips turning up in a gentle smile, Soren replied, "Thank you, but no. There are some things that a commanding officer has to do on their own, and this, unfortunately, is one of them."

"I understand...Soren..." She replied, lowering her voice so no one could hear her using the Fleet Captain's first name, "Shepard told me much the same thing once. I'll be here if you need me."

"Thank you." The Danish captain smiled fondly at his lieutenant as he said in a very low, almost inaudible, voice, "Have I ever told you how special you are?"

"Several times." Ashley whispered back, "But I never get tired of hearing it. Now...go take care of her."

"Fleet Captain." Looking up, the grieving turian greeted her human benefactor with a sad smile. "Thank you again for all you have done. Lorrin would have been honored by your funeral."

"I only wish we could have arrived sooner, Ma'am." Soren replied, expressing regret for the loss of her husband.

"Please don't apologize." Orinia implored, "It's not your fault. The people I blame are the ones who did that to him. Please...please promise me that you will find and stop them from doing this to anyone else."

"I promise you, Ma'am." Soren swore, "I will do my best to find the ones responsible and make sure they never do this again."

Lowering her head, the turian woman responded, "Thank you, Fleet Captain." After a momentary pause, she asked, "What's going to happen to us now?"

"We're on course for Drozana Station." Soren explained, "The owner has kindly given us permission to house all of you until we can get you home."

"What if we can't get back home?" Orinia sobbed, "What then?"

"We're going to get you back home." The Danish captain vowed as a counselor arrived to help with the grieving widow. "The people who took you found a way to go back and forth between our universes and now we have much of their data. It's only a matter of time before we crack it. Until then, I promise you'll be well cared for on the station."

Watching as the counselor led the grieving woman away, Soren sighed as Ashley, walking up to the morose Fleet Captain, took his hand and squeezed it. Smiling at the beautiful woman looking up at him, the Danish captain declared, "We have to stop this, Ash."

"We will, love." Ashley gently responded, "I know we will."

"Thanks." Soren smiled back, "Buy you a drink?"

"Yeah. Sure. C'mon."

### *Valley Forge—Science Lab*

"Interesting..." Talana Zha'Thara mused as she studied the data on her computer monitor. "Very interesting."

"What?" Zara inquired as she moved beside the Andorian science officer. Seeing at once what her colleague had spotted, the quarian astrophysicist exclaimed, her excitement clear even through her vocalizer, "They're identical! The dark matter and energy readings, along with the verteron and chroniton particle readings are almost exactly the same as what I picked up in my scans of Farinata."

"And note how the particles are interacting with the dark energy and matter." Simi Nalo, the chief science officer of the *Bellerophon* who had just recently joined the team pointed to a set of readings as she commented. "They climb gradually, then hit a peak, and then drop dramatically."

“Like a portal opening and closing.” Zara conjectured.

“Exactly.” Talana cried out jubilantly. “I think we might have just found our key.”

“Now all we have to do is figure out how to use it to open the door.” Zara sighed as she grabbed a tube of nutripaste.

“We’re a step closer than we were.” Simi observed, putting her hand on the quarian’s shoulders, “We wouldn’t have done it without you.”

“She’s right. One thing at a time.” Talana grinned as she walked to the replicator and ordered a Tarkalian tea. “We’ve just taken a big step and you deserve the credit for much of it.”

Shaking her head, Zara modestly deflected, “I didn’t do that much. it was the intelligence we got from that base that did it.”

“Plus your readings from the other universe.” The Andorian science officer pointed out. “Without those, we’d be a lot further away from our goal.”

“So what now?” Zara asked as her attention returned to the data on the monitor.

“We let Captain Magnussen know first.” Talana said as she activated the comm. “Captain? Talana here. Where are you?”

*“Lieutenant Williams and I are on our way to the lounge. Why? Did you find something?”*

“You might say that we did.” The mischievous Andorian science officer replied, “We think we might have found our key to the other universe.” Talana then cheekily quipped, “I’ll be expecting my usual bottle of saurian brandy, Simi just put in an order for a bottle of springwine, and Zara wants a bottle of quarian nectar once we open the door.”

*“We’re on our way. If you’re right about this ‘lana...”* Soren joked back, *“I’ll owe you two bottles—same goes for Zara and Simi.”*

*“We’re going to hold you to that, Captain.”* Zha’Thara out.

Giving the woman standing next to him a rueful look, Soren sighed, “Looks like we’re going to have to postpone our drink for a while.”

“Figures.” Ashley grinned back, “Come on...let’s see what our eggheads have found out.”

### **Science Lab**

“Are you sure ‘lana? Zara, Simi?” Soren asked as he perused the information on the monitor screen, “Absolutely sure?”

“99.9 percent sure.” The Andorian science officer replied, Simi agreeing.

“Our analysis of the data’s looking pretty good, Sir.” The Bajoran science officer affirmed.

“There is always the possibility of error. But we’re as sure as we can be.” Zara declared as she called up a graph on the monitor. “See how the ratio of verteron and chroniton particles to normal matter and energy is at first in direct proportion with each other?”

“Yeah.” Soren nodded his head, “So?”

“Now...” Talana instructed as she displayed a second graph side by side with the first, “Look at what happens when dark energy is introduced to the mix.”

“The space in the region become unstable.” Zara announced excitedly. “Then when you add in an infusion of chroniton energy...”

“Voile! You’ve just created a portal into another universe!” Simi exclaimed before letting out a sigh. “Of course you have to be sure that you’re opening a portal to the right universe.”

“So how do we do that?” Ashley asked, joining the conversation.

“That’s what we’re trying to figure out now.” Talana sighed. “We think we might have a lead thanks to our Romulan friends.”

“Their research teams on both New Romulus and Quadra Sigma IV have been most helpful.” Simi added, Talana quickly explaining.

“While the two portals share certain characteristics, there are a few important differences—mostly in how quantum particles and dark energy interact to create a certain resonance or tone...”

“Like a musical scale?” Soren interrupted.

“Exactly!” Zara exclaimed, “Every universe possesses its own resonance. So all we have to do is...”

“Find the right frequency!” Talana triumphantly cried out. “Once we figure that out, then the rest will be a cinch.”

“Yeah.” Ashley smirked ironically, “All we have to do is build or find some way to open up a portal...”

“Or...” Soren thoughtfully interrupted, “Find a portal that’s already open.”

“You think there might be one back at the Coronado system?” Ashley inquired.

Nodding his head, the Danish Fleet Captain replied, “I’m pretty sure there is. The trick is in finding it.”

“We might be able to figure that out.” Talana replied thoughtfully. “But it’ll have to wait until we get back to Drozana Station. The three of us need to consult with Dr. Treeya and a few colleagues first, but I think I might have an idea.”

“All right.” Soren replied with a nod of his head. “We should be back at the station in a day or so. I’ll inform the admirals about the news. Good work—both of you.”

