Star Trek: Dark Horizon - Worlds Collide Part 1

by immortalkaos80

Summary

Episode 2

Part 1 of a 2 part 'episode'.

Guilt ridden and broken after the events in the Vendor System and burdened under the weight of precognitive telepathy she doesn’t want, Captain Winchester has fallen apart. Leaving Commander Singer in command and her crew desperately worried about their captain while the senior officers deal with the effects the Undine has wrought on their subconscious minds. But when the Devil’s Trap encounters a Romulan ship equipped with weapons capable of destruction on a scale the Federation has never even dreamed of Erin must retake her place in the Captain’s chair or watch not one but two universes be annihilated.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes.
Chapter 1

Stardate: 88327.3 (April 30, 2411)

“It wasn’t your fault!” Commander Dean Singer said again in exasperation.

His captain, Erin Winchester, her bobbed golden blonde hair uncombed and her eyes tortured, rounded on him. “You can’t possibly believe that!”

She was pacing back and forth in the living area of her quarters, to which she had been confined by Doctor’s orders for close to a week except for time allowed for a specifically dictated exercise regimen meant to return her to top form. The rest of that week had been spent in sick bay convalescing from numerous medical problems including: A heart attack which had damaged her heart. Deep puncture wounds in her left shoulder from an Undine attack that had subsequently infected her with Undine cells which had then proceeded to consume her from the inside out. An unknown issue that had caused her brain to secrete massive amounts of adrenaline, norepinephrine and cortisol that had led to the aforementioned heart attack complicated by an unexplainable increase in synaptic firing in the subcortex and hyper-arousal of the memory and executive function centers of her brain. All of which had been corrected by the Devil’s Trap’s doctor, Castiel Novak.
At least she was making sense this time. Something Cass was giving her for her medical problems had the dubious side effect of turning her mental capacity to that of a ten year old when she was under its influence. It must be wearing off, which meant Cass would be by soon to re-administer it and to yell at him if he found out that he and Erin were arguing again.

Dean still wasn’t sure what had caused the latter medical problem but then he didn’t pretend to be a doctor. He was just glad it was taken care of and right now he had more important things to worry about, like the effects on his Captain of the fallout of the ill fated mission that had led to her injuries.

The mission had been a ruse from start to finish, a plot by an Undine infiltrator posing as a highly regarded Starfleet Admiral to destroy research the Romulan Star Empire and the Tal Shiar had been doing to find a way to identify Undine spies and subsequently take the place of their head researcher on the subject, Commander Selok. Conducted under Code 47 and Article 14 protocols the mission had never officially happened but that did nothing for the five thousand Romulans that had been killed during it, including the real Commander Selok.

“Of course I believe it!” Dean shouted back. He had come here in his capacity as Erin’s best friend not as her First Officer and as every visit he’d made in the last week had, it had devolved into an argument he couldn’t win no matter how hard he tried. Erin just wouldn’t see reason. She was too distraught over the lives lost. Dean drew in a long slow breath through his nose and tried to regain his calm. “You did not blow up Vendor Station.”

“No,” Erin agreed bitterly as she paced, wrapping her arms around herself. “But I might as well have. I took Admiral Zelle to Vendor Station knowing full well that something was desperately wrong with the mission parameters. We never should have been there. I started a war, Dean.”

“You did everything in your power to stop it. Yes, you had a hunch that something wasn’t right but that hardly qualifies as knowing it was a ruse,” Dean insisted.

Erin stopped pacing to look at him, her pretty delicately featured face contorting in sorrow. She shook her head. “No. I didn’t. I should have refused to proceed with the mission the first instant something was off.”

“And now you’d be rotting in a Federation Prison…”

“I should be! I killed five thousand innocent people!”

“They were Tal Shiar, Erin. They were hardly as innocent as you keep saying. Even if they were innocent of the concocted lie about making experimental subspace weapons they were still planning something. Operation Khelian, whatever it is, is obviously aimed at the Federation. They’ve already tested the waters for an invasion force before…” Dean tried to reason with his captain, his best friend and though he’d never acted on it… the woman he was in love with. He was beginning to strongly regret that he hadn’t but Erin had never been willing to give them a shot. It wasn’t that she didn’t see the potential. It was that she was too professional for that, she didn’t want to ruin a friendship with the muddy waters of a romantic entanglement.

But nearly losing her twice over (once when she’d planned to out maneuver the Undine masquerading as Admiral Zelle with the knowledge that her plan would result in a court martial and being sentenced to a Federation Prison, where she would have her mind erased and reprogrammed to ‘behave properly’, and again when she’d nearly died completing the mission) had made Dean rethink his priorities. He no longer wanted to remain her best friend, he didn’t want to deny his feelings anymore. That Erin had shown a fleeting interest in the ship’s Science and Second Officer, the Vulcan Commander Lorian, didn’t do anything to quell his desire for there to be something more… before the Vulcan ended up with it.
Erin made a disgusted noise. “Even you can’t argue that. *Tal Shiar* or not, we invaded their space and they defended themselves…and died for it. If it had been reversed we’d have done the same thing and patted ourselves on the back for repelling the ‘evil’ Romulans from our homes.”

“Erin, you know that the Undine have telepathic abilities beyond the scope of almost every known species. You know that Lorian suspects that the Undine pretending to be Admiral Zelle was subtly influencing all of us. You aren’t to blame for something that was completely out of your control,” Dean pleaded with her to understand to accept that she wasn’t at fault here but he knew it was hopeless before he’d even finished saying it.

Too much had happened in the last few weeks, too many had been lost and too much stress had been piled on the Captain’s head. That they hadn’t had shore leave in six months during a time of war on multiple fronts only aggravated the situation. She’d finally broken under the weight of it and she wasn’t going to believe anyone until she’d worked through it. But that wouldn’t stop Dean from trying. He owed her that, as her best friend, as her First Officer, as the man in love with her and as the man who had almost unintentionally betrayed her by attempting to rally the Devil’s Trap’s crew to stand behind her rather than allow her to martyr herself to protect them.

“That doesn’t excuse it! Undine influence or not, I knew it was wrong. I knew! And I did it anyway!” Erin spat at him viciously. “That would make it so easy wouldn’t it? An Undine influenced me so it’s not my fault. Just let’s me wash my hands of all the blood. ‘They started it. We just did what we had to do. Not our fault.’ Do you know how many wars have been justified that way? And it’s the one the Romulans will use. It’s the one we’ve all used. At what point do we face up to the fact that we are responsible? When do we accept the blame if not for others actions then for our own? That’s what caused all of this. Everyone’s too busy reacting instead of acting. God, we’re supposed to be explorers with a bent for military peace keeping in extreme circumstances not a full blown military operation!”

“That’s not true…” Dean said.

“Oh yes it is. And now The Federation doesn’t just have a full scale war on its hands with the Klingons and the Borg, it’s about to have another one with the Romulans. And I gave them every excuse to do it. Not to mention that damn Undine is still out there, whispering in some naïve Romulan’s ear, stoking the fire and they have no idea that it isn’t really Commander Selok. But what are we doing? Sitting here, parked in space like a derelict hulk, waiting on orders for some other inconsequential mission because Starfleet has ‘put it in the hands of the higher echelon and the diplomats’,;’ Erin said angrily. “That is how you said Admiral T’Nae put it isn’t it?”

“Yes but…” Dean said very tentatively. The angrier she got the harder she was to get through to but he would not give up.

“No buts! I have told you about Ambassador Sokketh, I’ve told you about the attack on Utopia Planetia two weeks ago. We barely averted a disaster with those experimental biochemical torpedos and they are far from ready for mass deployment. There is no telling how long the Undine have been infiltrating Starfleet or how deeply. The Klingons were right and Starfleet ignored them. We even refused to help them. That’s why we’re at war with them in the first place. And yet they’re just going to ignore it and pretend everything’s just fine. Starfleet said they had this under control…damn it! How can they be so blind?” Erin said her voice wavering between sad outrage and anger to a softer pensive tone. “God, anyone could be an Undine with the methods they have of evading detection. Maybe the entire Federation Council is Undine and no one knows it. Maybe that’s why.”

“Erin,” Dean said trying a different tactic and hiding how much it bothered him that Erin had never told him about Ambassador Sokketh being an Undine or about the attack at Utopia Planetia last
week. Sure both missions had been classified heavily but he was her best friend. She could have trusted him with the information, turned to him for support. Her father worked at Utopia Planetia, it had to have rattled her badly. He was hurt she hadn’t told him. “You’re supposed to be recovering from surgery not worrying about the state of the Federation.”

“I’m a Captain! It’s my job!” Erin growled at him. She returned to thinking aloud…and pacing. “What I don’t understand is why the Undine would infiltrate The Federation, The Klingon Empire and the Romulan Star Empire all at once. They don’t need to. The kind of weaponry they have, their technology, their numbers… they could swoop in and blast us out of existence before we knew what hit us.”

“Technically,” Dean said very gently because he knew this was going to be a touchy subject, “You aren’t Captain right now. Cass put you on medical leave until you’re fit for duty again.”

The look of untempered fury she leveled at him should have burned him to ash where he stood. Dean raised his hands in a placating fashion.

“I’m just saying focus on you right now.”

She glared at him a moment longer and then all the air seemed to go out of her. Dean went to her, his arms open to envelope her in a supportive hug.

“Let me help you,” he said in a soft voice as he reached to embrace her.

She stepped out of reach and shook her head. Dean frowned, wounded by her refusal.

“I don’t want you to help me. All anyone is trying to do is ‘help me’. I want something done about this…situation. I want…..” she trailed off.

“Erin…,” Dean pleaded reaching a hand out toward her imploringly. “I’m your best friend. Let me be your best friend. A burden shared is a burden halved.”

“I don’t want to share it!” Erin said sharply as she moved out of his reach again. Dean let his arm fall to his side in disappointment. He couldn’t understand why she was this way with him now. She’d never been before. “Get out.” It was said very quietly, almost a whisper.

“What?” Dean said blinking in surprise.

“I said,” Erin reiterated through gritted teeth. “Get out!”

“I’m just trying to…” Dean began to say.

“Out!” Erin yelled at him loudly.

Dean’s entire being seemed to crumple under that one little word and he went, no longer sure how to help his Captain or the woman he loved. Behind him, he heard a sharp yelp of angry frustration and something crash in Erin’s quarters.

***

Commander Lorian stepped into the Ready Room and found Commander Singer buried in a pile of padds he was going over. The Vulcan Science officer walked over to the desk and set the padd he
was carrying among the others. “This week’s duty roster is complete.”

The ship’s First Officer and acting Captain looked up. His expression was tight and his brow furrowed as it had been for days. It was no great accomplishment for the Vulcan to deduce why, it was always the same reason.

“Did the Captain throw another vase at you?” he asked blandly.

“No, this time she kicked me out,” Commander Singer said, tossing the padd he was holding which proved to be a requisition from engineering requesting two extra hours of additional systems power so the Chief Engineer could continue tinkering with the warp drive, something it seemed she perpetually did. Lieutenant Commander Campbell had already approved it; it was only waiting on Commander Singer’s final approval.

It wasn’t just engineering that had taken to requesting it either. Every department had in an attempt to keep busy. Everyone wanted an additional share of the ship’s systems to do one thing or another. In the absence of a Starfleet issued mission, they were giving themselves projects. The Devil’s Trap was operating at beyond peak efficiency because of it but it’s crew was growing restless. Lorian found their work ethic quite satisfactory but he knew that without something more challenging than tweaking the warp core for another 0.5 percent efficiency they would begin to lose their edge and become, to use a word his father often used to describe his mother, ‘cranky’.

Commander Singer’s project was the Captain, much to the Captain’s displeasure and to the exclusion of the reality of what the Captain had revealed to them about the Undine threat. While Commander Singer was worried about the Captain, the Captain for her part--emotionally off-balance as she might be--seemed to be the only other person besides Lorian who was giving it the priority it deserved. The Commander must get his priorities straight and Lorian as acting First Officer must assist him in doing so.

Commander Singer sighed and leaned back in the chair, pinching the bridge of his nose. “She just won’t see reason. No matter how hard I try to get through to her.”

Lorian let one brow lift a bit. “Then perhaps you might begin to consider that you are attempting to follow a course of action that is useless.”

Singer looked at him sharply. “So what? I just give up? You haven’t seen her. You don’t know how racked with guilt she is. It’s tearing her up.”

“And yet you persist in reminding her of it by telling her daily that it is not her fault,” Lorian said. That rankled the Vulcan in ways no human would have understood. To invade the privacy of one’s Captain and try to forcibly make them comply with your viewpoint was unthinkable to a Vulcan. It would be considered intolerably rude, showed a marked lack of respect for a superior officer and another person’s rights, and violated every tenant of the Rules of Silences and privacy that Vulcans possessed. Had this been a Vulcan ship the Commander would have found himself in serious trouble.

But by the same token, it was not Lorian’s place as a Vulcan or as the acting First Officer to reprimand Commander Singer for his actions regarding the Captain. He was neither a human nor the ship’s commanding officer. It was however, his place to suggest that the Commander might wish to reconsider what he was doing.

“I would not presume to suggest that you ‘give up’. You are the acting Captain and thus the decision is yours. I am merely suggesting, in my capacity as acting First Officer, that perhaps you might wish to consider a different course of action.”
Singer snorted derisively. “And what course of action would that be? You haven’t the first idea the condition Erin’s in. You haven’t even bothered to check in on her since she came out of surgery.”

While Lorian had begun to understand Captain Winchester, Commander Singer was a constant source of confusion for him. The man seemed to operate almost solely on his emotions with little regard for logic unless it included tactics. Lorian still didn’t understand why the Commander seemed to dislike him for no apparent reason.

“In what way would my ‘checking in’ on the Captain help? The Doctor has kept us adequately informed of the Captain’s recovery progress. I see no reason why I should distrust his reports.”

Singer shook his head in disdain. “I don’t know how they do things on Vulcan but it’s considered polite among humans to pay a visit to someone who is recovering from surgery to show them support. To wish them well.”

“It is common practice among Vulcans as well Commander—assuming that the persons visiting are of close enough acquaintance—but the Captain strikes me as a decidedly private individual. I do not believe she would appreciate being imposed upon in such a way. I did not think it appropriate to violate her privacy to satisfy a custom nor to assuage any desire to prove that the Captain was recovering in a manner I might find fitting. It is not my recovery,” Lorian said.

He was well aware of all aspects of the Captain’s recovery progress. He was working with the ship’s Chief Medical Officer, Castiel Novak, to prepare a method by which to assist the Captain when she was ready to be informed that the reason part of her medical issues had nearly killed her was that she was a precognitive telepath with no training. What the Doctor knew, he knew. Until she was to a point that he could teach her how to control it, she was receiving Lexorin three times a day to suppress her newly reawakened abilities, lest they kill her.

However, the Captain could not remain under the Lexorin’s influence indefinitely. It became less effective with extended use and the reduction of intelligence it caused while active in a person’s system would become permanent if used for more than a couple of weeks. He would have to bring her precognitive telepathy to her attention soon. Today, if the Doctor thought she was physically ready. Otherwise, he would not have the benefit of the Lexorin to control the Captain’s telepathy until he had taught her the necessary techniques to control it.

Lorian lamented greatly that he had not recognized it before it had nearly cost the Captain her life and took full responsibility for such. He had not however told the Commander about it and he would not. It was not his place. If, after the Captain was aware of her true nature, she chose to reveal it to Commander Singer, it was her choice. That he knew from personal experience as a Human/Vulcan hybrid that being a precognitive telepath among humans—who rarely exhibited telepathy in any form—would make her a social outcast only reinforced his decision.

“So you’re telling me I should mind my own business?” Singer scoffed. Lorian’s other brow joined the first. He had no idea why the Commander should suddenly become angry. He’d said nothing about the Commander. “I’m not going to take ethics lessons from a robot.”

Lorian dismissed the Commander’s penchant for insulting him for no apparent reason and said, “I have suggested no such thing Commander. I was commenting on my own reasons for not having ‘checked in’ on the Captain. However, if you feel that the Captain would be better served by my paying her a social call, I will do so. I understand it is customary to present the one recovering with flowers or some other token during such visits. Does the Captain have an affinity for any particular flower or would she be more appreciative of a ‘Get Well’ card?”

“Are you giving me an attitude?” Singer snipped.
“I am expressing multiple attitudes simultaneously, sir. To which are you referring?”

Commander Singer glared at him for a moment as if considering giving Lorian a sharp-tongued dressing down, which the Vulcan knew he might well have earned with his last two comments. He had laced it with a shade of bone-dry sarcasm but the First Officer grated on Lorian and much as it seemed that he grated on Commander Singer. Then the Commander relented.

He sighed heavily and propped on the desk amid the scattered padds shaking his head despondently. “I just don’t understand it. She won’t talk to me. She won’t listen to me. I can’t believe she didn’t tell me about Ambassador Sokketh and Utopia Planitia before now. You just don’t get humans Mr. Lorain. You might capable of not feeling guilty but she isn’t. Humans have to release those emotions, bottling it up the way she is unhealthy. She has got to let it go before it strangles her.”

“I was unaware that the arguments between you and the Captain were not a ‘release of emotion’. From your descriptions, they sound quite emotive. Though I have noticed that what you humans term ‘a healthy release of emotion’ is usually unhealthy for those around you. The Captain has been keeping her regimen of appointments with Counselor Vajgrt has she not?” Lorian said.

“Yes. But it doesn’t seem to be helping does it?” Singer said bitterly.

“Has the Counselor indicated that the Captain is failing to make progress?” Lorian asked with genuine interest. Every report he had from the Doctor—and thus the Counselor who reported to him—suggested that she was where she was supposed to be in the psychological recovery process and he suspected the Commander’s opinion stemmed not from a lack of progress on the Captain’s part but on his own dissatisfaction with the results. He also had drawn a few conclusions about the Commander from his own wealth of scientific knowledge that he had kept politely to himself.

“I think the evidence speaks for itself,” Singer said confirming it.

Lorian considered what to say next very carefully and decided that it was the only option possible. It was not something that would have been condoned among Vulcans but he’d long since realized from his service in Starfleet that Vulcan protocol rarely worked with humans. He had adapted. Perhaps it was time that he made his observations of the Commander known to him, perhaps emotional as the human was he had failed to notice it himself.

“Permission to speak freely.”

Singer waved his hand at him. “Go ahead, it’s not like you haven’t been voicing your opinion without my permission anyway.”

Lorian further arched a brow at that. He had not thus far said anything that was untoward or outside the bounds of his position. “Thank you Commander,” he said politely. “Have you considered that your dissatisfaction with the Captain’s responses to your efforts and your conclusion that the counseling sessions are not working, are because you are trying to make her do what you want instead of doing what the Captain needs?” Lorian very carefully did not mention that Commander Singer did not hold a degree in human psychology from which to disagree with the Counselor’s findings.

“What?” Singer said becoming angry…again. “Are you suggesting that I’m trying to hurt her?”

Lorian thought about suggesting that the Commander consider Vulcan meditation techniques to control his emotions—it would make his existence much more peaceful for himself and those around him—but thought it might not be taken in the spirit in which Lorian would intend it.
“I am suggesting Commander that you are, in a very human manner, responding to emotional stimulus. However, I believe you are not acting on the Captain’s emotional state but your own. I have found many humans do not seem to be able to differentiate one from the other,” Lorian explained dispassionately.

“Oh? And what ‘emotional state’ is that?” Singer snarked.

Lorian hesitated. From his limited experience, he was not sure the Commander would appreciate Lorian being honest with him but he could not be anything less.

“I would not wish to offend you,” he said instead.

“No, no. Go ahead. I can’t wait to hear this,” Singer prodded.

Lorian sighed minutely and prepared to comply, placing his hands behind his back. “Very well,” he said. “Your job as First Officer is to support your Captain and yet you have consistently failed to do so. I do not suggest you have done it out of a deliberate desire to compromise the Captain’s position or a lack of good intention. However, you exhibit a lack of trust in her command decisions and you have repeatedly attempted to subvert those decisions into something you find suitable regardless of the potential outcome of doing so.”

“She would have gone to prison if I had let her go through with it!” Dean said appalled. “I couldn’t let her throw her life away.”

“You did not trust her decision,” Lorian reiterated. “As Captain every life on this ship is hers to command, the reverse however is not true. Her life is her own to do with as she deems fit. She chose to sacrifice her future prosperity and spare ours. You failed to respect that tremendously noble choice because you decided you knew better than your Captain, which again shows a lack of respect and trust.”

“You would have let her do it wouldn’t you? You’d have let her end up in a prison where they’d have erased her memory and reprogrammed her,” Dean snorted disgusted.

“Your suggestion precludes the possibility that after the Captain had succeeded in her plan that no other course of action would have been available to alter the outcome to a more favorable one,” Lorian said calmly, refusing to rise to the implied insult.

Commander Singer gaped at him as that sunk in and he began to turn slightly pale. Lorian let him and continued. If the Commander wanted the truth, Lorian would give it to him. “Also, you assert your displeasure that she did not reveal to you information that was clearly classified and not hers to reveal, in regard to Ambassador Sokketh and Utopia Planetia, on the basis that you are her friend as though your status as such in some way supersedes her position as Captain or yours as First Officer.”

“It does! I’m her best friend, she should have trusted me,” Dean shot.

“No Commander it does not. The fact that you believe it does proves that you have an alarming lack of understanding of what it means to be a Captain. Captain Winchester might have desired to tell you but she could not. No matter how close a friend she sees you as she has concerns that far outreach any friendships she might have. There are things that a Captain must carry alone for the well-being of everyone it might affect. She revealed the knowledge when it became pertinent, despite the fact that the knowledge is still considered classified and therefore not for anyone below the rank of Captain to know and yet rather than respect her action you persist in being upset that she had not informed you earlier.”
“I wouldn’t have told anyone. She knows that,” Dean seethed.

“Not intentionally I am sure Commander. But what if at some point you were taken by enemy forces and interrogated? There are methods that no one can resist” Lorian pointed out. “Mind sifters for example.”

“I didn’t…consider that…,” Commander Singer admitted with some chagrin. “Her father is stationed on Utopia Planetia I just thought about how that must have affected her for him to be so close when that attack happened. He’s the only parent she has left.”

“The Captain had to consider it. What she wants does not matter. What she must do to protect her ship, her crew and the Federation does. You might consider her position if such an event were to arise in the future. Her burden as Captain is a heavy one. It should be accorded the utmost respect.”

Commander Singer swallowed, humbled and maybe ashamed of himself. “Is there any other way you think I’ve failed to support my Captain?”

Lorian was pleased that the Commander had seen reason but he had not meant to cause him shame even if his actions had been shameful by Lorian’s thinking. “I mean no disrespect Commander. I am only doing my job as acting First Officer to support you as acting Captain. I would do you a disservice if I failed to broaden your way of thinking when it might be a threat to your well-being or your strength.”

“Tough love huh?” Singer said dryly.

“One does not hone a blade by being gentle,” Lorian agreed. “Even if the blade resists.”

“Alright then,” Singer said with some reluctance but a willingness to listen he had not previously exhibited. He motioned to one of the chairs in front of the desk. “Have a seat and tell me some more about how I’m a failure as a First Officer.”

“If you wish,” Lorian said and took the offered seat though he would have preferred to stand. One did not reject such an offer from one’s superior. It would be disrespectful. Lorian drew in a slow breath. The next thing he wanted to say might prove to be the hardest to convey without inflaming the Commander’s volatile emotional nature. “I am not suggesting that you are a failure. I am suggesting that you are inexperienced. You have been Captain Winchester’s First Officer for two years; I served aboard the USS Bradbury as First Officer for five. I have had much more experience in the capacity of First Officer and merely wish to convey what I know.”

“Then maybe you should have this job instead of me,” Dean scoffed in a self-pitying way.

“I would not presume to suggest such a thing. The Captain chose you. I do not think she would have done so lightly. She seems to make decisions very deliberately,” Lorian said and meant it. His sincerity must have been bolstering to the Commander because he sat up a little straighter and looked serious.

“Then I guess I better start listening,” Singer said and motioned for Lorian to continue.

Lorian took a moment to decide how best to phrase what he wished to say. “You insist upon inserting yourself in the Captain’s private affairs without regard for your position or her rights as an individual despite knowing how private a person she is.”

“You mean me trying to get her to see that she isn’t at fault for what happened at Vendor Station?”

“Yes. You cannot absolve her of her guilt. Only she can do that. Attempting to force her to comply
with your viewpoint because you want her to will only end in failure. That you are attempting to do so when she has been robbed of the very foundation of who she is would make it twice as certain to fail.”

“I haven’t robbed her of anything.”

“You have,” Lorian said cautiously. “We all have. The Captain’s relief from duty might be medically necessary but it comes at a very inopportune time. As a Captain, duty and responsibility are core traits of her personality and are thus vital to her well-being. She must and has accepted it but you cannot expect her to be grateful for it. Her very nature demands that she act and she cannot. That she feels guilt-ridden over the events at Vendor Station would only serve to fuel the need to act and she can do nothing. Captains tend to take an inability to act very…badly…in my experience. No one likes being helpless and Captains more so than most.”

Singer winced. “And I went and reminded her how helpless she was by telling her she wasn’t in command at the moment.”

“I would then assume that might have been when the Captain threw you out of her quarters,” Lorian mused.

“It was, more or less,” Singer admitted. “How could I have been so stupid? What was I thinking? I just wanted to be there for her, to support her.”

“Precisely Commander. You wanted. What you want is irrelevant. Your job as her First Officer and as her friend is to provide her with what she needs not what you want her to have. If a Captain’s job carries the heaviest burdens of all, a First Officer’s carries only slightly less. It is not always the easiest of positions but it is an exceedingly honorable one which deserves its own respect.”

Singer blinked at him in surprise that Lorian didn’t understand and then sighed in defeat. “So what do I do?” Singer asked despondently.

“Might I suggest that a better course of action than your present one would be to find out what the Captain needs and provide it without attaching your own wants to those needs?”

“Even if that need is for me to screw off?” Singer said. Lorian wasn’t sure if the question was rhetorical or not so he answered it.

“Yes, even if that need is for you to, as you say, ‘screw off’.”

Singer shook his head again. “I can’t believe I didn’t see all this by myself. I’ve known her for seven years. I know Erin hates to be helpless, I know how damn committed to duty she is no matter what. I know how private she is. I did everything wrong. I’ve done everything thing wrong since that damn mission started and I can’t seem to stop.”

“You let your emotions cloud your judgment,” Lorian said.

“And what emotions are those?” Dean said almost absently.

Lorian wondered if the Commander realized that they had circled back to the beginning of their argument. Commander Singer acting on his emotional state rather than the Captain’s. It was a very long handed way to arrive at what should have been a simple conclusion but humans took an exceedingly long route to arrive at such conclusions sometimes.

“I thought it obvious Commander. You show a great deal of loyalty toward Captain Winchester but you also show a possessive streak and a desire to bend her will to yours to accommodate that
possessive streak. You do not trust her judgment in regard to her own affairs even when they are
sound if you believe they threaten what you see as her well-being. Those are all typical human male
characteristics of dominance over a potential mate. It is quite apparent that you are in love with her,”
Lorian said with a hint of surprise.

Was it possible that the Commander didn’t even realize he was in love with the Captain? Lorian
supposed it might be, humans were controlled all too often by their emotions both overt and the
deeper instinctual drives that drove them.

Commander Singer turned a very interesting shade of red. “Is it that obvious?”

“I doubt that it would be to anyone who did not know you well, Commander,” Lorian quickly
assured him truthfully. That did not preclude that the Captain might well be aware that the
Commander was in love with her and it was not his business if she did. Though Lorian was fairly
certain that given Commander Singer’s behavior that she had not responded in kind, her personal
relations or how she felt about them were of no concern of his unless they interfered with her duties.
A point of view the Commander seemed not to share though Lorian fervently hoped he had given
the Commander reason to consider it.

“Given that your affection for the Captain has not presented a problem in the past, I do not believe
you are entirely to blame for your actions. It might behoove you to schedule a session with
Counselor Vagjirt yourself, to regain your previous control. The Undine undoubtedly influenced all
three of us and the easiest way to do so without drawing attention to it would be to incite us to act on
temptations, drives or fears we would not normally allow ourselves to indulge but already existed. I
suspect you may still be operating under those provoked emotions without realizing it.”

“And you being a Vulcan who doesn’t have emotions would be immune while us poor humans
aren’t,” Dean said scoffing more Lorian thought at himself than Lorian. “Though that does beg the
question, how you can have such an understanding of emotion when you can’t even feel them.”

“I do hold a doctorate in human psychology,” Lorian said. He had briefly considered offering a sort
of olive branch by simply revealing that Vulcans did indeed feel emotion but rejected it immediately.
No self-respecting Vulcan would do so, not with anyone less than mate or t’hy’la and even then it
was a very sensitive subject. Vulcans had all the same emotions humans did, that did not mean they
wanted them. The argument over whether Surak had intend them to only control and suppress their
emotions or if he had meant for them to get rid of them altogether still raged among his people. In
fact, there was no higher reverence than for those who had undergone the kolinahr, the purging of all
emotion. It would not be a violation of the Rules of Silences to admit it but only just.

“You have a degree in human psychology?” Singer said showing genuine surprise again.

“Several Commander. It is in my personnel file,” Lorian pointed out.

“Why would you study human psychology?” Singer asked flummoxed.

“When I decided to enlist in Starfleet it seemed logical that understanding the psychology of the
dominate species that comprises most of the organization would be a wise choice,” Lorian said in
explanation. He did not add the other emotion driven reason he had pursued those degrees. An effort
to understand his human half so that he could control his unwanted emotions in the attempt to behave
properly as a Vulcan. He had chosen the Vulcan way of life, not the human one and one could not
control that which one did not understand.

Nor did he offer any possible explanation for what the Undine might have influenced him with
without his knowledge. It was a point of shame that he had not noticed the Undine’s influence
however powerful the creature had been as was what he suspected had been the weakness the
Undine had influenced.

Further he had no desire to discuss his emotions because then he’d have to admit to himself once
again that all his research and logic had still failed to divulge what it was he’d felt when he’d briefly
touched the Captain during their sparring match. (A recognition? An acknowledgment of some sort
he didn’t yet phantom?) He did find the Captain a fascinating person but he refused to acknowledge
anything outside of that. Additionally, Lorian would have to consider the reason why he’d refused to
leave the Captain to die on the station. And his befuddlement over why she had risked her life to
save his. Neither had been a logical choice and he could not explain it from either perspective though
he wanted to.

He knew he must face it. C’thia or ‘reality-truth’ demanded it—that which Vulcans ascribed to
beyond all else and humans typically believed was only logic but encompassed only a small part of
what c’thia was. However, until he could understand it he felt no desire to over analyze it without
some basis from which to draw his conclusion when his attention was required elsewhere, with the
Commander and the Captain. What he wanted was irrelevant. What he must do was.

“You are a very…surprising…man Mr. Lorian,” Commander Singer said. He did not sound at all
pleased to find Lorian surprising.

Lorian might have asked the Commander in what fashion he seemed to have alarmed him but the
communications system beeped and Lieutenant Commander Triven’s voice sounded. “Commander
Singer, we are being hailed by Admiral T’Nae.”

“Be right there,” Commander Singer replied into the air. The Admiral had ordered them to wait for
further orders. Apparently they were about to receive them. First Officer and Second Officer
exchanged a professional look between them… but what would the orders be?

***

Dean stepped out onto the bridge from the Ready Room with Commander Lorian at his back. He
wasn’t entirely sure he appreciated the Vulcan’s candor but he had given him permission to speak
freely and he had a point however much Dean wanted to ignore it. Forcing Erin to do anything
would only push her away from him and that was the opposite of what he wanted.

That the advice had come from the person he saw as his primary rival made something deep and
ancient within him hum with alarm and renewed jealousy. If Lorian could see what Dean should be
doing, what was to stop the Vulcan from doing it himself and essentially taking what Dean wanted?

But was it anyone’s to take? Erin wasn’t a possession. He knew that. He had always known it. If
Erin belonged to any entity, it was the Devil’s Trap. How could he possibly hope to possess her
when she already belonged to this contraption of tritanium and transparent aluminum? It would
always possess more of her than anyone else and Dean hadn’t been able to quite reconcile with that.
He didn’t want to be second to a ship but he still wanted her.

But what right did he have to possess anything if it wasn’t offered to him and Erin had made it clear
a number of times that while she saw what could be, she would not tempt fate by attempting it. She
was happy with the status quo. Once, Dean had been.

Hadin’t Dean believed that was enough? That since he did love her that what she wanted and what
would make her happy was more important than what he wanted? Hadn’t he encouraged Erin to
pursue Lorian if that was what she wanted and thereby tied his own noose? Was Lorian right and the Undine’s subtle influence had changed something in Dean’s manner of thinking? Possibly irrevocably?