### *Valley Forge—Security*

“I’m not telling you anything, skank.” The Cerberus spy sneered as he sat in his cell eyeing his interrogator standing on the other side of the force field. “So you can take that tough girl ‘tude and go fuck yourself. Nothing you can say or do can scare me into betraying humanity.”

“Skank?” Salome quipped, turning to Dixie. “Are all Cerberus males such boors?”

Chuckling, The Alabama-born engineer replied as she pointed at the 23<sup>rd</sup> century Terran Empire blue midriff top and short-short skirt the *Belladonna* interrogator was wearing, “Ah jest don’t think he’s seen a uniform like that before.”

“Poor baby.” Salome mock-pouted, “I bet you haven’t had any in years—if ever. Maybe I should just cut ‘em off since you’re not using them.” She smirked as she drew her dagger and, licking her lips, caressed the blade with her finger. “It’s been sooooo long since I cut a man’s balls off.”

“You’d need a magnifying glass to find ‘em, Sugar.” Dixie smirked as she turned her attention to the prisoner. “Sides he’s several different kinds of stupid. The Illusive Man doesn’t give a shit about humanity. If he did, he wouldn’t be playin’ around with all that bad tech or workin’ with those other aliens. He’s got his own plans and I’ve seen part of them. I tell ya, it ain’t pretty.”

“You think I’d listen to a damn thing you say, traitor!” The spy snorted derisively, “I ain’t telling you bitches a thing.”

“He’s lying.” Twesata interjected with an evil grin, “He’s so scared right now that he’s about to pee his pants.”

“Get outta my head you goddamn freak!” The anti-alien zealot snarled, lunging at the Betazoid telepath only to be restrained by a shock from contacting the confinement field. “Goddamn aliens and alien lovers.”

“Didn’t have to read your mind, asswipe.” Twesata sneered back, “I’m also an empath and you’re all mouth.”

“Way I see it...” Salome menacingly drawled, “You’re going to be sent to a penal colony. The only question is...which one?” With an evil smirk, she continued as Dixie activated a computer monitor showing images of a penal colony. “This is the New Zealand penal colony. We call it ‘Club Fed’ because it’s a comfy minimum security prison. Believe it or not, you can even leave the compound on weekends and holidays or other special occasions. Of course, you’re monitored and not permitted to leave Earth or enter certain areas, but still...if you want to, you can go to Paris to see the Eiffel Tower, or catch a show on Broadway, or eat dinner at Sisko’s—by the way, their shrimp gumbo is absolutely scrumptious—you should try it if you get the chance. There’s lots you can do. Plus you’ll live in a nice dorm room with an easy to get along with roommate. If you cooperate, I’ll see to it that this is where you go.”

“And if I don’t?”

“Well...” her smirk now replaced by a cold, evil grin, the expert interrogator replied, “Then we go to door number two.” The computer monitor displayed another, much less pleasant penal colony. “Rura Penthe. It’s a Klingon prison colony—you do know that the alien whose parts you took to graft on to that krogan was a Gorn, don’t you? And that the Gorn are allies of the Klingons? The Klingons told us that they will be more than happy to put you in with their Gorn prisoners. I figure you’ll last as long as dinner—where you’ll be the main course. As you probably know...” she chuckled menacingly, “the Gorn are reptilian. That means they prefer their meals live. So...what’s it gonna be? Club Fed or nummy treat for the Gorn?”

The images from the icy Klingon prison world playing on the monitor in front of him, the Cerberus agent gulped. “All right. I don’t know much—but I’ll tell you everything I know. Just don’t send me to that hell hole.”

Catching Twesata’s slight head nod out of the corner of her eye, Salome smirked, “Smart choice. Sing me a song—and it better be a pretty one. Don’t forget—there’s a telepath standing a couple of feet from me.”

The Cerberus spy sang.

After the spy had spilled all his secrets, Salome turned to the *Valley Forge*’s security chief, Lieutenant Commander Michaels who had been watching the entire interrogation. “I’ll write up a full report and submit it to you within the hour.”

Nodding his head, Jeff replied, “Sounds good. Thanks for your help—and for leaving the prisoner in one piece.”

“Yeah...well...” Salome answered back with a wicked grin on her face as she gestured with her head at the prisoner, now with a large wet spot on his jumpsuit, “You might want to get him a new set of clothes. Seems the poor dear has wet himself.” Turning her attention back to the prisoner, the Terran interrogator, her wicked grin now more an evil smirk, warned in a silky voice, “You had better be telling the truth because if I find out later that you lied—about anything...” she licked her lips, “nom...nom...nom.” Laughing, she turned back to Jeff, “Awww... look...the poor dear has soiled his diaper. Better get him a change before the stench overpowers everyone. Ta, darling!”



## Act 2 A little downtime

### Chapter Summary

The taskforce arrives at Drozana Station and the crews take the opportunity to stretch their legs.

#### *Drozana Station—Arrival*

“Is this place for real?” Donkey exclaimed as he and his fellow passengers and crew of the *Dawn Star*, their mouths agape in surprise and astonishment, emerged on to the concourse of the newly renovated station.

“Welcome to Belen’s Pleasure Resort, Emporium, and Starship Maintenance and Repair Station. Belen’s for short,” The Ferengi proprietor of the station boasted proudly, making a sweeping gesture with his arms. “We’ve got it all here. Five-star rooms and suites as reported by *Federation Travel*. A five-star restaurant that serves dishes from every world in the Federation, Klingon Empire, and Romulan Republic—even a few from the Gamma and Delta Quadrants. We’ve also got a casino with dabo, roulette, craps, tongo tables—not to mention several other games and diversions. Last but not least, a nightclub with plenty of dance space and shows regularly. As a matter of fact, we just booked the Maia-Threes and that new comedian...”

“You landed Rodney Rickles?” Nelia happily exclaimed as she explained to the newcomers. “He’s one of the best standup comedians in the Federation. Headlined in Vegas, Risa and Argellius. Hell, he’s even done shows in the Klingon Empire and New Romulus. How’d you manage to snag him, Bel? Last I heard, he was booked well into the next decade.”

A smirk on his face, the Ferengi businessman explained, “Made him an offer he couldn’t refuse—a thousand bars of GPL and the company of Bella and Tellis while he’s here. The profit I’ll get from his shows will at least triple my investment.” Turning back to his new guests, the resort owner proudly declared, “We also have holosuites and shops of every sort—you name it—we either have it or can get it for you—for the right price, of course.”

“Gotta admit...this place has Illium beat several ways to Sunday.” Captain Forrester said, letting out a low whistle as his eyes and ears took in all the commotion, “Maybe...if we can ever find a way to make commercial cross-universal travel possible...I can talk my company into setting up a line here.”

“Why not set up your own line?” The Ferengi businessman suggested.

“You know...” the merchant captain replied, his eyes lighting up at the prospect, “That’s not such a bad idea! Of course I’d need backers and capital to get started...but I know some people back home.”