But then Lorian had come along and Dean had known the look in Erin’s eyes as no one but her best friend could, perhaps even herself. Dean had been able to let things lie as they were because somehow he’d always thought there’d be time. Now time was running out. Time. There was never enough time.

The bridge dropped into awkward silence with Dean’s arrival and heads that had been bowed in conversation abruptly broke apart, furtive glances were cast toward him and Lorian, some of them looked abashed but a few looked disapproving. That Dean and Erin had been fighting was no secret. You couldn’t keep a secret when a shouting match emanated from the Captain’s quarter’s daily. Dean straightened his back against the chagrin the crew’s glances caused him and he fought not to wince in shame again. Everyone knew about the fights between Captain and First officer, between two best friends. Gossip on a starship traveled at nothing less than warp 10. They also knew the Captain was notoriously private and hated having her dirty laundry aired in public and they blamed him for it. Not that they dared to say anything about it where he could hear it.

God, he’d been such an idiot. Erin might never forgive him now that he thought about it. He’d racked up enough check marks in the ‘screwed up’ column to last the next decade at least.

Commander Lorian politely said nothing about any of it but the glance he gave Dean as he moved to take his station all but proclaimed, ‘Ears burning?’ Dean let out a long blast of air through his nose and tugged on the hem of his uniform jacket in an attempt to ignore the undercurrent of hastily curtailed conversation.

“On screen.” He said to Janira who was dutifully staring down at her station console as though her life depended on it.

“Yes, sir,” the pretty Trill said and quickly slid her fingers over the holobuttons to comply. “Putting it on screen now.”

The front view screen flickered and the glowing orange orb of the Barradas System’s Class K star circled by its trio of planets was replaced by Admiral T’Nae’s dark, expressionless face. Her delicately upswept brows and elegantly pointed ears did nothing to temper the stern set of the Vulcan’s mouth nor the cold indifferent glint in her eyes. Admiral T’Nae was one of the most hard-nosed and inflexible admirals in the fleet. Dean hated dealing with her. She was infuriating and intimidating.

Erin had always been the one who could handle Admiral T’Nae, not him. But then Erin wouldn’t blink at telling anyone what she thought of them regardless of their station. She had no fear when it came to voicing her opinions and for some reason that fearlessness worked.

“Commander Singer,” Admiral T’Nae said blandly. Her eyes darted back and forth as though searching for something. “I assume then that Captain Winchester has not returned to active duty?”

“No, sir. The Doctor hasn’t cleared her to return to duty yet but I’m sure…” Dean began to say.

“The report you sent indicated that the Captain would be fully recovered within a week, was that report in error Commander?” the Admiral asked with a note of displeasure in her voice.

“No sir, it was not,” Dean said making himself keep his tone civil. “The Captain’s physical recovery has progressed as expected.”
“Then why am I talking to you instead of her?”

Dean gritted his teeth and bore the unveiled slight. That there was no love lost between he and Admiral T’Nae was evident. “Captain Winchester has physically recovered but she has been through a rather traumatic ordeal and I wouldn’t want to rush her return to…”

“In other words Commander Singer, you are coddling her. I have neither the patience nor the time for the human propensity for such things. Captain Winchester is a starship captain. She does not require coddling.”

“No one is coddling her,” Dean said a bit more sharply than he intended. One of the Admiral’s brows lifted in warning.

“It is of no matter. While the mission I am sending the Devil’s Trap on is delicate, it is not a strenuous one. I am certain whatever ‘coddling’ your Doctor deems necessary can be completed during it.” The Admiral said with no other hint of concern for Erin. “I am sending you to the Aelas System. The Aelas system is one of the major sources of topaline in the quadrant. The Federation has sent an envoy to negotiate with the Aelsean leaders for mining rights, and we are to do everything in our power to ensure that these talks go smoothly. Your orders are to patrol the system and keep an eye out for trouble. Nothing should disturb the negotiations until they are concluded. All pertinent data is being transmitted to your computers now.”

At his station, Lorian’s brow furrowed an instant then he began keying over his console quickly.

“Aelas,” Dean said. “Why is that sound familiar?”

“Because Commander Singer, you have seen the name on the last several star charts used on this ship. The Aelas System is in Romulan Space,” Lorian said. He said it factually with no hint of emotion but there was a very noticeable sense of disquiet in the Vulcan’s voice nevertheless.

“In Romulan Space?” Dean said shocked. Surely the Admiral wasn’t seriously going to send them back into the very space they’d just left after having invaded and destroyed a Romulan Starbase without cause and unwittingly resulting in the deaths of five thousand people? It would be a suicide mission. The entire sector had to be crawling with ships looking for them by now. That Undine certainly wasn’t going to keep mum about their involvement and neither would the few survivors rescued before the station self-destructed. “How far?”

“Seventy eight point one two light years,” Lorian provided.

That was farther in than the Vendor System was.

“Admiral…” Dean began to protest.

“I am well aware of the Aelas System’s location Commander,” the Admiral said cutting him off. “It is in Romulan Space, however the Aelaseans are independent from the Romulan Star Empire.

“Hundreds of years ago, the Aelaseans were some of the fiercest warriors in the galaxy, with technology that was far beyond what the Klingons, the Romulans, or the Federation had at the time. They could have become a major power in their own right. Instead, when they realized that their warlike ways would lead to their own destruction, the Aelaseans willingly rejected almost all technology and turned to a tribal way of life.

“Since then they have isolated themselves, and even the Romulans have been content to leave them in peace. The Romulans hold no jurisdiction there.”
“Well that’s nice,” Dean said scandalized. “What about the seventy eight light years between here and there? That is ‘under Romulan jurisdiction’.”

“Then I suggest you proceed cautiously,” The Admiral advised nonplussed by Dean’s obvious astounded outrage. “But you will proceed. The Federation’s only current supplier of topaline is the Capelleans. Topaline is a major component of starship life support systems and we require additional supplies to maintain our continually damaged fleet. Your ship is equipped with a slipstream drive. *The Devil’s Trap* is the only ship within range with the speed capability to accomplish this mission. The twelve point four chance of the *Devil’s Trap* being intercepted in the seventeen minutes the trip would require is acceptably low.”

Dean began to protest again with no idea what to say to the Admiral that didn’t scream insubordination but Lorian very subtly shook his head out of view of the Admiral and Dean desisted. Instead, with every iota of his being crying for him to resist he drew in a long breathe and said. “Yes, sir.”

“Very good Commander Singer,” Admiral T’Nae. “And tell the Captain I will find it most acceptable when she has returned to duty.”

The transmission ended and Dean gawked at the reestablished image of the Barradas System with a scoff of disbelief. “She can’t be serious.”

“Obviously, Commander,” Lorian said rising from his station to join him in the command pit, “She is.” The Vulcan lowered his voice to a whisper. “We should speak privately.”

Dean considering it for a moment, looking around at the alarmed expressions of the bridge crew. Truly disturbing was the deeply foreboding look on Lieutenant Law’s face, a exiled Romulan he knew all too well the ferocity and the viciousness of his own people. They knew most of the story. They knew what had happened at Vendor Station and knew how insane it seemed for the *Devil’s Trap* to be sent back into Romulan Space because of it but none of them knew the whole story. Not even Dean, Lorian and Cass had until Erin had divulged the entire thing. It wouldn’t do to distress the bridge crew further. Dean nodded and followed Lorian into the Ready Room promptly.

Inside, the Vulcan wasted no time. “You do recall the Captain’s warning about the Undine infiltration of Starfleet and the ramifications implied by the additional infiltration of the Klingon Empire and the Romulans?”

“Of course I do!” Dean hissed slightly perturbed. Then with alarm, “You don’t think Admiral T’Nae…”

“It is a distinct possibility we must consider,” Lorian conceded. “However, there are two other possibilities. The mission to Vendor Station never officially happened. It is possible that the Admiral is using this mission as a continuation of our cover, just as the nonexistent aid to the Acamar System was, by not giving the *Devil’s Trap* special treatment. Were she to do so it would lend credence to the ‘rumors’ that will have undoubtedly begun to spread via the Undine posing as Commander Selok and the survivors that a Starfleet vessel invaded and destroyed a Romulan base and all personnel on board. It would be illogical and foolish to send the very vessel responsible for the act back into enemy space. It could even be called insane. Starfleet is hardly known for engaging in such reckless behavior and so it could conceivably be outrageous enough to deflect our implication in the attack. That being said it is a highly dangerous and calculated risk.”

“And the other possibility?”

“We are being sent to die.”
Dean’s blood ran cold. “But the Admiral is sending us on this mission. If we were being sent to die that would make her responsible for our deaths. Starfleet would throw the book at her!”

“May I remind you that Admiral T’Nae can deny any official knowledge of the events at Vendor Station making this mission our first official mission into Romulan space on a perfectly acceptable diplomatic errand absolving her of any guilt in our demise.”

“Then she is Undine. We obviously weren’t supposed to survive the last mission but we did,” Dean said growing colder.

“The Admiral may not necessarily be Undine Commander. Despite the Vendor Station mission having never officially happened, it can hardly be expected to go unnoticed even without open acknowledgment. Even if the Undine who replaced Commander Selok were not a factor, there were survivors that witnessed our ship attacking their station. It would be flawlessly logical to send us back into the jaws of those we harmed to be destroyed. The mission was not officially sanctioned by Starfleet. It would be very easy to declare we had gone rogue, allowing Starfleet to save face. Our destruction might well be enough to prevent the Romulans from declaring war.”

“I thought Vulcans hated violence and killing,” Dean said. “That would be outright murder.”

“We do Commander. But if we have a logical reason for doing so we are quite capable of killing even committing murder. And while I do not agree with it, that would be a very logical reason,” Lorian said.

“Then we can’t do it,” Dean said resolutely.

“We have little choice. We cannot flee. There is no faction within an achievable distance that would accept Starfleet refugees that Captain Winchester has not made an enemy of in service to the Federation. We would undoubtedly be apprehended before we could escape. We cannot abandon the mission. We would all be court-martialed and imprisoned if we did. Admiral T’Nae would surely have made certain that the mission as indeed valid before utilizing it in any case,” Lorian insisted.

Dean thought hard. What could they do? He latched on to what Erin had intended to do with the Undine in the first place and he had unintentionally thwarted. “I’ll contact Admiral Quinn and get some answers.”

“And how will you know if the person you are speaking to is indeed Admiral Quinn?” Lorian countered. “As the Captain has pointed out, we have no way of knowing how far or how deep the Undine infiltration of Starfleet goes nor do we have any way of determining who is Undine and who is not. There is evidence that the infiltration may have started as early as sixteen years ago, the numbers could be staggering. You might guarantee our deaths if Admiral Quinn is not Admiral Quinn.”

“Then we’re on our own,” Dean said aghast.

“So it would seem,” Lorian agreed solemnly.

Dean looked across the room, out the Ready Room’s large window at the infinite expanse of space around them and suddenly it felt impossibly large and very much a cold, lonely, dangerous place and he was so very small.
Lorian hurried down the corridor toward sickbay with his mind racing, calculating, going over one figure after another with the speed and efficiency of a computer. He had very little time.

Though he had intended to ascertain if he could reveal the news of the Captain’s precognitive telepathy to her today after consulting the Doctor for approval, now he had no choice. Their circumstances negated any delay he might have considered, regardless of the Doctor’s approval or disapproval. Nevertheless, the Vulcan was proceeding to sickbay to determine what the Doctor would say.

This was not the way he would have chosen to do this. He was decidedly displeased with it. But the Devil’s Trap needed its Captain. It would not survive without her. Its crew was too loyal to her. They needed her reaffirming presence or they would flounder. And her rare gift might be the only thing standing between them and destruction. How he was to enable her to use it without killing herself in such a short time Lorian had no idea. But he knew he must.

As the one who had discovered the truth of it, it was his responsibility to provide whatever instruction he could in the absence of a proper teacher. Lorian wasn’t even certain there was a proper teacher for his Captain’s abilities, there hadn’t been a viable precognitive telepath in centuries and Lorian had no way to know before he began how strong her abilities would be fully awakened.

Lorian had left Commander Singer to his deliberations over how to proceed with their mission after much discussion and the Commander had asked to be left alone to consider his very limited options, which essentially amounted to what course to take to the Aelas System and what precautions might be considered against possible attack by the Romulans enroute. It was not a favorable situation and Commander Singer had only a few hours to make the decision.

Of the three possibilities Lorian had presented to Commander Singer he believed the first and the latter to be the most likely. Undine or not, both would serve the same purpose. The Devil’s Trap’s annihilation, which would either give Starfleet ground to stand on over the Vendor incident or remove a possible threat to the Undine Infiltration of Starfleet depending on which circumstance were true.

He could not give his second consideration equal weight without further information that might more thoroughly explain the Admiral’s motivation. While plausible Lorian could see no reason for Admiral T’Nae to go to such extremes to deflect suspicion for the Vendor Station disaster from the Devil’s Trap and her crew when simply waiting it out and summarily court-martiailing them to satisfy the Romulan desire for justice if the issue were pressed was a far more logical course of action. Unless she had a personal motivation for doing so and it would have to be a desperate one. Lorian had no way to determine if she did and so he must necessarily give the concept less credence than the others.

As Lorian walked through the doors of sickbay he put thoughts of the Admiral’s motivations aside. He would need all his mental capabilities focused on the Captain now if he were to have any chance of succeeding with the time available to him. He fervently wished there were more of it.

Doctor Novak was heading for the door with a medical kit in his hand when he saw Lorian and stopped.
“Oh you’re just in time. I was about to go give Erin her last dose of Lexorin for the day but I think I can spare a minute to give you an update if you like,” the Doctor said.

Lorian had found that he very much enjoyed the Doctor’s company in the week they had been working together to treat the Captain. He was not what anyone would call eloquent but he was refreshingly straightforward and somewhat guileless. He saw everything in such a manner that it was boiled down to its bare parts and dealt with without fuss and Lorian had discovered that when not spurred by someone else’s emotional outburst the Doctor was pleasantly academic about everything. He didn’t burden himself or others with extraneous conversation either unless prodded to by others. It was a much preferable change of pace from Commander Singer’s constant roil of emotion which Lorian found exhausting.

“I would appreciate it Doctor because the time table for the Captain’s treatment has been drastically curtailed by our current mission,” Lorian said. “Are we alone?”

“What mission?” the Doctor asked. “Yes we’re alone.”

“We are being sent back into the Romulan Space.”

The Doctor’s brow furrowed with alarm. “That’s suicide no matter what the reason is.”

“Quite probably. Which is why I must attend to the issue of the Captain’s untrained precognitive telepathy now, regardless of what you tell me. The ship needs its Captain and we may need her abilities far sooner than I would care for. You will have to reduce her Lexorin dosage to half the amount twice a day. It’s inhibition of intelligence would adversely affect her abilities as Captain at anything higher.”

The Doctor tilted his head and looked dubious. “I don’t know if that’s a good idea. Erin’s fine physically, all that’s left is to get those regenerated cardiac muscle cells up to their previous condition—which exceeds Starfleet standards anyway since Erin is committed to extensive physical training. If it were only physical, she’d already be back on the bridge. But mentally, she still in pieces. Counselor Vajgrt assures me that she’s progressing at an acceptable rate but she’s so guilt ridden over what happened that she can’t let go of it. She keeps telling him she knew it was going to go wrong and he doesn’t know how to convince her otherwise since there’s no way she could have predicted it.” The Doctor looked at Lorian significantly because they both knew that was exactly what she had done, albeit without realizing she’d actually done it.

“Then let us hope that confirmation that she did indeed know but could not be expected to know that it was precognition and not paranoia is enough to sway her,” Lorian said.

The Doctor shook his head doubtfully. “I don’t know if even that will work. Erin’s funny that way. She takes deaths under her command very seriously and very personally. She’ll accept those that are unavoidable but these weren’t necessary deaths. I don’t know if she will ever forgive herself for it.”

“‘The spear in the other’s heart is the spear in your own—you are he’,” Lorian quoted aloud, there was an almost wistful note to his voice that made the Doctor blink at him. Lorian quickly masked it. The quote was from Surak’s Analects. The irony of the fact that the saying fit so well and that Surak himself was the last known precognitive telepath to have survived childhood was not lost on the Vulcan.

“I don’t understand that reference,” the Doctor said perplexed.

“Perhaps, I will explain its meaning to you when we have more time,” Lorian said calmly though the Doctor’s dislike for metaphor when he felt that plainly putting it would do was faintly amusing to
“I’m never going to understand why people can’t just say what they mean without being obscure about it,” the Doctor grumbled.

“Will you clear her for duty?” Lorian asked.

“If I have to,” the Doctor agreed reluctantly. Lorian nodded gratefully.

“I thank you for the information. I will notify you if my efforts prove fruitless and you must begin administering the Lexorin again at the previous dosage and schedule. I will go and do my best.”

“Now hold on a minute,” the Doctor said as Lorian began to move away. “Not that I agree with his methods but Dean can’t get through to her. What makes you think you can? What are you going to do?”

Lorian looked back over his shoulder at him. “I do not know,” he answered honestly. “But let us hope I will succeed where Commander Singer failed.” He didn’t have to add what went unspoken. That if he did not they might all be doomed.

That c’thia dictated this was the path Lorian must walk if he intended to decrease entropy was certain as it had dictated his transfer to this ship. But again Lorian wondered if there was not some greater c’thia he had not yet discovered for if this was the path a’tha intended him to walk it was a difficult one and Lorian was forced to admit that he did not know if he was up to the task set for him. But he also knew he would not deny c’thia simply because he was afraid of failure or of what the greater c’thia might be…or what it made him feel.

"Cast out fear. There is no room for anything else until you cast out fear."

Lorian was Vulcan. He would not be afraid.

***

Captain Winchester…no check that…Erin Winchester, she wasn’t the Captain now…knelt in front of the steel and transparent aluminum shelving unit that she had toppled earlier in a fit of frustrated anger when Dean had been here for his daily argument. She started to pick up the scattered knick-knacks that had fallen when the unit hit the floor but then changed her mind. What difference did it make anyway? Let the damn things lay there forever for all Erin cared.

She straightened and wandered aimlessly around the living area of her quarters for a moment trying to decide what might be sufficient to distract her from her crushing guilt and the burning hatred inside her. It was tolerable most of the time, whatever Cass had been giving her had the dubious benefit of reducing her mental capacity to a child’s when it was in her system and so she couldn’t quite grasp the scope of what she’d done while under its influence.

But oh how she could when it wore off, like now. And she’d had three whole days fully conscious on a bio bed while a cardiac stimulator forced her heart to function to think about it nonstop. She was terribly cognizant of the ramifications and blame for what had happened. She should have died. She’d wanted to, she certainly deserved it. Erin wasn’t sure if the fact that whatever Cass had been giving her gave her something resembling a break made it all better or worse. She voted for worse.

She could talk to no one. The Counselor kept telling her that she was blaming herself for something she had no control over. Dean tried to force her to believe it. Erin knew better. She didn’t know how she knew but she’d known however vaguely.
And Dean with his damn preaching and badgering. He wouldn’t let up and if he did it was to try to console her in ways that she didn’t want. There’d always been the potential for something more than friendship between them but they’d long ago agreed that it could never be. Erin understood now that he was in love with her. That he’d let that thin but immeasurably strong barrier between friendship and romance collapse. It wasn’t that Erin didn’t care for him, she did. He was her best friend. It wasn’t that she didn’t love him. She did. Completely, irrevocably. But not the way he wanted. She couldn’t. It wasn’t in her because to love him in that way would mean giving up the things most important to her. The Devil’s Trap and all it embodied. She’d have to relinquish her aspirations because Dean would never be happy coming second best to a ship or a career and his friendship was too important to her to endanger it with the possibility of romance.

And…love made you vulnerable. Loss hurt enough without loving the thing you might inevitably lose.

She was also still furious with him for what he’d done during the mission and for his constant unrelenting insistence that she see things his way. That he’d all but imprisoned her in her own quarters did nothing to help the matter.

Then again that hardly mattered any more. It hardly held a candle to the fact she’d caused the deaths of five thousand Romulans needlessly and started a third war that the Federation couldn’t afford that would cause the deaths of millions maybe billions more. Erin had no business in Starfleet captaining a ship. And the worst part was that she couldn’t even get anyone to arrest her for her crimes because the mission itself hadn’t officially happened!

Worst of all, she knew that the Undine Infiltration of Starfleet, the Klingon Empire and the Romulan Star Empire was far more serious than they’d ever believed possible and Starfleet was blindly ignoring it. They were being jerked around like puppets on strings for some unknown purpose that was going to make all of them destroy each other and no one seemed to care. How could one person hope to do anything about something that gigantic?

She hated the Undine that had posed as Admiral Zelle and replaced Commander Solek. Hated it. Hated it more than she did Nero with a deep burning intensity. Nero had killed thousands. He’d killed her mother. But that Undine had baited Erin into killing thousands more with more yet to come. She was worse than the man she had hated more than anything else in the universe. If she ever saw the damnable creature again she’d kill it with her bare hands if she had to.

Erin sighed heavily. She wished her father was here. He had always been the rock she hung on to in a storm. He always seemed to know just what to say when she needed to hear it. She’d call him if she could but Dean had insisted upon deactivating the outgoing subspace communications from her quarters to prevent her hailing Admiral T’Nae and going on a tirade. He’d also insisted that all the weapons in her quarters be removed ‘for her protection’ and Cass hadn’t helped by having Sam reprogram the replicator not to allow her synthehol and then confiscating her stash of real alcohol to prevent her drinking herself into a comfortably numb stupor.

Erin was too damn proud and unwilling to show weakness to ask him to let her call her Daddy like a frightened little girl. And her ship and her crew went on merrily without her.

Tired of pacing Erin flopped down in the chair at her desk, she hadn’t sat there and brooded yet today, and tried to stop the tumble of jumbled thoughts. The message light blinked languidly on the edge of the console. It couldn’t be a priority message that would have triggered the notification alarm so it must be personal. Curious and hoping it would provide her with the distraction she so desperately wanted Erin touched the panel and it lifted from the surface of the desk. Her fingers slid over the holobuttons in the clear surface. It was from her father. Normally they sent each other
messages once a week but this one was a few days early. Janira must have intercepted it with the regular influx of personal communications and routed it to her quarters. Erin might kiss her the next time she saw the Trill Communications Officer. Just the voice she needed to hear right now. Erin queued the file and the message began to play.

Computer Science Specialist Commander Robert Winchester’s face resolved on the screen, lined with sixty three years but still as rock steady as it had been in his youth. He didn’t look his age despite being a single father and a widower. His hazel eyes still twinkled with all the sarcastic humor he’d possessed when Erin was a child though his brown hair had turned to salt and pepper. His image gave her a lopsided smile in greeting.

‘Hey Honey’, he said. ‘Dad here.’

His hello alone was enough to envelope her in a warm blanket of comfort.

“I know this is a little early but I just wanted to check in on you. You’re always out there in space facing who knows what.” His image paused and raised his hand to still the response that he knew would have been said if she’d been there. “Before you say anything I know you can take care of yourself. But I’m your old man, it’s my right to worry. And after the...incident....a couple of weeks ago I might be worrying a little more than usual.” He was talking about the Undine attack on Utopia Planetia on First Contact Day that no one was allowed to talk about. Her father’s face changed, he frowned. “That rattled me more than I thought it would. I know you’ve fought things before that would have turned my hair white but...seeing it and knowing you were out there on that ship fighting to save us...that you might be killed....” He shook his head. “I guess it just struck a little close to home. It’s one thing to know all the things you’ve done, all the lives you’ve saved...” Erin winced. If only he knew.

“...It's another to look out a window and know your daughter’s commanding on the bridge of the only ship fighting off a fleet of...well you know what happened.” He paused again and then looked squarely into the frame. “I just...I know you have to do what you do. I know that's the path you’ve chosen and I’d never ask you not to do it. But...I already lost your mother and...” He stopped and sighed. “She was the same way you know.” Erin began to feel sick. “Always out there wanting to help people, to save them. You’re just like her. I was happy tinkering with computers but not you two, you two were always meant for something more.”

Her father’s image smiled bittersweetly. “She’d be so proud of you. I’m proud of you.” Tears of shame and guilt sprang to Erin’s eyes unbidden, she fought them. Proud. He wouldn’t be very proud if he knew she’d just murdered five thousand innocent Romulans. He’d be revolted, disappointed. She couldn’t begin to think what her mother would feel. “My daughter – the hero.” He smiled proudly, eyes glittering when he said it. Erin couldn’t stand to see it. “I love you, Honey. Talk to you soon.”

The message ended and Erin thought she was going to have to make a dash for the bathroom to throw up. Hero. Some hero she turned out to be. She didn’t save people, she got them killed. Her crew, innocents. The weight of shame, guilt and pain was like a lead weight that threatened to crush her beneath it. She’d failed utterly and there her father was proclaiming how proud he was. She failed him, her mother, her crew, the people she’d killed, the Federation, Starfleet, her Captain’s Oath, the Starfleet Oath, her own principles and morals. The list went on.

Erin’s stomach flipped over and rebelled against the wave of negative emotions. She bolted for the bathroom and heaved the contents into the toilet. Once she’d stopped trying to regurgitate her spleen she sat there on the cool floor of the bathroom and was about to give in and sob until she ran out of tears to sob with when the door chimed. She had a visitor.
Lorian pressed the chime to the Captain’s Quarters and waited patiently, using the time until she answered to gather his thoughts and weave them into some sort of plan for he had been completely honest when he’d said he had no idea how he was going to get through to the Captain. He was not relishing this. Lorian did not deal well with emotion. He understood them but he did not deal well with them. He wasn’t designed that way. It wasn’t his nature. He was a Vulcan after all.

Asking Lorian to find a way through a human’s wild emotions (even those with the best emotional control were still woefully ruled by them) was like asking a lower primate to do advanced trigonometry. You could ask and you might even get an answer but expecting it to be the right answer would be foolish. But he could not fail.

There was the faint sound of movement inside the cabin and then a bitter, “Go away Dean!”

“It is Commander Lorian.”

Again a brief pause then reluctantly. “Come in.”

Lorian stepped forward and the doors to the Captain’s Quarters sprang open to reveal her sitting on one of the couches in the living area with a short glass of some deep amber liquid. She was sitting at an angle with one bare lithe well-toned leg drawn up beneath her and the other bent. One arm was propped on it, the glass she was holding hanging casually from her finger tips. Her expression was wary and closed.

Lorian’s throat tightened. She was in under garments. True they were Starfleet issue—plain gray tank top and matching shorts, which were not designed for aesthetics—and could easily have doubled as exercise attire. They revealed nothing untoward but they were still under garments. He found her state of undress most disturbing. Especially because his eyes wanted to draw themselves back to her long lithe legs for no discernible reason. Finally, he decided it was because he hadn’t expected to see the Captain’s legs and he was merely surprised. He fought the desire to demand she cover herself.

“Feel like a chess piece yet?” the Captain asked darkly. Lorian lifted a brow. He had not understood the comment when the Captain had first made it but he did now much to his displeasure.

“I have begun to understand the metaphorical reference,” he admitted.

“Come to absolve me of my sins?” the Captain said petulantly. “Dean couldn’t badger me into agreeing with him so he sent you to try and logic me into it?”

That drew Lorian’s attention suitably away from thoughts of the Captain’s legs. He chose his words very carefully. “I am here on my own recognizance, Captain. I can not absolve you of your sins, I am not a priest though I was unaware you were religious.”

The captain’s head pulled up a bit and she shifted slightly. Some of the petulance in her expression faded and was replaced with a guarded curiosity. “I’m not.” Her eyes were red-rimmed as if she might have been crying but she hid it well. He did not call attention to it. That would have been quite rude.

‘Harm no one’s internal, invisible integrities. - Leave others the privacies of their minds and lives. Intimacy remains precious only insofar as it is inviolate: invading it turns it to torment.’ It was another analect of Surak and what the Vulcan had been trying to explain to Commander Singer.
Lorian nodded in response to the Captain, noting that she seemed to respond to his acknowledgement that he could not absolve her of her perceived sins by letting down her guard a small amount. He looked around the room with what appeared to be idle curiosity of his own, noting and cataloging everything that might give him some hint as to how to proceed. The room was done in subdued shades of soft steel and gray tempered with off white to create a monochromatic blend that was quite aesthetically pleasing. It made the furniture itself the ornamentation of the room. All the pieces matched, delicately carved from simulated oak to add warmth the color scheme would have lacked otherwise.

The Captain sighed. “I’m sorry. Of course you didn’t come to badger me. You’re you. So what is it? Something to do with ship’s business obviously or you wouldn’t be here. It might be better if you took it up with Dean though…seeing as I’m ‘not the Captain’, at the moment.”

Lorian didn’t turn to face her, letting his eyes wander. Deliberately being casual. The Captain was already geared to be on the defensive, anything he did to belay that defensiveness would be to his advantage.

“I did not come for that either, Captain.” He turned with calculation and looked at her. “And you are still the Captain.”

He noted that she collected real books with a bookcase packed full of them, each precisely ordered by subject and then by author. He also noted that there were a few vases around the room that held Terran Cattleya orchids that, given their fresh state, Lorian believed were cleverly disguised miniature hydroponic units.

The Captain’s eyebrows wobbled, a flash of what might have been desperate gratitude sweeping across her refined features. “Then why are you here?”

There were several empty places that he suspected might have held art pieces or given the Captain’s proclivity for such things, weapons displays but now they were missing, leaving noticeable gaps in the overall flow of the room’s design. He wondered why they had been removed. Various personal holophotos and paintings which fit with the room’s appeal, which seemed to be harmony over all else, hung on the walls.

“I wished to talk, nothing more,” Lorian revealed. The Captain went immediately back on guard again.

“How about what? How I’m not responsible for what happened?”

“No. I would not presume to tell the Captain for what she should or should not be responsible. It is a different subject I have come to discuss though not unrelated.”

Everything was streamlined and neat as a pin….all except for one toppled shelving unit that one could not fail to notice. The collected objects had been scattered over the floor on one side of the room and never reset. It was very jarring considering how precise the rest of the room was kept. And one of the objects, approximately 0.3048 by 0.1524 meters in size, might be the very thing he could use if the Captain could be swayed to take the conversation in the proper direction. A medal display. Unexpectedly the Captain did it without prompting from him.

“My mother was a doctor. She saved people. She died trying to save people. I wanted to do the same thing. To help people. To do some good. Explore the unknown. That’s the whole reason I entered Starfleet. I hate war. But the only thing I seem to be able to do is get people killed,” the Captain said. She let out a long weary breath. Lorian wasn’t sure what had provoked her to share so suddenly. He knew she was very private and could discern no reason why the Captain would abruptly decided to
confide in him. But he did not dissuade her nor did he make the mistake of mentioning Nero’s name in relation to the Captain’s mother.

‘Reach out to others courteously: accept their reaching in the same way, with careful hands,’ Surak had advised.

“I’m tired of being responsible for four hundred and twelve lives plus the lives of anyone else who happens to be unlucky enough to be involved in any mission this ship undertakes. I’m tired of deciding who lives and who dies. I’ve had it,” she said in a voice that started very determinedly and became smaller with every word until it was barely a whisper.

That alarmed Lorian and surprised him. As hard as she had fought to live, to save his life, to continue in her duty knowing she was dying with no idea why…the idea that she would simply walk away did not fit with the nehau, he’d gotten from her.

The closest human word might have been ‘vibes’ but even that was inadequate. It was the sense a Vulcan got of another being’s inner status, their essence of self as it were. The Captain’s nehau had struck him as pleasant and particularly strong and resolute. Nehau was very hard to deceive and was almost always accurate. It was also one of the properties he suspected might be attributing to the Captain’s precognitive telepathy on a grander scale than Vulcans were capable of. “You are resigning your commission?”

The Captain snorted delicately and then began to speak in a solemn orator’s voice. One meant for the reading of stories and poetry. Answering him with what had to be a quote from somewhere. “‘Does this darkness have a name? This cruelty, this hatred, how did it find us? Did it steal into our lives or did we seek it out and embrace it? What happened to us that we now send our children into the world like we send young men to war, hoping for their safe return, but knowing that some would be lost along the way. When did we lose our way? Consumed by the shadows. Swallowed whole by the darkness. Does this darkness have a name? Is it your name?’”

“I beg your pardon, Captain?” Lorian asked slightly perplexed by her choice of words. It was terribly melancholy and very philosophical in nature. Indeed, it fit so well with the concept of entropy and extropy and the choice between them that was the essence of c’thia that it intrigued Lorian to know from where she’d gotten it, though it conveyed a sense of the inexorable that Lorian did not agree with.