“That’s the entrepreneurial spirit!” Belen praised, “Come see me later. I’m always looking for a competent being with drive and ambition. I might just have an opportunity for you. Rule Number Nine: Instinct plus opportunity equals profit. And I see a way where we both might be able to earn a lot of profit.”

“What about the children?” Orinia inquired, her gaze first falling on the dabo tables in the casino with their scantily clad women and then the astonished middle-school kids and teenagers. Having taken the now guardian-less children under her wing, she declared. “They obviously can’t be allowed to just run around unsupervised.”

“Don’t worry, Ma’am. There are schools and things to do for the younger ones.” Ashley grinned as a young woman, looking almost human except for the ridges on her nose, approached. “This is Ajun. I guess you could say she’s my adopted sister.”

“Yeah.” The Bajoran teen affirmed with a smile, “I adopted her after she saved me from Nausicaan slavers.” Her smile fading away, Ajun earnestly declared, “I owe Ash and the others my life.”

“We do too, child.” The still grieving turian woman replied, giving the alien girl a maternal smile as she spoke.

“You’ll be pleased to know that there’s a school for the kids and Ajun’s one of the students. She’s a senior now and has been accepted by Starfleet Academy.” Ashley stated before suggesting, “The school could always use teachers’ aides and volunteers.”

“I’m sorry, but I’ve got homework to do.” Ajun apologized, making her excuses. “But I also work parttime as a hostess and waitress at the restaurant, so let me know you’re coming and I’ll make sure you get good tables.”

Clearing his throat, Captain Magnussen spoke in a polite, but authoritative tone, “I apologize for interrupting your conversation, but we’ll need your presence Captain Forrester...Gunnery Chief Keys...at a conference being held at the Joint Operations Command center on the station at 0900 tomorrow. Lieutenant Williams can escort you,”

“Aye, Sir.” Ashley quickly acknowledged.

“Lieutenant Commander Terre? You and the rest of your team are also needed at the meeting.” Turning to the quarian woman standing close by, the Fleet Captain further requested, “Zara? Your presence would be helpful as well.”

“Of course, Captain.” Zara politely responded, “Anything to help.”

“Don’t worry. We’ll be there.” Nelia replied with an irreverent grin. “Whether we’re in uniform or not—that’s another matter.”

Trying to hide the grin threatening to appear on his face, Soren responded, "Just try to keep the senior admirals from dying of cardiac arrest, Ms. Terre."

"No promises!" Nelia bantered back as she waved goodbye. "See ya later!"

Ashley promised in a reassuring voice as the green Orion temptress walked away. "Don't worry, Soren. Shelana and I will make sure the more rowdy members of our team stay at least a little in the lines."

"All I'm asking, Ash." Soren quipped back. "I have to deliver my preliminary report to the admirals, but I'll be seeing you in a couple of hours for dinner, okay?"

"Count on it." Ashley grinned back, "Too bad it's crowded now and we're in uniform, otherwise I'd give you a kiss. But, I'm afraid you're going to have to wait."

"Don't worry." Soren chuckled, "I'll just put it on your tab."

### ***Boris and Ilya***

"Brings back memories of Quark's doesn't it, Ilya?" Boris grinned as he and his first officer entered the casino.

"Belen's done a lot with the place." Ilya agreed as she flashed a brief grin at a handsome dark haired Starfleet commander.

"See something you like, XO?" Boris joked, giving his Halenoi first officer a friendly nudge in the side with his elbow.

"Perhaps." Ilya drawled, "We'll see. What about you?"

"Ah. I'm just an old ex-Border Dog." Boris laughed, "I'm afraid those days have long passed me."

"You've still got it, Boris." Ilya bantered back, "You just haven't met the right someone yet." Speaking now in a lower, more solicitous tone, she spoke encouragingly, "I know you loved her years ago, but she's gone now and I have a feeling she would want you to love again."

"Maybe one day." Boris answered, letting out a breath of air. "For now though, I think I would like a drink. Join me at the bar?"

"Have you ever known me to turn down a drink?"

### ***Twesata and Rana***

"So..."

"So..."

"Did you mean what you said or was it just the heat of the moment?" Twesata asked as she snorted an Aurelian euphoriac.

Taking a snort of the euphoriac as well, Rana replied, placing her hand on that of her Betazoid lover's. "Did you mean what you said about feeling the same."

"You first." Twesata, feeling the effects of the drug, giggled.

"Yeah. I meant it." Rana confessed, also laughing thanks to the euphoriac. "...I'm over two hundred human years old and I've never felt this way about anyone else before. I know...I mean..." the lovely asari stammered, her cheeks turning a darker shade of blue, "I'm as surprised about it as you. If you...I...I'll...understand."

Smiling at her lover, Twesata leaned over and gave her a gentle kiss on her forehead, "I feel the same way about you, imzadi...and I'm just as surprised about it as you are. I've never felt...you know..." The beautiful Betazoid empath blushed, "about anyone else like this either."

"So..." Rana stumbled, "what do we do?"

"I don't know." Twesata replied with a warm smile, "I've never been in love with anyone before. Guess we just have to do what everyone else does."

"Take things as they come?" Rana chuckled nervously.

"Yeah." Twesata laughed, "So...imzadi...now that we've gotten that out of the way and we're both flying high, wanna fuck?"

Chuckling, Rana leaned over and gave her lover a passionate kiss, "What are we waiting for, siha?"

### ***Angie, Lexa, Luciano***

"So what does everyone want to do first?" Angie asked as she and her friends walked down the station promenade. "Shopping? holosuite? grab something to eat? Something else?"

"How's about we check out that Romulan restaurant over there...next to Grizo's knick-knack kiosk?" Luciano proposed.

"Sounds good." Lexa, a young and attractive Trill wearing a blue trimmed standard jacket with ensign's pips on the collars responded, "I've got a craving for Romulan mollusks right now. What do you think, Ang?"

"Works for me." The tall and lithe platinum-blond helmswoman replied, "Let's eat. After that...maybe we can do some shopping. I want to check out that Garak's we just passed, I'm looking for a new dress for my holosuite program."

""The cheerleading one?" Lucky quipped.

"Nope." Angie grinned mischievously, "This is for a new one."

"Let's go." Lexa prompted, "Maybe he'll have an outfit for me. You coming, Lucky?"

"Sure." The Italian operations officer laughed, "Why not?"



## Act 3 The Way Forward

### Chapter Summary

Information comes to light as a course of action is determined.

#### *Drozana Station—Joint Operations Command Center*

“I must state that I find the news I’ve read in these reports regarding cybernetic and genetic experimentation disturbing.” Admiral Kererek commented, a worried frown on his face. “Not to mention this apparent alliance between the Tal’Shiar, one or more mirror universes, and this Cerberus organization.”

“Added to that, we also cannot rule out a more powerful entity or entities controlling them.” Admiral Quinn, having just arrived from Starfleet Command on Earth, declared with a grunt. “The question is...who?”

Shaking her head, Zsuzsanna proposed, “Maybe it has to do with something we found in our universe and that Boris found in his.”

“Elaborate please, Captain.” Admiral Tuvok requested.

The Hungarian starship captain told her story with rare gravity. “The *Belladonna* was answering a distress call from an Imperial colony and science outpost on Cyrus IV in what we call the Elkoli Sector. At first, we thought it might have been a raid from either the Klingons or Romulans or maybe pirates, but when we arrived on the scene...” Zsa-Zsa’s voice now took on a rare awed tone, “we’d discovered that the colony and outpost had disappeared.”

“You mean it was destroyed.” General Martok grunted.

“No.” The normally unflappable captain shook her head. “I mean disappeared. Poof—all gone—as if it never was there to begin with.”

“What were your people investigating, Zsa-Zsa?” Soren prompted encouragingly.

“We found ruins.” The strawberry blonde Hungarian replied, “Over three billion years old.”

“We found the same thing on Fregan III in our universe.” Captain Rodenko added, “A young planetologist who had just joined the crew and was on her first away mission found glyphs in the ruins. The same ones our Admiral Bateson found on a system called Eleuthra IV.”

“Here is where the story gets complicated.” Zsa-Zsa warned.

“Da.” Boris affirmed, “This will take a lot of explaining with much of it going over both our heads.”

“We have the time.” Admiral Quinn responded with a wry grin. “Go ahead.”

“All right.” Zsa-Zsa cheekily replied, “But don’t say we didn’t warn you, dahlings.”

“Fascinating.” Tuvok observed. After the two captains had finished their stories “That would place those ruins as even older than the Preservers in our universe.”

“It would make them one of the first—if not the first—form of sapient life in Captain Rozsa’s universe.” Captain Hobson noted.

“Not to mention existing in several different universes.” Franklin Drake pointed out, “That would imply that this civilization—if it is still existing—is very powerful and advanced.”

“The key phrase here.” Tal’Mera interjected is, “Is ‘if it is still existing’. One or more other races could easily have discovered or taken their technology and are now using it for their own purposes.”

“Were any ruins of this sort ever discovered in your universe, Dr. Treeya?” Soren asked the asari archaeologist.

“No..” Dr. Treeya promptly responded, with a shake of her head. “But that doesn’t mean they don’t exist. Most of the exploration, colonization, and travel that went on in my universe was tied into the relay network. There might well be ruins. It’s just that we haven’t found them yet.”

“Logical.” Tuvok nodded. “Anything else Captain Rosza? Captain Rodenko?”

“*Igen. Da.*” Both captains replied in unison as they recounted the story of their joint investigation of the strange anomaly they had discovered.

Zsa-Zsa continued telling her story to a rapt audience with Boris chiming in at key points. “We found something and decided to investigate...”

After they had finished their tale, Ashley remarked, drawing amused smiles from both captains. “So you poked the bear?”

“*Igen, Lieutenant.*” Zsa-Zsa responded first. “It was very foolish of us. What we saw...”

Boris then spoke, his gravely voice taking a tone of simmering anger, “We were being put through a maze—like mice. Never knowing when

whoever it was who had set this thing up would pull a sudden surprise on us.”

“What kind of surprises?” Soren inquired.

“All different kinds.” Zsa-Zsa replied. “They all involved solving puzzles of one sort or another with one thing in common—they are all very dangerous.”

Boris confirmed, “We both took casualties.”

“*Igen.*” Zsa-Zsa nodded. “I lost two of my crew and Boris lost two also. “We saw other things too.” Zsa-Zsa said, speaking softly. “Things that someone very dear to Eliza and I and who also was a friend of Captain Rodenko's told us about.”

“Da.” Boris sighing, grabbed Zsa-Zsa's hand in his in a supportive gesture. “Admiral Bateson...Morgan...sent me and my ship on the trail as well.” Captain Rodenko declared, further elaborating, “Morgan's shuttle was overdue at DS-11. Later on, we received a subspace message from him telling us that he and another man had taken a shuttle to investigate reports of portals opening and closing near Fregan III where similar ruins were found. We discovered later that he went through one of the portals...”

“And came out of it in our universe.” Zsa-Zsa smoothly picked up the narrative, “As you're all aware, wormholes and portals can carry you not just to different universes and dimensions, but also to different times. Time is very slippery. *Apa* arrived in our universe while Eliza and I were just entering our teens.”

“He took us under his wing.” Eliza stated, drawing a warm smile from Boris and a gentle nod of the head from her lover granting permission for her to reveal this very personal side of the hedonistic captain. “Zsa-Zsa never knew her father—he deserted her and his wife when she was still just a baby.”

“Asshole dead beat dad.” Ashley muttered under her breath as she turned her gaze to the Hungarian captain, giving her a warm supportive smile.

“And my father died when I was very young.” Eliza continued, “Accident at work. He was a laborer. We didn't know each other at the time...”

“*Igen.*” Zsa-Zsa affirmed, “I was living in a Budapest slum with my mother.”

“And I was living in a shack on St. Marie in the West Indies.” Eliza declared, “We were both in and out of trouble though. Admiral Bateson rescued us.”

“He gave a damn about us.” Zsa-Zsa recalled with a sigh, “But he wasn't a damned aristo who was looking for something in return. He helped us...listened to us...brought us together eventually...he's the reason we're with each other now.”

“But we had to earn our way.” Eliza proudly stated, “We busted our asses in school and while he gave us a recommendation to the Academy, we had to pass the exams...”

“And with much higher marks than the aristo and merchant house applicants.” Zsa-Zsa also declared, her voice reflecting her pride in their accomplishment. Letting out a mournful sigh, she brushed away a tear. “He was the *apa* Eliza and I never had. There are portals opening and closing in our universe as well. Colonies like Cyrus IV gone dark. Old ruins on our versions of your worlds like Eleuthra IV. He sent us to investigate and that's when we met Boris.”

“Da.” Captain Rodenko confirmed, “We both arrived at an anomaly and after a brief misunderstanding...”

“We almost fired on each other, *kis apam.*” Zsa-Zsa laughed. Her laughter fading quickly, the Hungarian captain picked up the narrative, “We found a Vulcan and a Klingon—from, as it turned out, Boris's universe—on lab tables.”

“Da.” Boris again confirmed Zsa-Zsa's account, elaborating further on Admiral Bateson's long and complicated history. “His logs and the logs of our *USS Lexington* under the command of Commodore Wesley, point to the same thing.”

“*Igen.*” Zsa-Zsa affirmed, “We found two bodies. One...the Klingon...was dissected...”

“Filthy pet'aQs.” Martok growled.

“Like Orinia's husband.” Ashley noted with a frown.