“Nothing,” the Captain muttered. She dropped her gaze into her drink glass. “It’s just a stupid quote from a stupid television show from the early 21st century.”

“I cannot speak for the ‘television show’ but the quote is hardly stupid. It is quite thought provoking in fact,” Lorian said then very carefully broached. “Do you think it is your name?”

She looked up at him then, sharply, green eyes unveiled with bitter conviction. “Isn’t it? Five thousand people are dead because of me…killed by me. Innocent people. And I could have stopped it. But I was so convinced that even if the Romulans didn’t have the experimental subspace weapons that they were up to something that I didn’t stop it at all costs. Now they’re dead, I’ve started a war and millions more will die because of it. Because of me. Not to mention the Undine infiltration of every significant power in the Alpha and Beta quadrants. Which I helped by escorting one right into the heart of the Romulan Empire. How do you overcome that? How do you fight that?” The Captain’s face pinched in obvious deep emotional pain. “What could you possibly say to make that alright?”

Overwhelmed. The Captain was overwhelmed by circumstances she couldn’t control and with a bit of a shock Lorian realized that part of it was that she wasn’t in control of her emotions and she was
disturbed by it in very much the same way he would have been. He pitied humans their inability to control their emotions then. Would life have not been so much easier if they could? Even Vulcans struggled with it. To be ruled by them against your will…would be terrifying.

“Nothing,” Lorian admitted.

“I’d say that’s a pretty fair reason to quit Starfleet. Wouldn’t you? I’m certainly not helping it. If I’m helping anything it’s the further destruction of everything.”

“No, I would not. You were right about the Romulans being up to something. Operation Khelian is targeted at the Federation though we do not know for what purpose. I highly doubt they are planning on sending us a peace envoy.”

“That doesn’t excuse the blatant murder of five thousand people. A piece of information that could mean nothing isn’t worth even one innocent life. I’m a murderer plain and simple. You’re a Vulcan, that should tweak every ethical bone in your body. If you were human I’d say you should hate me.”

Lorian produced the shadow of a frown. “Is that what you want? To be hated and punished for your perceived crimes?”

“Yes!” the Captain bit at him. Lorian blinked at the vehemence of it.

“I do not hate you. I could not even if you asked me to,” Lorian stated.

“Because you don’t let yourself experience emotion, I know,” the Captain said brushing his comment aside. Lorian was surprised again at her phrasing. She obviously was not under the inaccurate—and encouraged—impression that Vulcans did not feel. He wasn’t sure if that bothered him or not but it was very rare for a Human to know that.

“No,” Lorian said, “Because I see no logical reason to hate you. And I would suggest you are punishing yourself quite adequately without assistance.”

The Captain sighed with frustrated disappointment that she couldn’t seem to make him hate her. “You don’t get it either. I knew Mr. Lorian. I knew this was going to go horribly wrong and I didn’t stop it. I don’t know how I knew…but I knew.”

Now they were at the crux of it.

“I know,” Lorian said calmly.

The Captain looked at him, blinked, looked at him again. There was something akin to relief that someone believed her and violent suspicion in her expression. “You know?”

“Yes,” Lorian admitted. “I lament that I did not recognize it sooner. If I had…but the past cannot be changed.”

“Recognized what exactly?” the Captain asked her tone becoming icy, hard, warning.

“The reason you were dying that Doctor Novak could not identify before. It is why I wished to speak to you,” Lorian said. The Captain’s head tilted in an imperious command to continue. Even stripped of her rank temporarily due to medical leave, confined to her quarters and about to resign, the ‘Captain’ was never far away, always present. He wondered briefly if she was even aware of how much being the Captain was a part of who she was. “You are a precognitive telepath, Captain.”

She sat there and stared at him for a full thirty seconds in disbelief. Then to Lorian’s consternation,
she started laughing madly. “Precognitive telepath?” She shook her head. “No way. I tested dead zero on the psionics test at the Academy, I’m about as telepathic as a rock.”

“Precisely. You scored absolute zero. A complete null. The average score is twenty to allow for random chance. A score of zero is impossible,” Lorian said.

The Captain took a breath, held it, exhaled it, took another. “So you’re saying that I failed the test because I’m a telepath?”

“Yes. A false negative. I believe that some traumatic event in your early childhood, prior to your abilities becoming active, repressed them. It is often the cause of a false negative score,” Lorian explained. He neatly side stepped saying aloud that it was Nero’s murder of her mother. “Just as trauma can repress it, trauma can also reawaken it. That is what I believe has happened with you. However, what I do not understand is why no one seemed to notice. Those tests are reviewed by experts in the field of psionics. Someone should have noticed. They did not. It leaves me with only one conclusion. Someone deliberately ignored it.”

The Captain’s brow furrowed. “Wait,” she said holding up a finger to stay him. “Number one, why would anyone do that? And Number two, I’m human. I can’t be a telepath. Humans aren’t a telepathic species.”

Lorian shook his head and clasped his hands behind his back. “A mystery I have yet to solve, Captain. Human telepaths are quite rare but they do arise on occasion. Precognitive telepaths are even rarer…in any species. One or the other, yes, but both is almost unheard of. They inevitably die in childhood from the physical ramifications of their natures and without training you will. You are, Captain, a logical impossibility.”

“You realize telling me this is not helping?” the Captain said deadpan. “It makes it worse.”

“I apologize Captain but it is necessary. One cannot blame an untrained person for not knowing that which they have not yet learned. Nor can one reasonably punish them for it, including themselves,” Lorian said and waited. Either she’d accept it serenely and they would move forward…or she’d go into denial. Possibly turning the anger that came with denial on him in the process.

The Captain shook her head and got up off the couch, agitated into motion by the conversation. She shook her head again empathically, her back to him as she paced. It seemed to be an instinctual habit.

“I am not a telepath. I am not precognitive.”

“You are,” Lorian cajoled. “Denying the facts will not change it. You said it yourself—you knew. You have exhibited the ability to know that something was amiss on several occasions, all of which proved correct and according to Commander Singer have never been wrong. Doctor Novak is fully aware of your condition and I have conducted extensive research on the subject. I can provide my findings and the Doctor’s if you wish.”

“No. I’m not,” the Captain insisted again illogically. Lorian sighed. He was going to have to offer her more than words or calculations. He was going to have to prove it outright. And he was in a particularly good position to do so, it was not a chance occurrence. Lorian had deliberately timed this talk.

The Lexorin had begun to wear off since she had not been given another dose yet, which meant that her telepathy would have begun to work again without the drug to suppress it. She would not yet have become able to sense those outside her quarters, they were too distant but he should be able to reach her at this proximity. Lorian braced himself then with practiced ease lowered the outermost mental shield that kept everyone else’s thoughts out of his head and his surface thoughts out of theirs.
It exposed him to the shield less Captain instantly and if he had not possessed layer upon layer of mental shields, each protecting the layers of his mind and carefully honed over years of mastery he would have been brought to his knees with the tide of confused emotion and thought that emanated from her. Guilt, grief, hate, fear, shame, disgust, confusion, fierce wounded pride and notes of something else he couldn’t place all tangled together and attempted to drown him. This was the real reason the Captain had been confined to her quarters. If the Lexorin had worn off at the wrong time among other telepathic crew members, possibly even among non-telepaths, she would have been revealed instantly and possibly caused havoc with those less skilled than Lorian.

It was a bit like quarantining someone who suffered from Bendii Syndrome, a degenerative neurological disorder that affected a minority of elderly Vulcans that was akin to Human Alzheimer’s. The sufferer lost all ability to control his emotions or his telepathy. That loss of emotional control could be telepathically projected to others. Vulcans were able to resist the emotional projections, but if the afflicted person was in the presence of non-Vulcans or other telepaths, particularly empaths, the emotions could cause outbreaks of violence.

Unshielded the Captain’s untrained telepathy would broadcast without restraint. It was the equivalent of standing in a crowded, silent room and screaming at the top of your lungs while beating everyone around you senseless with a club. Worse, it would snowball because she’d hear their thoughts and emotions and feed them back on their owners without realizing what she was doing.

Lorian braved the tide, blocking out the assault and focused. ::Can you hear me?: he thought.

The Captain scoffed. “Of course I can hear you, Mr. Lorian. I’m not deaf,” she said as she turned around.

“An impressive accomplishment since I have not spoken aloud,” Lorian said.

“Yes you did,” the Captain insisted.

::No, Captain. I did not: Lorian thought again, using telepathy to speak to her. She was looking directly at him, his mouth did not move. She could not deny it.

She didn’t but she did protest most fervently. “I don’t want to be a telepath!”

Lorian sympathized deeply. He hadn’t, sometimes still didn’t, want to be half Vulcan and half Human. Neither Vulcan enough nor Human enough to be accepted in either world, he was always set apart. How many times had he wished that he had been born fully Vulcan or even fully Human for that matter? And yet it accomplished nothing to dwell on it. He was what he was and must make peace with that. What was, was.

“What we want and what we get are very rarely one and the same,” Lorian said as he erected his outermost mental shield again, as much to shield her from his surface thoughts as to shield him from hers. He would not embarrass her by accidently allowing her to know he’d gotten a deluge of her thoughts and emotions. They’d been too snarled to read individually but he had felt them.

“I think I need to sit down,” the Captain muttered and shuffled back to the couch dropping onto it in an undignified heap. She looked up at him desperately. “Can it be turned back off?”

“No. It was never ‘off’. It was suppressed but it has always been a part of you,” Lorian confessed. The Captain’s shoulders sagged disappointedly.

“Does anyone else know? Besides you and Cass?”

“No. We are the only ones aware of it. It is not ours to reveal. That is up to you, Captain,” Lorian
assured her. The Captain nodded tightly.

“Thank you.” She reached forward and picked up her glass again. Her hand shook faintly. She caught him observing this and mistook it.

“Don’t worry it’s iced tea. Cass blocked access to anything alcoholic, said it might interfere with my medication. Just like Dean confiscated all my weapons and curtailed outgoing subspaces communications. He seemed to think I might harm myself with them or hail Admiral T’Nae to scream at her.”

That explained the blank spaces about the room. A possibly wise decision on the Commander’s part but he was mildly horrified that the Commander had cut off the Captain’s access to outside communication. She wasn’t figuratively imprisoned, she was in fact. Each of them contributing some element to her incarceration and never knowing that the other had already robbed her of some freedom. No wonder she was in such a state. She’d been imprisoned and interrogated daily since she’d been released from sickbay without any way to do anything about it.

“I wouldn’t presume to dictate such a thing, Captain,” Lorian said his tone slightly deeper than normal. He was angry about it! That would not do. Quickly he repressed the emotion, disturbed by its sudden arousal.

The Captain blinked at him and then became serious again. “How did this happen?” she asked as though she’d just been told she had a terminal illness there was no cure for. Undoubtedly the understanding of what this meant for her were beginning to sink in.

Lorian arched a brow. “Obviously you were born this way. Has anyone in your family ever exhibited what might have been considered precognition or telepathy? It need not have been both.”

The Captain shrugged. “No not that I…,” she started to dismiss and then her eyes widened. “My father. It was only once but when the USS Galen was assigned to assist the Romulans in need of aid after the Hobus supernova my Dad begged her not to go. He’d never done that before. But he said he knew if she went he’d never see her again. He was right. Nero murdered her and everyone aboard the USS Galen along with the two other hospital ships with them.” The Captain’s voice became very sad. “I’m worse than Nero ever was.” She drew in a long breath. “I never saw her again. If I hadn’t begged them to stop fighting….maybe…” The Captain trailed off and her eyes were suspiciously bright.

Lorian deliberately did not acknowledge that he’d heard the last bit. He would not intrude on a person’s private grief nor call attention to it in such a way that it might be exacerbated. Nor would he acknowledge her self-deprecating remark about being worse than Nero. To do so would only invite her to argue with him and he could do nothing to exonerate her from the blame she placed on herself.

“Only your father?”

“Well,” the Captain said shrugging one slim shoulder again. “There are stories of course. But every family has their old legends. That one claims they’re related to Benjamin Franklin, another one insists their hundred times over great grandfather was the pivotal figure in some historical event. Doesn’t make any of it true.”

“May I remind you that there is usually some truth to every legend however small. What ‘family legend’ are you referring to?”

“Supposedly there was some ancestor of mine back in the late 20th century, early 21st that for a time, had startling accurate precognitive visions. He and his brother allegedly used them to hunt down
monsters, like demons and werewolves. They were even supposed to have saved Earth a time or two. I think the demons and werewolves might have destroyed any credibility it had,” the Captain said with a generous amount of sardonic humor. “Oh and one of them married a half angel.”

“A most creative tale indeed Captain. Did these stories ever say what happened to the one who had visions?”

“They were just stories my grandfather told me to amuse me as a child, Mr. Lorian,” the Captain insisted. “But yes.” She paused as if trying to recall the ending of the tale. “Eventually the visions just went away but before they did, they almost... killed him.” The Captain sat there and realized what she said directly correlated with Lorian’s warning that if she did not learn to control her abilities they would kill her.

“Intriguing. I would be most interested in hearing more about this ancestor of yours at a later time but I believe that is enough to substantiate my position. You must learn to control your abilities. The first thing you will need to learn is to shield yourself from other’s thoughts and them from yours. Up until now, the Lexorin the Doctor has been administering has suppressed your telepathic abilities but without it, you are vulnerable, as is everyone around you. You will begin to sense the rest of the crew. It will be very disconcerting. I will provide the instruction if you do not object,” Lorian said.

“So there is a way to get rid of it!” the Captain declared almost accusingly.

“No,” Lorian said with a long-suffering tone. “Lexorin only suppresses your ability, it does not get rid of it. Nothing can. Nor can you continue to take Lexorin for the rest of your life. It loses its effectiveness over time and while under its influence your intelligence drops significantly.”

The Captain’s face fell. “So I’m stuck with it.”

“I am afraid so, Captain,” Lorian admitted. He understood, emphatically and he wished that he dared to breach the strict protocols of his kind to relate it but he could not and would not. At this moment, in this place, he did not think it would be of any help and he wasn’t sure if he wished to relate it because it might help her or because it would help him to relate to another misfit.

The Captain heaved a heavy sigh and motioned toward one of the other couches. “I think you had better tell me everything you know then.”

“Oh course, Captain,” Lorian said and promptly obeyed, taking a seat opposite the Captain. He found himself inordinately pleased with her response. She was again setting aside emotion and pursuing logic despite her mental state. He ignored that he wasn’t supposed to be inordinately pleased about anything.

Chapter End Notes

Please read and review!
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Over the course of the next hour, Lorian relayed in quite scientific terms, which the Captain listened to with rapt attention, everything he had discovered and what it all meant. She listened with the same bearing she would have held if this were a mission briefing and again some part of him was pleased. Both because he didn’t have to stop once to explain a term or a concept, one scientist to another, and because she assumed her rank without thinking about it. He was not the senior here though he held the superior knowledge. She was. It was obvious and incontrovertible and exactly as it should be. It was so engrained she couldn’t not do it.

He could not take away her guilt or grief. He could give her what she needed and this was it. She was a starship captain and they needed objectives and purpose. Right now, she had one and was studying it with all the clinical detachment he could have desired. It only served to fuel his fascination with her. She was the most intriguing person he’d met in years, everything about her was fascinating.

Her personality, what she was, that unnamable sensation he’d felt when he’d touched her sparring that he still could not understand. Her decision to save his life instead of her own and his illogical decision to return the favor against orders. Her odd mix of overt emotion and logic. The iron bound duty, honor, and responsibility she insisted upon. Her impossibly high standards for herself. There was an element of the unpredictable to her because of it all. She was like a puzzle or an equation his logical mind yearned to solve.

By the time he was finished he realized he had settled into a comfortable exchange, his shoulders relaxed as they talked. He didn’t feel at all the usual sense of ‘apart’ he felt with everyone else. It was as though he’d known her for years. Her nehau had enveloped him and set him at ease and he hadn’t even been aware of it.

“Well aren’t I special,” the Captain remarked with sarcasm. She rubbed her forehead with one hand, unaware of the effect she’d had on Lorian as he blinked several times to pull himself together. He fully admitted he had no idea how far her abilities went. Was the effect some element of her telepathy that he hadn’t considered? The Captain didn’t even notice his slip for which he was thankful. “So, how do I learn to ‘shield’?”