“*Igen.*” Zsa-Zsa affirmed, “The exact same thing. But that's not all. We heard a voice in our minds. One that spoke to us. Warned us of our final test.”

“It was the Vulcan lying on the slab.” Ilya interjected, “His brain had been removed from his body and suspended in some sort of liquid. Tubes connected it to...something.”

“We were shown visions—different places...people and beings we've never seen before.” Zsa-Zsa's gaze then fell on Ashley and each of the others in the room, “You were one of those people Ashley Williams...so were all of you. There were others we know and those we don't. Subcommander Avesti...V'lane...was one of those people.”

Donkey announced. “She's in our universe.”

“Gunnery Chief Keys is correct.” Captain Forrester declared to an astonished audience, “We have news vids of her and members of her crew on our ship.”

“May we see them?” Admiral Kererek requested. “The mystery of what happened to the *Gallena* has been in my mind for the last couple of

years. I and Proconsul D'Tan had thought her lost. But to discover that our sister is still alive..."

Inclining his head at the admiral, Captain Forrester replied, "You're more than welcome to them, Sir."

"Thank you." The Romulan admiral responded with a smile as he rose to his feet. "As it will take some time to prepare everything, I would suggest that we adjourn for now as we are approaching the noon hour. We will reconvene in two hours. Dismissed."

### *A few hours later*

As he watched the video with the others, a smile appeared on Commander Kaval's face, "It is good to see V'lana again. And it is also welcome news that the *Gallena* and her crew have survived."

"It looks like she has been very busy." Drake noted as he and his colleagues viewed the vid. Gazing at one of the figures on the dais more closely, the spymaster inquired, "So...that's a salarian?"

"Yeah." Ashley affirmed with a scowl on her face, "That's Valern, one of the Councilors sitting on the Citadel Council. The turian's name is Sparatus and the asari, Tevos. And is that...Not it can't be!" A big smile appeared on the former marine's face as she exclaimed in glee, "Yes...it is! That's Captain Anderson!"

"It's Councilor Anderson now. He got promoted." Donkey declared with a barely disguised surly quality in his voice.

"I know." Ashley responded, "I've been brought up to speed on most of what happened since Rana and I went down that rabbit hole. It's just seeing his face again after all this time." Her smile broadened as she recognized the others in the video. "And there's Kaiden—Lieutenant Alenko..."

"He got promoted too." Donkey interjected, "He's a Staff Commander now."

"Good." Ashley smiled, "He deserves it." Recognizing a couple of other familiar faces, the former Alliance marine's smile grew wider, "And that's Liara—Doctor Liara T'Soni—talking to that Starfleet officer."

The faintest traces of a smile appearing on Captain Hobson's face, the Iceman commented with a note of fondness in his patrician voice, "Lieutenant Commander Oudekirk."

"It's good to see that Cilla's okay." Commander Rysyl interjected.

Chris agreed with a nod of his head. "She has been missed. Besides being an outstanding second officer, she is a most excellent bridge player."

"And there's Tali." Ashley exclaimed with glee, at once recognizing the quarian woman standing next to a Romulan male.

"I heard stories about her trial." Zara remarked in a forlorn voice, "That the admirals set her up as a scapegoat. *Bosh'tets!*"

As the vids continued to play, Captain Hobson commented approvingly at Cilla's performance during her interview. "Ms. Oudekirk did very well representing the Federation without revealing any compromising information."

"As did Subcommander Avesti." Admiral Kererek commented.

An affectionate grin on her face, Ashley remarked, "It's good to see Kaidan and hear his voice again after all this time."

"Subcommander Avesti has done an excellent job playing the diplomatic game." Commander Tal'Mera astutely noted. "The establishment of informal legations will help smooth the eventual opening of full diplomatic relations and military cooperation."

"A Klingon presence will be required." General Martok declared warning, "This is not open to negotiation."

"Of course, General." Admiral Quinn immediately conceded, "Please be assured we do not want to do anything to endanger the peace."

"Good." Martok grunted. "I think Worf will be most interested in representing the Empire's interests. I shall approach him and the Council about it."

Returning to the matter at hand, Captain Hobson inquired, "This Citadel Council is the chief government authority in your universe, I take it?"

"Yes...and no, Sir." Ashley replied as she explained the functions of the Council in greater detail. "The Council is composed of representatives of the top three races in Citadel Space—asari, turian, and salarian—with humans just recently being admitted as full members."

Donkey affirmed, "Thanks to Commander Shepard and the sacrifice of a lot of good men and women who gave up their lives stopping Sovereign, they finally gave us a seat."

"So there's a tier system for member and affiliated worlds." Admiral Tuvok observed as Soren pointed out sagely.

"No different than the Federation in that regard. We have full member worlds such as Earth and Vulcan, along with affiliate members and non-affiliated colonies and protectorates."

"Where we differ is in the membership criteria." Ashley explained, her use of the pronoun 'we' drawing attention from Donkey and Forrester both. "From what I've learned from my Academy classes and talking with people, full Federation membership is open to any world that meets the basic requirements and those requirements are fully spelled out. While the party line in Citadel space is that a species has to be able to

materially and substantially contribute to the galaxy ..." the former Alliance marine drew air quotes as she spoke, a slight sarcastic edge creeping in her voice, "In reality, it's determined by whether the Council wants you to join their exclusive club or not."

"I detect a note of bitterness in your voice, Lieutenant." Tuvok commented, "Would you care to elaborate?"

"I'm sorry, Admiral." Ashley apologized, her face reddening in embarrassment, "When I first saw the Council, I was just a grunt under Commander Shepard's command. If it weren't for her and Lieutenant Alenko, I'd be dead—one of the casualties on Eden Prime. I owe them my life and I saw firsthand how the Council treated Shepard while she was putting everything on the line to save their sorry asses..." her face reddening even more, she again apologized, "I'm...I'm sorry, Sirs. That last comment was out of line."

Chuckling softly, Zsa-Zsa wryly interjected, "Nothing to be sorry for, dahling. You and your Commander Shepard were far more patient with those *seggfej* than I would have been."

"The volus have had an embassy on the Citadel as long as the asari and salarians." Zara interjected, "They've had a presence there for nearly 2,500 human years and played a major role in establishing our economic system, but every time they petition for a seat on the Council, they are rejected. My people..." Zara's voice trailed as it took on a more defiant and mournful edge, "lost their seat on the Council because of the Morning War."

"You did create the geth." Donkey pointed out, again with a barely disguised snarl.

"Over four hundred years ago!" Zara angrily retorted, "I think the loss of our homeworld and colonies and permanent exile has been more than ample repayment for my ancestors' mistake!"

Intervening quickly in an effort to head off a confrontation, Ashley shifted the focus away from the quarians and geth. "The krogans lost their seat when they rebelled and the batarians when they refused to give up slavery."

"Fucking batarians." Donkey growled, "I was involved in the cleanup after they hit one of our colonies. You don't want to know what they do to their slaves."