“I can teach you. Vulcan children learn to do it very young but I must admit that while my knowledge will be sufficient to teach you the rudiments of the mental arts I have no knowledge of how to train a precognitive telepath. There has not been one recorded since the time of Surak. I neither know what makes it work or to what extent you can use it. This will be a learning process for both of us.”

“Oh goody so I’m a guinea pig,” the Captain sighed. “So what do we do first? Do I go get candles or incense or something?” She sounded uncertain and a little afraid.

“Guided meditation is an option but a mind meld would be most efficient,” Lorian admitted.

“A mind meld?” the Captain said warily.

“Yes. It is a telepathic merging of minds that would allow me to more easily…” Lorian began to explain.
"I know what a mind meld is," the Captain said sharply. Lorian blinked again taken aback. "It’s also supposed to be very intimate and revealing. You’d have access to all my thoughts, everything I am." The Captain shook her head almost frantically. "No."

"A meld would allow me to relieve some of your distress, to calm your mind. Something of one’s strength can be lent to the other. It would also enable me to place the shields myself and ensure that they are correct. The training time would be cut in half. It would be far more expedient but the choice is yours," Lorian assured her.

"I don’t care. It would also mean giving you complete access to my mind," the Captain said vehemently rebelling against the concept. It alarmed Lorian. He’d had no intention of upsetting her. He had merely been offering the available options with no intent to persuade her to one or the other.

"You’ll forgive me if I’m a little hesitant to consider letting anyone into my mind when I just had an Undine force its way in," the Captain excused weakly. It had the sound of a lie though Lorian didn’t know why.

"You repelled it quite efficiently," Lorian complimented and added, "As I said, the choice is yours. I would never force you to undertake a mind meld if you did not consent" Lorian assured her firmly, gently. "But please consider that we have very little time in which to establish the basic shielding necessary for you to function."

"Why do we have very little time?" the Captain said immediately honing in on that aspect of his comment like a sha’vok stooping on a hayalit.

"We have received new orders. The Devil’s Trap is being sent back into Romulan Space."

"What?" the Captain barked in outrage.

There was no question that the Captain took all of two seconds to calculate every aspect that went into that statement without any needed input from Lorian. Her mouth tightened, her jaw set and her eyes blazed fire.

"Who?"

"Admiral T’Nae," Lorian said.

The Captain growled and Lorian realized he’d unwittingly said the one thing that would spur the Captain to action like nothing else. He’d just told her that her crew was in danger. She’d disregard her guilt and grief, even her own life, to protect them. He silently berated himself for not having said it earlier for fear of further upsetting her. She was upset. Tremendously so, she was also pinpoint focused with an abrupt ferocity that would have made every teacher on Vulcan envious that their students did not possess it. He wondered if she had been that focused at the Academy. If she had it was no surprise she’d blown through it with a will.

Resigning commission indeed. There was that unpredictable streak she possessed again. It was like being on a calm sand plain and being struck by a sandfire storm with no warning. He respected that strength and dedication in her immensely with all the negative side effects it brought with it. To disregard herself meant she would not tend to what she needed in favor of what those around her needed. It was noble but must be carefully guarded against. She would leap before looking.

"Well don’t just sit there Mr. Lorian. How does one do guided meditation? Get started," the Captain demanded. She still wasn’t going to consent to a mind meld, however. With the burning fury she seemed intent on, he had to wonder why that was.
“Yes, sir,” Lorian said with a hint of dry amusement. Who was the teacher here again?

Within a few minutes the Captain had directed him to the only thing he required and then only because the Captain was new to the practice. He could have done it without the visual aid. With her permission, he nudged the couches back to make more room around the low coffee table and sat a single candle in an etched crystal holder on it. He lit the candle with a simple device made for the purpose and folded his limbs down onto the floor, indicating that the Captain should sit opposite him on the other side of the table. She did so with her usual cat-like grace. He admired it; she had earned that grace with much training. He also noted she mimicked his pose exactly, knees together, leaned back on her heels with her back straight as an arrow.

“Lights to twenty five percent,” Lorian commanded the computer and the room was thrown into quiet shadow with only the candle for illumination casting a warm orange glow between he and the Captain that bounced and refracted off all the gleaming surfaces in the room like a crystal prism.

“I will warn you, what we do here today will only teach you the rudiments of shielding. It is an outer shield only. It will allow you to function but if it should fall or be penetrated it will be as though you have none at all. The thoughts of others may overwhelm you if it should happen in a crowd. Untrained telepaths have been known to go insane from it. In addition this will do nothing for your precognition. Through some mechanism I do not yet understand, your precognition triggers the fight or flight response as though you were experiencing it first hand and does not seem to cease. No one has been able to understand it thus far, no one has survived long enough for it to be studied. That is what almost killed you. Because of this you must continue taking Lexorin on a reduced dosage schedule I have already discussed with Doctor Novak. It must be inhibited until we can discern some way of controlling it. Emotional control will be essential. If you can control the fear and anger fight or flight induces you can control the over abundance of adrenaline, norepinepherine and cortisol that was almost your undoing. This is not how I would prefer to proceed but we have very few options,” Lorian explained before they began. He did not add that a mind meld would allow him to look within her mind and better understand how her precognitive telepathy worked and thus enable him to develop ways of teaching her to control it.

“You mean I have to become a pseudo-Vulcan?” the Captain said. She didn’t sound at all happy about the prospect.

“You must learn emotion control as we do. I would not expect you to engage in emotion suppression. They are not the same thing though you cannot suppress what you cannot control. You will not develop pointed ears as a result,” Lorian said drily.

The Captain blinked at him. “Did you just make a joke?”

“Vulcans do not make jokes,” Lorian dismissed, never denoting if he was serious or not. “Merely stating fact.” Despite common opinion, Vulcans understood humor perfectly. Whether they indulged in it or appreciated it was a deliberate mystery.

The Captain smiled faintly at him and Lorian did not find it displeasing.

“Let us begin,” Lorian said moving to the lesson. “The flame of the candle is fire disciplined—tamed and under control. It is the appropriate focus for the task ahead of us. Look at the flame. See only the flame.”

The Captain dutifully complied focusing on the wavering bit of fire. “Listen only to the sound of my voice.” Lorian encouraged using the same words, the same methods he had been taught. He thinned but did not lower his outer mental shield so that he could sense whether she was doing it properly without invading her privacy. “Empty your mind. Think only of the flame.”
The Captain nodded, drew in a deep breath. Lorian continued his litany, his voice a constant even sound purposely meant to be a comforting if emotionless lull. “See only the flame. Hear only my voice. Think only of the flame.”

He gave it a few moments and then tested the sense of the Captain’s progress. She was stalwartly trying but emotion still roiled like a wave off of her. He could not discern what emotion, not with his shields still up, only that it was emotion.

“You are not thinking of only the flame,” Lorian pointed out. Her eyes snapped up to meet his with accusation.

“You’re reading my thoughts?”

“I am not reading your thoughts. You are still emanating disquiet and a sense of emotion. I cannot tell what emotion, only that it is emotion. I would not do such a thing,” Lorian assured her. “Your mind is your own.” The green fire that had sprung up in her eyes died down again and he tried to project calmness at her, willing that she might take some strength from it. She was afraid and that fear exhibited itself as anger. “Let us try again.”

The Captain nodded and resumed as he had instructed.

“Try to maintain your emotional equanimity,” Lorian instructed. “You should not be concerned with success or failure. Either will distract you from your goal. The ability to shield is innate to all telepaths. You can do it. You must simply learn how.”

The Captain focused for a long time and he could sense her struggling. She stubbornly refused to give up but she was too afraid and too embroiled in the overwhelming emotions that she had no control over to reign them in. She was also becoming increasingly frustrated by it. She would never be able to shield like this. Very much as he had been as a child. This had been one of the hardest things for him to learn as well.

Lorian rose to his feet in one fluid motion and went to the Captain’s side of the table. The Vulcan dropped down beside her. “Face me,” he instructed. “Forget the candle.” The Captain did so. Gently he spoke. “You are having trouble focusing. It is not uncommon,” he said matter of fact but did not do her the dishonor of bringing attention to the fact that she was afraid. He would not acknowledge it if she would not. As a Vulcan he understood it, fear was one of the most shameful emotions a Vulcan could admit to even in the most private and discreet of settings. He didn’t give her time to interrupt him. “There is no shame in that. Not for you. You are untrained and not expected to be able to achieve focus as readily as I would be. Allow me to help you.”

“By letting you do a mind meld?” the Captains said warily. Where did she keep getting this illogical idea that he was still intent on a mind meld when he’d firmly insisted it was her choice. With a flash of anger, he blamed Commander Singer. The Captain had become so used to his forceful attempts to have his way that she expected it from everyone. Lorian had to fiercely repress a desire to go back to the bridge and strike the man for it. It only made his job that much harder. Moreover he was appalled he’d had the thought in the first place.

He would increase his meditation routine, immediately. He had repeatedly failed to sustain a'rie'mnu on several occasionssince coming aboard the Devil’s Trap. He found it most disturbing and yet he knew without any doubt that a'Tha had led him here and that c'thia demanded he follow the path before him. But it did nothing to soothe his alarm at having his emotions flare up when he least expected it. Perhaps the Undine had had more of an effect on him that he realized.
“By letting me assist you. I will not bring up initiating a mind meld again unless you ask me to,” Lorian said determinedly. The Captain relaxed again marginally but remained reserved. That would never do.

“Trust me. I will not harm you or invade your privacy in any way,” Lorian encouraged. “You are familiar with the breathing exercises common to most martial arts are you not?”

“Yes, of course,” the Captain said perplexed. Lorian nodded.

“I suspected you would be since you practice several forms yourself. We will begin there.” He looked at her briefly, noticing the bared flesh of her arms and upper chest beneath the tank top. He profoundly desired to touch her bare skin again, to see if the same thing would happen as had occurred during their sparring match but he would not. “You may wish to put on a thin robe.”

“Is my attire offending you in some way?” the Captain asked.

“I remind you that I am a touch telepath and this exercise requires me to touch you. I would not wish to receive your thoughts without your permission even inadvertently.”

“Oh,” the Captain said flatly and hastened out of the room on quick feet. She returned wearing a short, thin, cotton-like robe that was quite worn. It did nothing to cover her legs, which were only accentuated by the fact that now nothing else served to distract from them. Lorain focused firmly on the task at hand and was quite relieved when the Captain resumed her place and duplicated his pose exactly again, hiding her legs beneath her. It was in that duplication he hoped to find the balance and control the Captain required to learn basic shielding.

“Now what?” she asked.

“Now we will try empathic mirroring,” Lorian said. The Captain raised an eyebrow that was so like another Vulcan and only enforced by the delicate angled arch of them that for a moment he almost expected her ears to be pointed. “It is not telepathic in nature. Every life form that lives in social groups does it. You are doing it now. Look at how you are sitting.”

The Captain looked down and frowned further. “I’m kneeling on the floor. You’re kneeling on the floor too. So?”

“Precisely. I never instructed you to do so. You mimicked me because it seemed the natural thing to do did you not?” Lorain asked.

“Well yes,” the Captain admitted. “I suppose so.”

“Just as you unconsciously mimicked my posture so can you mimic other actions. We will coordinate our breathing. I had difficulty with the flame technique at first as well. My mother used this method to help me learn to focus,” Lorian explained.

“Alright,” the Captain agreed seeming to find this a much preferable way of proceeding. It was something not unlike something she was already familiar with. That would help remove some of her apprehension.

Slowly so as not to startle her, Lorian reached out first placing one hand against the Captain’s chest, below the collar bone, the robe separating them then with a slight inclination of his head indicated she should do the same. She looked slightly nervous but one long fingered hand lifted and pressed itself to his chest in direct mimic of his own. Now they could both feel the gentle rise and fall of the others breathing beneath their fingers.
Without prodding the Captain shut her eyes, familiar at least with the technique of controlling one’s breathing, shutting out other senses in favor of the one you wished to control. Lorian did the same and took the lead. This was fully guided meditation. He would set the conditions and she would follow, mimicking him and together they would find the place of focus required.

“Feel my breath as I feel yours,” Lorian said in a quiet voice. “Focus only on our breathing as one. Do not think of the task ahead. Do not consider success or failure.” He felt her fingers splay out further in response and knew she was attempting to comply. Lorian focused, felt the rhythm of her breathing and instead of asking her to match his breathing, he matched hers.

It was a calming sensation as both of them sat there in the dark. The synchronization had an almost immediate effect on the Captain. He sensed it readily. A great deal of tension went out of the Captain’s limbs and she settled into a sort of stationary lull that waited calmly for the next instruction. It was not the emotional control required but it was the anchor for it.

He kept them that way for some time. Letting the mirror imaging of one another permeate the atmosphere around them until it was all that was. Acutely more aware of his body’s functions and hers since he had much training in the area and because he had thinned his mental shielding to sense her progress with the exercise he became aware with some sense of surprise and bemusement that it had gone further than breathing.

Their heartbeats had harmonized. Not synchronized, that was impossible between a Vulcan and a Human, even if the Vulcan was half-Human himself. Vulcan heart rates were 240 on average compared to the usual 72 of a Human’s but they were in a rhythm. For exactly every 3.3 beats of his heart, hers beat once in precise coordination. He had not done it. She had…unconsciously. Remarkable. He found himself both very satisfied with the outcome and surprised it had occurred so readily. The Captain was proving most adept at this method.

With it came the control he had requested of her, however tenuous. And it was tenuous. The least change in the rapport established would break it like shattered glass. But it was enough for a first attempt. The Captain’s emotions settled and allowed themselves to be contained. They did not go away but they ceased their continuous attempts to overwhelm her. There was a particular sense of comfortable stasis to it. It was not the state of emotionless calm and peace that Vulcans strived for but was instead a kind of vibrant aliveness that had courteously paused to be observed at their leisure. Dynamic as an aurora but equally as languid and quiet in appearance.

Lorian could quite easily have remained where he was in this state for hours but he could not, the state would not hold indefinitely. They must act quickly.

“Satisfactory,” Lorian said keeping his voice even and low so that there was less of a chance that it would break the careful balance established. He sensed the Captain almost lose it, like a tightrope walker who teetered and regained their balance precariously. “Now imagine a wall of your own making around your mind that is flexible but impervious. It should bend but not break. Imagine that it repels that which is outside of it and not desired but also contains that which you do not wish to let out of it. You may attempt to replicate one such as mine if you wish.”

“How?” the Captain asked.

Lorian thought of how to phrase it. Telepathic contacts of any kind were highly subjective. While the impression would result in the same ‘feeling’ how it was perceived was entirely unique to the individual. “Do you sense my presence next to you?”

“I…,” the Captain started to say. The rapport started to falter and Lorian concentrated on keeping it in order by adjusting his own breathing and heart rate to keep them as they had been. “Yes,” the
Captain finally replied with notes of awe, mild confusion at the sensation and a flash of fright that she could do it at all.

They almost lost the rapport entirely then and it was only Lorian’s gentle reminder of ‘Focus’, that saved it from breaking.

“Reach out and touch the sense that marks itself as my own. It will not be intrusive for either of us,” he assured her and tentatively he felt her do so, reaching with her mind as she would have her fingers to tentatively touch his presence. He felt it brush against his mental shields and immediately retract as though afraid she might break what she touched. Then a more confident brush came that was not unlike the fingers of a blind person feeling the facial features of another to discover what they looked like. It was not at all personal for Lorian and nothing of his own thoughts or hers traversed the touch. It was only a novice sculptor discovering what a given piece should look like when completed from a much more experienced artist. There was a terrible curiosity at all of it that threatened to destroy the entire exercise that Lorian belayed with a quiet, ‘Control yourself.’

The Captain bottled up the curiosity that had begun to bleed through the delicate state and withdrew. For an instant Lorian worried she had withdrawn in fear but then a tentative first effort at an outer mental shield began to form around her mind. It was transparent where his was opaque, but it grew until it enveloped her mind and some of the sense of her dulled to him. She toyed with it, made it her own until it became a distinctive crystal clear bubble around her mind instead of the solid tritanium wall Lorian’s mental shields gave the suggestion of.

“Good,” Lorian encouraged. “Now I shall reach out. I will not do anything that might break the shield but we will discover if it is stable. You must reinforce any areas that feel too weak.” He heard the Captain swallow hard.

“Oh,” she agreed.

Lorian reached with practiced ‘hands’ and touched the clear bubble. It moved from his touch, sliding away from it without breaking, bending as though it were made of some pliant transparent aluminum. Lorian increased the pressure of his touch and explored the whole surface of the shield, careful never to push more than required to test its stability. Once or twice, he found ‘soft’ spots that the Captain dutifully made stronger but only a few.

Finally, Lorain was satisfied. It was not a perfect shield but it was adequate for a first try from an untrained telepath with no knowledge of what she was doing in the first place. “That will do. Now imagine it built in such a way that you do not have to consciously focus on it. Such as the hull of the ship. It is there, you do not think about it being there for the most part but if you were to fall, you would strike it even if you did not remember it was there.”

There was a long pause and then, “Okay. Done.”

Lorian broke the rapport with some reluctance and opened his eyes. The Captain did so more slowly. The candle had burned down almost half way.

“That’s it?” the Captain asked almost incredulously.

“For the first lesson,” Lorian said as he would have to a child who incorrectly assumed building a starship was as simple as gluing two sticks together. “It takes a great deal of training to master one’s mental abilities. You require many more lessons.”

“But this shield will hold? It will allow me to function?” the Captain asked with impatience.
“It will do for the moment,” Lorian admitted. The Captain was already getting to her feet. And just like that the pleasant calm that had descended upon them and around them dissipated but oddly Lorian felt it’s echo all around him.

“However you must practice daily to maintain…” Lorian went unheard. The Captain had subjected herself patiently to the lesson because it served her goal of protecting the crew and the ship. As soon as she was informed it would hold she was once again in action. The Captain’s penchant for disregard of self in the endeavor of her job was admirable and noble. The duty and responsibility that made her a Captain in more than rank alone, the innate instinct to put herself behind her ship and her crew took over. It was however potentially dangerous. Someone was going to have to constantly keep her from jumping off cliffs to save or protect others without looking. Lorian had a sinking feeling that someone was him.

“I will. And you can instruct me. But right now I have a ship and crew to worry about,” the Captain insisted. She glanced at the candle with the intent to extinguish the flame and blinked in surprise. “How long were we in meditation?”

“Three point twenty two hours,” Lorian replied. The Captain’s eyes widened and she turned on her heel as if on hinges for the door to the bedroom area.

“Stay here,” she commanded.

“Captain, I must insist that you…” Lorian began to say. The Captain waved him off, dashing into the bedroom and it was all Lorian could do to repress a very human beleaguered sigh. Suddenly he greatly sympathized with Doctor Novak’s plight in treating the Captain. As remarkable as the Captain was, she was also very stubborn.

The Vulcan flashed back on the remarks exchanged just before the beam down to Vendor Station and thought that he should have expected this.

“Captain, is it wise to take all of us on this away mission? Especially yourself? If the Devil’s Trap is…”

“Janira and Law can handle it. I need my best men on this. We know what to expect up here. We don’t know what to expect down there.”

“I would cite regulation but I suspect you would simply ignore it.”

“See Mr. Lorian? We’re getting to know each other.”

The Captain seemed to have as little use for more discussion of the training her abilities required at the moment as she did for regulations stipulating that Captains were not supposed to go on away missions on which their First Officer was also in attendance. As long as she’d hold together, she’d merrily ignore it.

Lorian did as he was bade, blowing out the candle and waiting. The distinct sounds of the sonic shower could be heard. Within fifteen minutes the Captain remerged from the bedroom tidily attired in her uniform and heading straight for the door.

“Come on,” she said authoritatively. Lorian rose to follow knowing it was pointless to argue.

“Captain,” Lorain said with a hint of dry amusement. “You do not know if the Doctor will declare you fit to return to duty.”

“I don’t care. Let Cass try and stop me,” the Captain said fiercely.
“Then it is good that I took the liberty of securing the declaration myself before coming here.”

The Captain came up short and swung around to look at him with surprise. “Thank you.”

“It seemed the logical course of action,” Lorian replied, then tried again to get the Captain to listen. “Captain I must warn you the shield will do for now but undue emotional strain from within or without could easy cause it to come undone until you have mastered the technique…”

“Later Mr. Lorian. We have more serious matters,” the Captain insisted. “Brief me on the situation.”

“I must strongly insist…” Lorian said.

“Commander, I will listen to anything you have to say…later. Right now, my ship and my crew are being sent back into Romulan Space when it’s the last thing anyone with half a brain would do. It’s suicide plain and simple. Anything that happens to either of them is on my head. I won’t let anyone else suffer because of my crimes. That’s on me and me alone. Is that understood?”

“Yes, sir,” Lorian said obediently. No, the Captain had not overcome her guilt and grief. Not by a large margin and Lorian suspected it would be long in coming, if ever.

“May I at least suggest that you avoid physical contact with anyone until it is determined if your telepathy extends to touch,” Lorian hazarded. “I can assure you from experience the unintended intrusion is most disturbing for either party. You are not yet adept enough to prevent it.”

“Duly noted,” the Captain said and doubled back to the replicator. “Computer, one pair of gloves, standard issue. Reference clothing size parameters for Captain Winchester, Erin M.”

“A evasion,” the Captain corrected tugging on the second glove and moving for the door again.

“An evasion,” the Captain corrected tugging on the second glove and moving for the door again.

“May I ask you a personal query?” Lorian asked quite abruptly. He could bear the way not knowing nagged at him no longer. The reminder that she kept surprising him reminding him that she’d surprised him even more on Vendor Station.
The Captain blinked at him. “Yes but make it a quick one.”

“Why did you save my life on Vendor Station? It was not logical.”

Again she blinked and her eyebrows rose. “Logic had nothing to do with it.”

“Obviously. But that is not a reason,” Lorian observed.

“I couldn’t let you die,” the Captain said simply.

“I fail to understand why you would put your own life in danger when the chance for my survival was slim. You took great risk to do so. More than I was aware of at the time. Until that moment you had shown yourself to be eminently logical but in that moment…”

“Why did you save me? I ordered you to get out of there and you didn’t. That wasn’t very logical either. Maybe you’ll find your answer there Mr. Lorian,” the Captain said turning the query back on him. “Now about that briefing…”

Lorian blinked and could find no way to reply to that. So he tried to put it from his mind with only moderate success and explain their orders as the Captain led them out the door and into the corridor. He ignored the warm bloom he felt and what it might mean.

“We are being sent to the Aelas System…”

***

Commander Singer gave a final glance at the star charts on the Ready Room computer console and decided he’d mulled over every possible course of action until it was a dead horse. None of which were good because no matter how much he wanted to disobey orders and run for the hills, he couldn’t and his integrity wouldn’t let him. He was a Starfleet officer after all. It was the Aelas System or Bust for the Devil’s Trap.

He’d finally worked things down to two possible courses of action. Traverse Romulan space in a matter of minutes with the slipstream drive and avoid any confrontation en route or proceed at a more sedate warp 9.99, dealing with anyone that pursued but avoid confrontation in the Aelas System. The deciding factor was that no matter which of the two he chose they had to pass in close proximity to the Rator System, the alleged base of operations for Operation Khellian they had discovered on Vendor Station…whatever it was.

Even if the sector of space they had to pass through wouldn’t be crawling with pissed off Romulans aware a Federation ship had infiltrated and destroyed a Romulan Base, killing all on board—and it would be—the Rator System and the surrounding space would undoubtedly be heavily patrolled. Making it impossible to get from here to the Aelas System without being noticed.

The slipstream drive would give them the advantage of speed but it would also cause a drastic increase in the energy signature of the ship, alerting anyone nearby that something was amiss immediately. They’d get to the Aelas System just fine only to bring the force of angry pursuing Romulans down on anyone in the System. No that wasn’t an option.

This was a diplomatic mission. The people of Aelas, who were peaceful and chose not to pursue violence, and the Ambassador already sent to negotiate for the topaline (and the attending ship that
took them there) would be put in serious danger.

The only reasonable—reasonable nothing about this mission was reasonable—course of action was to proceed at maximum warp, navigating a course that avoided as many populated systems as possible and deal with whatever came along the way. They’d still be traceable by their warp signature but it wouldn’t be the glaring ‘here we are’ that the slipstream drive would. It might get them all killed but at least no one else would end up in the crossfire. Dean didn’t want another Vendor Station incident.

Maybe they’d get lucky and avoid any altercations. Yeah right.

None of his mulling began to address what to do about Erin, or more accurately what he should do about his feeling for Erin. He should…no…would apologize the first chance he got. He didn’t know quite what had come over him but the damned Vulcan was right. Before this last mission had started Dean had loved Erin and been willing to allow her to have what she needed and wanted to be happy. After, he’d turned into an alpha male jackass intent on having the object he wanted without regard for what she thought about it. Undine influence or his own selfish desire, it didn’t matter. He’d been wrong. He just hoped Erin would forgive him.

With a heavy exhalation Dean lowered the console screen back into the surface of the desk and left the Ready Room. Either way he had a job to do.

Out on the bridge he strode down to the command pit wishing he was worrying about duty rosters and not the fate of the whole ship. Lorian was right about that. Dean had never given her enough credit for the weight she carried. He would from now on.

“Pril,” he said to the Saurian helmsman who turned his scarlet scaled head around to look at him. His huge golden eyes peered back in a way that could be rather disconcerting if you weren’t used to the reptilian gaze. “Set a course for the Aelas System that avoids inhabited systems. Avoid all known traffic areas. Maximum warp.”

Large gold eyes blinked at him twice as if making sure he’d heard right. Then he said, “Aye, ss sir,” as he turned to his station and began computations.

Lieutenant Commander Campbell’s brown haired head swiveled around like it was on ball bearings, his expression incredulous. “We aren’t going to use slipstream?”

“No, Sam. We aren’t,” Dean explained. “Slipstream would cause too large an energy signature, we might as well paint a sign on the hull that says ‘shoot me’.”

“But…” Sam began to protest.

No one had noticed the turbolift doors had whooshed open until they heard a welcome and familiar sound, the simple clearing of someone’s throat. Heads snapped around to see who it was. Erin walked out of the turbolift looking every bit the Captain of the *Devil’s Trap*…with Commander Lorian dutifully at her heels.

“Captain on the bridge,” Lorian announced promptly.

“Captain!” Talia piped with genuine enthusiasm from the security station. Erin didn’t reply with more than an acknowledging head nod. She had eyes only for Sam.

“You heard the Commander,” she said with authority. Sam’s spine went ridged with chagrin.

“Yes, sir,” he said and ducked his head, admonished. Lorian dropped down into the command pit
and took his place at the science station, relieving Lieutenant Sheppard without a word.

Dean repressed a flash of jealousy at the Vulcan. He’d gone and done what Dean feared, he’d pulled Erin out of her funk when he couldn’t. But that wasn’t fair. If Erin wanted him, let her have him. Dean wanted her to be happy, to have what she needed. Maybe if he was lucky, one day it would be him. May the best man win. Besides Lorian had exhibited no evidence of returned attraction for the Captain and she wasn’t very likely to show any attraction she had for him even if it was present, so what was Dean really worried about? It was hard, but Dean curbed his inner selfishness.

Somewhere in the back of his mind flitted a bit of barely remembered poetry he’d heard once. ‘If you love something, let it go. If it comes back to you, it is yours. If it doesn’t, it never was.’ Dean hoped it was right.

Erin came to join him in the command pit, Captain and First Officer—side by side. “Cass cleared me,” she said before he could ask. “And Mr. Lorian briefed me.” Then she made him feel worse than ever. “Carry on.” With that, she took her place in the Captain’s Chair and waited expectantly for Dean to do whatever it was he was going to do.

Dean nodded his thanks feeling every inch the idiot he knew he had been and proceeded. “Status,” he commanded.

“Courssse laid in,” the Saurian confirmed. The crew went into sound off. Though some of the nervousness in the air eased with Erin’s arrival (How did she do that? Dean wondered) most of it lingering like a bad smell. The bridge crew was afraid to go back into Romulan Space knowing this was a possible suicide mission and Dean didn’t know how to comfort them. It was what it was, there was no arguing it.

“All systems online,” Sam said.

“Engineering?” Dean asked only to have Chief Engineer Mary Harvelle’s girlish soprano nearly run over the query.

“Warp is available at your command.”

“Acknowledged,” Dean said. “Mr. Lorian…”


“Monitoring subspace. All quiet. No Romulan communications detected,” the communications officer Lieutenant Commander Janira Triven called.

“Weapons standing by,” Lieutenant Law added.

“All decks report ready,” Talia put in.

“No cloaked vessels have been detected,” Lorian said. “Though I remind you that does not preclude their presence.”

“Noted,” Dean said forcing himself to sound much more confident than he felt and took a seat in the First Officer’s chair beside Erin. “Can you obscure our warp signature?”

“I will make every attempt to do so, Commander,” Lorian confirmed. Dean looked toward the helm.

“Mr. Pril. Let’s ride.”
“Aye, aye, ssir,” the Saurian said his clawed fingers flying over his station console as he initiated the warp drive. The ship took on a tension as though it were an arrow being pulled back on a bow string and then hurtled toward Romulan Space. Turning the pin points of light into glowing streamers, leaving the orange glow of the Barradas sun far behind them.

Only when they were under way did Erin make any attempt to do anything. She keyed over her arm rest control panel, Dean noticing for the first time that she was wearing gloves. He glanced at her curiously but he knew she wouldn’t answer it until she was done with what she was doing. 

The communications system beeped, acknowledging an open channel and Erin began to speak in that confident, nothing-scares-me-I’m-the-boss tone Dean could never quite manage without sounding angry at the same time. “Attention crew of the Devil’s Trap. This is your Captain speaking. We are currently on route to the Aelas System. Before anyone panics, yes, the Aelas System is in Romulan space.

“I won’t lie to you and I won’t insult your intelligence by telling you everything is going to be alright. It’s not. This is a very dangerous mission in light of the events at Vendor Station. It was most certainly tragic and a prelude to war with the Romulans. We will be a target for retaliation.

“However, we are embarking on a diplomatic mission to ensure that the Federation’s representative in the Aelas System has every opportunity to secure mining rights for topaline without interference or threat to their safety.

“For those of you who don’t know, topaline is one of the main components for the life support systems of a starship and the Federation has access to only one source of it. Cappella. It’s not enough.

“There are a lot of ships in Starfleet, carrying many thousands of people. Our friends, our family, our brothers and sisters in arms. We’re fighting two wars with a third on the horizon. We are losing ships and people faster than we can replace them. Our brethren need that topaline more than ever before. They deserve everything we can give them, however dangerous the attempt to do so may be.

“Whatever danger awaits us, remember that and keep on, keeping on. You are Starfleet officers and without a doubt the best crew in the fleet. Make me proud.”

The channel closed as Erin tapped the control panel and just like that the entire atmosphere changed. People sat a little straighter at their stations, shoulders loosened and the nervousness, while not completely gone, was mostly replaced with a swelling sense of purpose. They were still nervous, rightfully so, but now it took on an air of forging on regardless of that fear with heads held high. Even Dean felt it despite knowing what a dangerous situation they were placing themselves in.

Dean never understood how Erin could do that with the crew. She always seemed to know the exact words to say that they needed to hear, when they needed to hear them. He couldn’t. He knew he couldn’t. He knew she didn’t feel that way but she sounded so convinced herself it would never have crossed his mind to doubt her words if he hadn’t already known different.

He left the moment as it was, undisturbed, as Captain Winchester sat with her hands curled over the arm rest and her eyes focused with iron-determination on the path in front of them. They were shadowed and haunted but they burned with a will that had bound the loyalty and the dedication of four hundred twelve people to her with such strength they had even begun to spite him silently in her defense.

And again he was reminded that Erin was much more than he had been giving her credit for lately. Dean looked out at the tunnel of streaming light Erin was contemplating as the Devil’s Trap’s dart
like shape pierced space. He wouldn’t make the mistake of forgetting again…if they survived.

Let the moment in time hold for as long as it could. The crew needed it. Erin needed it. Dean needed it. He could ask about the gloves later.

Chapter End Notes

Please read and review!
They’d been in Romulan space for almost nineteen hours. They’d slipped past the Rator System, without incident. While that success could be attributed to Lorian’s skill at obscuring their warp signature Erin still felt like biting her nails constantly. She kept waiting for the other shoe to drop.

All the possibilities Lorian had outlined regarding the mission were possible but Erin feared that the most likely was that they’d been sent back to die. She’d never have entertained the idea if she hadn’t known about the Undine infiltration of the Federation and Starfleet but now…who knew?

She thought this mission was an utter waste of time even if it was genuine. Yes, the topaline was an essential commodity to the Federation’s military forces but no one seemed to care that lifesupport systems wouldn’t mean a damn thing if the Federation implode from the inside. That they were all fighting each other when they should be fighting the Undine, finding out what drove them to set every major faction in two quadrants against each other in a war that virtually guaranteed mutually assured destruction.