Ashley added, "I was with Shepard when we busted up a batarian slave ring. It wasn't very pretty."

"Thank you for your insights. They will prove most helpful in the coming days and weeks." Admiral Quinn remarked, with a slight incline of his head as he shifted the topic of discussion. "Now, I believe Lieutenant Commanders Zha'Thara, Simi, and Zara have some important news for us."

"We do." The Andorian science officer responded as she activated the computer monitor. "We think we might have found a way to open up a portal into the other universe. With the help of Lieutenants Jenkins and Johnson as well as Edi, we discovered that the unusual levels of chroniton and verteron radiation were the products of subspace intrusions. Lieutenant Jenkins' interrogation of a Cerberus spy gave us an important clue—one easy to overlook."

"The mistake we made was that the portal would be a direct connection." Simi interjected, "But, after going over Salome's report, Candy and Talana discovered that a nexus point existed in subspace that controlled access not only to the universe we came from, but also other universes."

"Is there a way to open the subspace portal? And if so...how long will it take to do so?" General Martok queried.

"Yes. We can open a portal." Talana enthusiastically responded. "Thankfully, the base we took is still more or less intact. It should be possible to restore it to operational order and use it to open up a permanent gateway."

"Before we do so, I would suggest that we establish a joint presence in the system to discourage potential intrusions from our enemies." Admiral Kererek advised.

Nodding his head, Admiral Quinn responded. "Agreed. Due to its proximity, Drozana Station will serve as a staging and command and control point for our new alliance—assuming we can come to terms with the station owner." The admiral concluded, raising an eyebrow as his gaze turned to the sole Ferengi in attendance.

"I think we can come to an accommodation. We have plenty of extra space on the station that I am willing to lease—in exchange for a fair profit." Belen replied with a sly grin, "Of course, I would be willing to cut you an even bigger discount if you would agree to assist in moving the station to the Coronado System."

"And why would we want to do that, Ferengi?" Martock demanded with a sneer of contempt.

"Because it would benefit all of us." Belen countered. "You're going to need a station at the portal entrance no matter what. Now, you can go through the time, trouble, and expense of building a station from scratch or you can take advantage of an already existing station that will meet all your needs."

"Of course you stand to make a handsome profit as well." Admiral Quinn remarked, "You'll catch all the traffic going to and from the portal."

"Naturally." Belen smiled back, "The 199th Rule of Acquisition: Location...Location...Location." His expression now a poker face, the Ferengi fixer went into full haggling mode, "We all win here. I get a good location where I will make lots of latinum. You get an already built station that is neutral territory. We can begin negotiations whenever you're ready."

"Our next item." Admiral Quinn cleared his throat. "Effective immediately and with the full agreement of the Romulan Republic and Klingon Empire, the temporary task group led by Fleet Captain Magnussen will now be a permanent formation formally known as the Joint Universal Task Force. Other ships from all our governments as well as allied powers will be joining this task force. As this is a long-term multi-ship

command and Fleet Captain has traditionally been considered a temporary rank, Starfleet Command has decided to restore the rank of Commodore. It is my pleasure to announce that Fleet Captain Soren Magnussen, effective immediately, is promoted to the rank of Commodore and designated Commanding Officer of the Joint Universal Task Force.” Smiling at the nonplussed newly promoted man, the Trill Admiral announced, “Congratulations, Commodore Magnussen.” A sly grin crossing his face, the admiral added, “Better begin training up a captain to replace you, Commodore. It won’t be long until you get promoted to admiral.”

Whispering in a low voice to her man, Ashley offered her congratulations, “You deserve it.”

“I just hope I don’t foul it up.” Soren whispered back.

“You won’t.”

“One other piece of business before we conclude the meeting.” Admiral Quinn declared as he turned his attention to Nelia and the rest of the *Spoiled Princess* crew. “Due to recent events—to a large extent shaped by you and your team, Captain Terre, we have had to make some adjustments to your mission.”

“What sort of ‘adjustments’?” Nelia inquired, raising her eyebrow in suspicion.

“As the *Spoiled Princess* will be part of the new joint taskforce, it will need to be registered as an official Starfleet vessel...”

“Oh no!” The roguish Orion objected, “I’m not about to allow some tight assed Starfleet admiral to come on my ship and make us wear uniforms with all the ‘Yes, Sir...No, Sir...Yes, Ma’am...No, Ma’am shit that comes with it. And what’s this ‘Captain’ shit?”

“Rest easy, Captain.” The Trill admiral responded placatingly. “Starfleet will continue to honor the agreement the triad made with you—with just a few minor modifications. You are most useful for covert operations and stealth insertions and we intend for you to remain in that role. The only difference is that from now on you’ll be acting with the official sanction of the Joint Command and that your ship will carry a U.S.S. prefix. As for the promotion...” Quinn grinned, “It is customary for the commanding officer of a raider class vessel such as the *Spoiled Princess* to hold captain’s rank.”

“So...I’m officially the captain?” Nelia inquired with a smirk, the admiral confirming with a nod of his head. “That means I can set uniform policy—right?”

Gritting his teeth, Quinn responded, “Yes.”

“Good.” The roguish Orion leered, “As captain of the *Spoiled Princess*, I declare that there is no uniform policy on my ship.”

“That is your right as captain. But we do ask that you exercise a measure of discretion on certain occasions.” The Trill admiral reluctantly affirmed before turning his attention to the rest of the raider’s crew. “Your promotion is not the only one, Captain Terre. Lieutenants Shelana and Glex—effective immediately, you are promoted to the rank of lieutenant commander. Brevet Lieutenant Thanoptis. Your rank has been officially confirmed by Starfleet along with a brevet promotion to lieutenant commander. Lieutenant Ashley Williams your commission has also been officially confirmed and you are now commissioned as a brevet lieutenant commander.” His lips turning up in a grin, Quinn exclaimed, “Congratulations. Now...if there is no further business, this conference is concluded. We all have our duties. Dismissed.”

Ashley shook her head in sadness and anger as her former friend walked away muttering curses in a barely audible voice. Gritting her teeth, she murmured in response, “Asshole.”

“Ignore Jackass.” Shelana remarked as she placed a hand on her best friend’s shoulder. “You earned this.”

“You did too.” Ashley, her mood improved by her Andorian comrade’s encouraging words, responded, a smile appearing on her face.

“We all do.” Twesata said as she and Rana joined the little group.

“So...” Shelana joked, “What would that gunnery chief...you know the one you’re always talking about who was your instructor during basic training? What do you think he’d have said?”

“Gunny Ellison?” Ashley smirked. “He’d tell me that being an officer is no excuse for goldbricking.” Her laughter fading, a sad smile crossed her face, “I wish Dad and the Skipper could have been here to see this.”

“They see it, *min kaerlighed*.” Soren whispered back as he joined the conversation.

“Sun set and evening star...And one clear call for me.” Ashley smiled.

## Act 4 Beginnings and Endings

### Chapter Summary

New chapters are turned in relationships as the stage is set for the meeting of two universes

#### *About a week later—Drozana Station Lounge, Nightclub, and Casino*

“Damn! I can't believe this place.” Donkey exclaimed as the couple entered the station's adult entertainment section with Donna beside him, followed closely behind by Captain Forrester.

“Nos Astra's got nothing on this.” Donna chuckled as she gazed at the gamblers gathered around the dabo tables and seated at all sorts of gaming tables, all being waited on by scantily clad waiters and waitresses of all races, shapes, colors, and sizes.

“What'll you have?” Belen called out as he waved his customers to the bar. “We've got everything: whiskey, beer, Trillian aurea, Betazoid tulaberry wine, Klingon bloodwine, Andorian and Romulan ales, Terranovan rum...you name it...odds are we have it!”

“Welcome to the party!” Nelia, wearing practically nothing other than a skimpy gold filigreed top and loincloth that left little to the imagination, waved at the newcomers while studiously ignoring Donkey, “Come on over and take a load off.”

“Who's the singer?” Captain Forrester asked, gesturing at a Vulcan woman performing in front of a swing band.

“Oh!” Nelia exclaimed, “That's T'Pren—weapons officer on the *Aeolia*. She likes performing here whenever her ship is in port. Doesn't she have a great voice?”

“I'll say.” Donna quickly agreed and then curiously inquired. “That song sounds like old swing tune, but there's something else there...more of a lyrical beat...what is it?”

“I asked T'Pren about that a few months ago.” The Orion woman recalled as she sipped her drink. “She said that it was a form of New Orleans blues mixed in with some Deltan tones and melodies.”

“Hmph.” Donkey, still surly over Ashley, snorted derisively, “It's not right. Taking our music and mixing it in with a bunch of alien stuff.”

“Well...I like it.” Donna declared, glaring at the man sitting next to her before her gaze fell on the amber-colored liquid the roguish Orion was sipping from a crystal champagne flute before asking, “What's that you're drinking?”

“Antarean sunrise, Sweetie.” Nelia smiled as she gestured at her Ferengi friend, “Belen, love? Can you fetch an antarean sunrise for the lady here?”

“Of course.” Belen grinned, quickly mixing the drink.

Watching with rapt fascination as the bartender expertly made his purser's drink, Captain Forrester exclaimed, “He's good.”

“What are your people called again?” Donna inquired as the bartender handed the drink her.

“I'm a Ferengi.” Belen proudly declared, “The smartest traders, merchants, businessmen and financial wizards in this universe.”

“Also the most modest.” Shelana joked as she joined the conversation, also giving Donkey the cold shoulder. “You know what I want, Bel.”

“One Andorian ale coming up.” The bartender grinned as he handed his Andorian shipmate and friend a drink.

“Belen's also the owner of this station.” Nelia chimed in as her friend refilled her drink, directing her remarks to Donna while still ignoring the man seated by the human woman.

“And everything in it.” The Ferengi bartender proudly declared, “When I bought this station several years ago, it was a rundown pile of mugatu shit overrun by pirates and mercenaries. So...I hired mercenaries of my own to run the squatters out. It's been a lot of work and cost me a lot of latinum.” Belen sighed as he gazed first at the casino with its gamblers and then the nightclub where several people, including the Commodore and Ashley, were on the dance floor enjoying themselves, “But it was worth it.”

“Where's Twes and Rana?” Nelia inquired with a crooked grin.

“Take three guesses.” Shelana quipped as she quaffed down her ale. “Dixie and Edi are hanging out with Treasure and the Amigas. “I believe they're all on the dance floor.” Chuckling, she remarked as she gestured at the girl pack dancing with each other and several males. Even the mobile AI was dancing, albeit awkwardly, to the music, “Dix even got Edi on the floor.”

Motioning with his head at a blonde woman wearing a fringed minidress dancing frenetically, Captain Forrester exclaimed, “Who is that?”

“That's Candy. Lieutenant Candy Johnson.” Shelana laughed, “She's our perpetual motion machine.”

“I can see that.” Forrester remarked with a laugh

“Does she have an off switch?” Donna giggled before taking another drink.

“Not when she’s on the dance floor.” Nelia chuckled, “Hell...I’ve seen her outdance both Zsa-Zsa and Eliza and those two love to dance almost as much as they like to...” hearing a familiar thickly accented voice, the roguish Orion smirked, “Speaking of whom...”

“Hello, dahlings!”

Donkey’s eyes practically bulged as the Hungarian captain entered along with her executive officer, both wearing matching outfits. “They call themselves officers?” The Alliance gunnery sergeant grumbled self-righteously as he saw what the two women were wearing: Zsa-Zsa outfitted with a black leather top and tight leather pants with a crystal navel ring and diamond choker, and Eliza, a white lace top and pants showing plenty of skin, also with navel ring and choker.

"Won't you give it a rest?" Donna whispered to her erstwhile date, "You're behaving like an asshole."

“Nelia, *dragam!*” Zsa-Zsa exclaimed, “Give us a kiss, please, dahlings.”

“Of course.” The lovely Orion responded as she kissed both women on the lips. “Enjoying yourselves?”

“*Igen.*” The strawberry-blond captain replied as she took a seat and a glass of champagne while Eliza stretched out luxuriously at her feet almost as a cat would. “We just got back from trying a new holosuite program. It was wonderfully decadent—wasn’t it Eliza, *dragam?*”

“Mmmm...Hmmm...” The dark haired, olive skinned executive officer purred as she stroked her mistress’s leg. “Simply marvelous. You should try it Nelia, love.”

“I think I will.” The hedonistic Orion responded, “So...what time’s the party?”

“In a couple of hours, dahlings.” Giving both Donkey and Donna appraising looks, the attractive captain remarked first to the woman and then to the man sitting next to her, her voice instantly changing from flirtatious to cold as she switched her remarks from Donna and then to Donkey. “You’re invited. You’re not.”

"I can take a hint." Donkey growled as he got up off his stool. Turning to his date he asked, "You staying or going?"

"Staying." Donna snapped back.

Sneering as the Alliance marine walked away, Zsa-Zsa muttered under her breath, but loud enough for everyone to hear, “*seggfej.*”

“Did someone get an invite to Zsa-Zsa’s party?” Ashley quipped as she and Soren joined the others at the bar.

“Yeah.” Donna replied with a forced smile, “At first I wasn’t planning on going, but changed my mind.”

“The *pendejo* she was with was being an asshole.” Eliza explained, rolling her eyes.

Letting out a breath of air, Ashley responded with a dejected sigh, “He’s had a lot thrown at him. He’s not taking it very well.”

“Not your fault, Ash.” Salome consoled, “He’s had that attitude ever since he found out you took a commission in Starfleet.”

Nodding her head, Ashley agreed, “Yeah. I have a feeling that’s going to be the reaction of a lot of the people I used to know.”

“That’s his and their problem, Ashley.” Soren declared supportively, “Not yours.”

“Better listen to that man of yours.” Nelia advised with a wink, “He’s talking sense.”

“You’re right.” Ashley grinned, “I don’t owe him or anyone else any explanations.”

“Exactly.” Soren agreed, giving his companion a warm smile. “You’ve made a life for yourself here.”

“So...” Donna asked, changing the subject, “Are the two of you going to the party, Ash?”

“We’re making an appearance, but we’re leaving before things get rowdy. So...how are the rest of your people doing? I know it must be rough on the kids and Orinia especially—what with the kids’ guardians among the missing and what she’s been through—it has to be especially tough on them”

“You’re right.” Captain Forrester sighed as he addressed his next remarks to Soren, “I am thankful, Commodore, that you and the other captains have made your counselors available to us. They’ve been most helpful. As for the kids...” the freighter captain let out a breath of relief, “they’re beginning to adjust.”

“Children are resilient.” Ashley agreed.

Forrester nodded in reply, “The younger ones seem to be adapting to things much better than the older ones though.”

“That makes sense.” Soren observed. “While there are similarities in our universes, there are many important differences. It must be difficult on them at times.”

“It took me some time to get used to the differences too.” Ashley admitted with a rueful grin. Her expression now pensive, she related, “I had to rethink a lot of stuff.”

“You were already well on your way when we met.” Shelana pointed out supportively. “It didn’t take you too long.”

“Thanks to Shepard and the others on the *Normandy*.” Ashley declared, heaving a sigh, “Really...I think the big thing was that I was finally able to put away the ‘Williams Curse’ once and for all. It’s like I’ve gotten a fresh start here. No baggage to hold me down. People here accept me for who I am. For the first time in a long time...maybe for the first time ever...I’m doing what I want to do and living my life the way I want to live it. I like it.”

Captain Forrester asked Ashley, “So...how difficult was it for you to pick up on all the changes between our universe and this one?”

Giving the freighter captain a warm smile, Ashley replied, “Like I was saying, it was a little difficult at first. Shelana and Soren can tell you stories about how hard I struggled to get through my Federation history courses—and I used to get all ‘A’s in history in school! I went through many a cup of coffee prepping for Captain Soval’s exams both when I was doing my residency at the Academy and then later on with the extension courses.”

“Soval’s a tough Vulcan bastard.” Shelana agreed, “I had him when I went to the Academy too.” Giving her teammate a friendly punch in the arm, the Andorian woman proudly declared, “Ash aced every exam.”

“I had lots of help.” Ashley modestly replied before inquiring, “What about Orinia? I know it hasn’t been easy for her—losing her husband that way...finding herself in a new universe. Turian culture can be rigid at times. How is she doing?”

“She’s still dealing with her grief.” Forrester answered, “But since she volunteered to help at the school, she’s gotten better. Working with the kids is keeping her mind occupied and off of what happened to her husband.”

“That’s good to hear.” Soren replied as the dark-haired woman next to him prompted him with a gentle nudge, “We have to go now, but take care and if you need anything...”

“Thank you, Commodore.” Captain Forrester grinned as he and the Danish flag officer shook hands, “For everything.”

As the pair walked away, Ashley whispered in her beau’s ear, “How’s about a walk in the holosuite after we leave Zsa-Zsa’s party?”

“The Janaran Falls on Betazed?” Soren suggested as Ashley took his arm.

“Love to.”

### ***Ashley and Soren***

“This is beautiful.” Ashley sighed as the pair sat down at a table on the patio of an outdoor café with a splendid view of the Janaran Falls. “I like this program.” She smiled as she sipped her coffee.

“Commander Rysyl from the *Aeolia* recommended it.” Soren replied as he took his companion’s hand in his. “She said she got it from Admiral Shelby. Liz’s husband, Admiral Mackenzie Calhoun, proposed to her at the Falls when they were vacationing on Betazed.”

“Hmmm...nice place for a proposal.” Chuckling, Ashley playfully nudged her date, “Don’t worry...I don’t think either of us are ready for that step...yet. But maybe...” she allowed her thought to linger for a moment, “one day...but not for a while yet. Too much going on right now anyway.”

“You’re right, as always, *min kaerlighed*.” The handsome Dane chuckled, eliciting an amused response from his companion.

“I’m always right.” Growing serious again, the newly promoted lieutenant commander asked, “So how long do you think before...”

“Before we open a portal?” Soren completed his companion’s thought as she nodded, “Not long. Not with the people we have working on it. So what do you plan on doing when we do open that portal.”

“Well...” Ashley grinned, “First thing is introduce you to my old friends from the *Normandy*. Then after that...” a rakish grin appeared on her face, “Take you to see my mother and sisters. Don’t worry...” she smiled warmly as she took her companion’s hand in hers, “I’m not going anywhere. Like I told Donkey, my home is here now...in Starfleet. And...hopefully...one day...with you.”

“I would very much like you to stay here...with me.” Soren replied in a soft voice as the woman beside him leaned over and gave him a kiss.

“Stay with me tonight.” Ashley entreated. Seeing the look of both surprise and anticipation on her lover’s face, she chuckled, “Come on, lover boy.”

### ***Mass Effect Universe—SSV Orizaba under Captain Hanna Shepard***

“Entering Farinata System.” Commander Ferguson, the *Onizuka*’s executive officer, reported to his commanding officer.

“Any traces of the *Dawn Star*?” Captain Hanna Shepard inquired as she gazed at the display on her monitors.

“No sign of wreckage or debris.” The sensor officer reported.

“What do you think, Captain?” Ferguson queried, “Pirates? Cerberus?”

“Either are good suspects.” Captain Shepard replied before calling out to the special sensor technician on loan from the *Gallena*.

“Sublieutenant Rekar? Are you picking up any of those unusual particles we were told to look for?”



“Picking up unusually high concentrations of verteron and chroniton radiation.” The Romulan officer responded, “It matches similar readings we’ve taken from Elachi portals in our universe. I’m also picking up faint traces of a warp trail.” Shaking his head, the sublieutenant ruefully reported, “I can’t pinpoint a destination. The trail’s too cold.”

“Do you think these...Elachi...attacked the ship?” Ferguson inquired with a worried look.

Nodding her head, the experienced captain responded, “I’d say that’s a good guess. Get me Admirals Hackett, Anderson, and Mikhailovich on the QEC, then I want a thorough scan done of this system.”

“You think something’s here?”

“I think so.” Hannah replied, “Get those scans started and report to me the moment you find something—I don’t care how little it might appear to be—it could be crucial. I’ll most likely still be on the comm with the admirals.” Giving her XO a slight grin, the Alliance captain declared, “I think we might have found our door.”

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