Erin wanted desperately to do something. Anything. But the problem was so gigantic and she was only one person. She wouldn’t know where to begin. How could one person possibly hope to turn the tide? It was just too big. And she certainly wasn’t worthy enough to take up that mantle, even if she was insane enough to try. She was a mass murderer as bad as their enemies.

Erin was back in the chair but she wasn’t herself. She hadn’t spent more than a few hours on the bridge the previous night when they’d set out for the Aelas System because Cass had insisted that she had to keep a regular sleep schedule and that if she didn’t he’d happily enforce it with a hypospray. Lorian had agreed with him citing the fact that in her current stage of training, which was to say all but non-existent, that sleep deprivation would only degrade her ability to maintain the newly established mental shield that stood between her and the thoughts of her entire crew.

Erin had agreed readily enough to the training schedule Lorian ever so politely suggested. Daily after the end of their shift. But that didn’t mean she had accepted anything. She wasn’t foolish enough to deny it. Lorian had proven that she was indeed, at the least, a telepath but she did not want it. At all.

Frankly the idea of being anything but a plain run of the mill Human scared her witless. She’d never admit that but it did. Lorian hadn’t even needed to advise her that the revelation to other humans of what she was could have drastic consequences. People would be afraid of her. It was one thing to accept that Vulcans were telepathic and not blink. They had always been that way. The same went for Betazoids. And both species had very strict codes of conduct when it came to the use of their telepathy but Humans weren’t supposed to be telepathic and the few who had been had been summarily ostracized and stigmatized, seeking refuge with other races.

That Erin was supposedly a precognitive telepath only increased the possibility of becoming a pariah among her own kind. Or a commodity to be studied in a lab. There were any number of unscrupulous sorts that would love to get their hands on someone with precognition. How much of her nightmares had been nightmares and how much of it had been the Undine trying to screw with her as much as it was able (which Lorian thought the creature had had difficulty with) and how much had been precognitive? That whispering dream self that kept insisting something had been wrong and then screaming at something (the Undine?) to get out?
More to the point, she didn’t have time to worry about it. She had a ship and crew to protect. She couldn’t waste time worrying about this now. Erin was thoroughly irritated by the inconvenience it caused her. She wanted very much to cram her new found precognitive telepathy back in the Pandora’s Box it’d come out of but just like that mythological box, once opened you couldn’t close it again. Her father would have said it was like closing the barn doors after the horses had already gotten out. Pointless.

So Erin did what she did best. She set her own issues aside, crammed them in a box somewhere and carried on as best she could with what she had.

With the help of the dosage reduced and less frequently administered Lexorin and the mental shield she was managing to pretend very hard that it didn’t exist. Sort of. She kept wanting to worry at the shield the way a child worried a loose tooth and no matter how much she ignored it there was a persistent though faint sense of everyone around her. It couldn’t be called their thoughts and it wasn’t the stronger sense of another she’d gotten from Lorian before they’d managed to establish the mental shield but she was ‘aware’ of the people around her. More a feeling that she was surrounded by living things that she had not had before. That awareness got more intense the more emotionally charged they became or she became. So Erin was stalwartly refusing to become emotionally charged…by avoiding anything she could that might provoke it.

She had managed to avoid Dean readily enough thanks to Cass’s insistence that she get sleep. She didn’t have to engage in the very personal and probably explosive discussion they would have to have while she was on the bridge. Rank did have its benefits and Dean, wisely, hadn’t pushed for it. But she knew she would have to get it over with soon. Probably today or he’d become suspicious. Maybe if she high tailed it the instant Beta shift relieved them. She wasn’t looking forward to that conversation in any way.

She avoided physical contact with anyone and so far had managed not to be forced into it by situational circumstances. Even with the gloves she didn’t want to test Lorian’s theory about touch telepathy so she avoided it by not touching period. Now she thought she had some idea why every Vulcan she’d ever met seemed to have the habit of clasping their hands behind their back when they weren’t actively doing something with them.

She was also ignoring her own virulent emotions. It was difficult but she had much practice. No Captain worth their salt survived long out here by letting their emotions get the better of them. They inevitably died. Usually painfully young and taking their crews with them to their starry graves.

She would not allow herself that dubious luxury. Her emotions were still there, the guilt, the grief, the shame. The desperate need to do something about it. The venomous hatred she bore for the Undine who’d manipulated her into doing it. Profoundly so. But she wouldn’t let it stand in the way of her responsibility to protect her ship and her crew. Especially since whatever they ran into out here was likely to be because of what had happened at Vendor Station. Erin had more important things to worry about than her grief and guilt.

That the instant she lost even the slightest grasp on that control made the tenuous mental shield fluctuate only reinforced it. When her own fierce will seemed to not be enough she’d do something like what Lorian had showed her. She’d focus on her breathing and listen to her own heart beat in her ears until she got control of it again. It had only happened once or twice but she’d managed. She was fervently glad that there were no other telepaths in her bridge crew just now.

Both times Lorian had glanced back from his station at her curiously, one brow raised as if to inquire whether or not she required assistance. She never asked for it and when she got the shield stable again he seemed to know and would glance away again without remark.
That brought her to another issue. Lorian himself. She flat refused to acknowledge anything but professional admiration for him and a certain amount of personal gratitude for the help he’d rendered in getting her mental shield established. She would not even contemplate the undefined way those piercing blue eyes seemed to capture her gaze and hold them against her will. Or the sense of something approaching ‘peace’ she’d felt when he’d taken over the meditation and helped her focus enough to do it herself without trying to force the issue of a mind meld. Nor did she entertain why it was she didn’t want to mind meld, particularly with him.

Oh there was the fact she was reticent because of the assault by the Undine. Most certainly. She had no desire to ever experience anyone in her head again trying to break anything it found in its path and leaving her unable to prevent it from prying open all the private nooks and crannies it cared to in the process. But she knew the Rules of Silences.

She’d had the pleasure of being informed of more Vulcan culture than she’d ever thought to learn when she’d had to disprove that an anonymous mad Vulcan was trying to assassinate Romulan Ambassador Jarok. It had been a pleasure and an honor, Erin hadn’t minored in sociology for kicks and the Vulcans were notoriously tight tugged about their culture. That they had allowed her to learn what she had was a high privilege, the Rules of Silences one of the most dearly held. By those same rules, she wasn’t allowed to talk about it to anyone who didn’t already know it and had in fact had to undergo something of an initiation. She’d had to agree to swear an oath to obey the Rules of Silences before the Vulcans would even consider revealing the necessary information, despite the fact that not revealing it could have resulted in a war between the Romulans and the Vulcans all over again. Vulcans were an incredibly private species.

She knew that whatever was found of a personal nature during a mind meld, was not allowed to ever be spoken of outside the ones involved unless it was done for the explicit purpose of information gathering and then only under very stringent protocols. She still didn’t want to do it. Not if she could avoid it. She valued her privacy. She had no desire for anyone to glimpse the inner deep parts of her and judge them. She didn’t want Lorian to most of all. For no reason she was willing to admit to she didn’t want him revolted by what he found.

He might not be allowed to ever speak of it. Not even to her if she didn’t allow it. But he’d know and that was enough.

Then again she also greatly appreciated the manner in which he conducted himself during all of this. Never once had he insisted upon having his way. All choices had been up to her discretion. It was typically Vulcan of him but nonetheless she appreciated it immensely. And that only made it worse.

It didn’t help that while she firmly didn’t want to be a precognitive telepath, she found herself feeling a little as though she’d lost some sense that she hadn’t known she had until now. A vital one she knew could be the difference between success and failure, life and death. The Lexorin dulled the telepathy until it was bearable but it seemed to strip away all the ‘intuitive hunch’ part of the equation. If she could tell what was going to happen or at least if it was going to go horribly wrong, then she could possibly avoid it and protect her ship and her crew. Nothing was ever simple was it?

The Captain was drawn from her circuitous thoughts by the constant drumming of fingers. Erin glanced to her right at her First Officer who was steadily tapping his fingers in an unending rhythm that was decidedly loud in the quiet of the bridge.

“Stop it,” Erin said. Dean always drummed his fingers when he was nervous to the eternal irritation of those on the bridge. He also disliked silence. Erin could sit in companionable silence all day without complaint. Dean always felt the need to fill it.

“What?” he asked uncomprehending. He had been looking out the view screen with a sort of fierce
concentration, as though if he stared hard enough he’d see anything out there waiting for them
despite the wild speed they were traveling at.

They were traveling at warp 7, having had to reduce speed an hour ago to allow the engines to cool
before kicking things back up to warp 9.99. They couldn’t initiate such high speed again for another
seventeen hours without risking superheating the engines. By Erin’s estimation they were on the
outside of the Proxima Rhogana System, skirting the fringes of the system’s gravitational influence
under Pril’s deft navigation. Though you couldn’t have told by the view. All that was visible was a
river of star lines as they warped along.

“You’re drumming your fingers,” she pointed out to Dean. Commander Singer looked sheepish and
pulled his right hand off the armrest, curling his fingers to his chest.

“Sorry,” he muttered. He put his hand on the armrest again couldn’t seem to control the desire to
drum even consciously then stuck it in his lap to keep it still. He cleared his throat slightly as though
composing himself and then asked, flicking the index finger of his other hands at Erin’s gloved ones.
“So what’s the deal with the gloves?”

Erin had a split second of panic that she quickly quelled and smoothly replied in an absent minded
fashion. “Oh. Temporarily reduced peripheral circulation. Cass says it’ll go away in a week or so but
my hands were freezing.”

“Oh,” Dean observed accepting the excuse. He became quiet again and stayed that way for a long
moment before saying in a very personal manner. “Erin, I….”

Well, she’d nearly made it to the end of the shift. She supposed that was something. Erin stopped
him before he could start. “Later Dean.”

He looked like he wanted to protest, his mouth opening as if to voice such.

“I promise,” Erin said. Dean looked vexed despite that for an instant longer and then to Erin’s
surprise relented, nodding. Erin favored him with a wan smile of thanks for it that he returned.

What would he think if she told him about being a precognitive telepath she wondered briefly than
shoved the thought aside. She couldn’t think about that right now and a crewman peeping out of the
turbolift like a frightened mouse saved her from having to.

Erin leaned forward a bit in her chair to see him better. He stood just on the verge of stepping onto
the bridge proper and kept peering out at them as though he were afraid one of them was going to
shout at him. He was cagier than the notoriously shy Lieutenant Logan Atwater, Sam’s Beta shift
alternate at Ops. Erin observed the man had Lieutenant pips on the breast of his black and gold
uniform.

“Lieutenant?” she asked calmly. She honestly thought if she raised her voice a decibel more the man
might turn and flee back to the deck he came from. Erin recognized him. His name was James Brody
if she recalled correctly, tall, fair and if he hadn’t looked more like a mouse than a man at the
moment, the newest male specimen for the female crew to ogle. He was one of the illicitly assigned
officers that she had been so paranoid over but that Dean had cleared as being legit despite the
subversive way they’d been transferred to the Devil’s Trap. They still didn’t know who exactly had
assigned them because of the level 10 security protocol on the orders, though Admiral Quinn had
taken responsibility for it.

“Uh…,” Lieutenant Brody said his gaze flitting away then he seemed to get a grip on himself and his
spine straightened. “Permission to come on the bridge.”
Erin’s lips quirked slightly in amused sympathy. She knew that particular awkwardness. She’d had the same expression the first time she’d asked for permission to come onto the bridge of the *USS Impala*, three years ago. That seemed so very long ago now but the tragic events that followed it had not faded from memory, they never would.

“Granted,” Erin assented.

Lieutenant Brody dragged himself out of the turbolift and approached the command pit, holding a padd close to his chest and casting glances at the bridge crew, some of whom favored him with the same amused expression Erin had while others disregarded him altogether sparing the poor man further scrutiny.

“I just needed to get your approval for some spare plasma injectors,” he said hesitantly. “…sir.”

Erin reached out and motioned for the Lieutenant to hand over the padd, she frowned significantly with momentary worry. “Is there something wrong with the plasma injectors?”

If something had gone wrong with them they could lose warp power very abruptly and this was not the place to end up stranded without warp drive available.

The Lieutenant blinked pulling his eyes away from her gloves. “No sir!” he said sharply alarmed then modulated his tone bashfully. “Commander Harvelle just wanted a few spares close at hand in case something should happen. Since we’re in Romulan space and all.”

“Sounds like Mary,” Erin observed with relief, glad Mary was on top of things as always. The Lieutenant was still holding onto the padd for dear life. Erin wasn’t sure why he had come all the way up here to get permission. Mary had more or less free reign in Engineering. She didn’t need Erin’s explicit permission to fetch spare parts.

“The padd?” Erin asked.

The Lieutenant looked at her blankly for an instant, then looked down at the padd as if he’d forgotten he was holding it. “Oh!” he declared and thrust it out to her. It toppled from his trembling fingers before Erin could get a hold on it and the man scrambled to catch it as it fell. Erin instinctively leaned down to catch it as well and their heads collided with a dull crack.

Erin saw stars for an instant and the Lieutenant scurried like a scared child to make amends.

“I’m so sorry Captain!” he proclaimed and started to reach for her out of concern. Erin leaned away from him to prevent him touching her again without permission (God she was going to grow pointed ears at this rate Lorian’s insistence otherwise to the contrary) hand cradling the spot where his head had hit hers. It hurt vaguely for a moment but no damage had been done. She waved him off and flashed her best congenial Captain smile at him as she retrieved the padd.

“No harm done,” she insisted. Dean was sitting beside her biting his lip so hard it might bleed to keep from laughing. Talia’s antennae curled and waved with the uncontrollable expression of great amusement despite her ability to keep from laughing aloud. Lorian had looked back to raise a brow at the man.

Lieutenant Brody stood back and looked as if he wished he could hide under a rock.

Erin did him the courtesy of not saying anything more about the incident and looked over the padd. It was a standard parts requisition. One that could have been easily fed into the computer banks and left for Erin to acknowledge during her usual morning reports without inhibiting Mary’s desire to get the parts now. She recognized what the Lieutenant had done immediately. It was a common flub of the
nervous and over eager. They went and got the acknowledgment right then, instead of waiting. Some did it out of pure habit after a transfer until they got used to their new assignments. Some Captain’s insisted upon micromanaging their crew.

Erin wasn’t one of them. She knew what her crew could and couldn’t do. She saw no reason to micromanage them. A Captain who had to micromanage did not know their crew.

With a few quick taps on the padd, Erin acknowledge receipt of the report and her permission then handed the padd back to the Lieutenant who took it nervously, his face was so red it made the scattering of light freckles across his nose look like spots of ink.

“For future reference Lieutenant, the next time Mary asks you to file a parts requisition,” Erin said with kindly humor. “You don’t have to bring it to the bridge. Just file it in the computer and go get the parts.”

The Lieutenant nodded jerkily and turned an even deeper shade of scarlet. He clutched the padd to his chest again. “Yes, sir.” He hesitated a moment longer then all but fled back into the turbolift.

Erin watched him go and shook her head as the turbolift doors closed and the lift whisked him back to Engineering. Half the bridge crew started snickering softly over the incident.

“Were we ever that awkward?” she muttered to no one as she turned her attention to Janira, who was absorbed in monitoring subspace for Romulan communications instead of laughing with everyone else.

She had a communication earpiece Erin had specifically helped her design in their free time a while ago, that was a modern take on the 23rd century technology that was now obsolete. It was probably the only of its kind in the fleet. Earpieces had gone out of style centuries ago but Lieutenant Commander Triven held the firm stance that no matter how advanced the computer system that there was an element of sentient intuition and sensitivity it couldn’t duplicate.

Erin and Janira had had more than one friendly debate on the subject with Erin, being a computer scientist before she’d ever been a Captain, firmly arguing the opposite. Grudgingly, Erin had to admit that Janira might have a point. Thus far, the Trill Chief of Communications had never failed to perform and she’d detected subspace noise that the computer would have disregarded as inconsequential but had proven to be anything but in the past. It pained Erin to admit that in her computer loving heart.

“Getting anything?” she asked Janira.

The pretty Trill pulled her hand away from the earpiece where she’d been unconsciously holding it in place. A needless gesture, the almost invisible instrument fit seamlessly against her ear and wouldn’t come off without Janira actively removing it but one that seemed to come naturally.

She shook her head, a few stray strands of wavy dark hair escaping from the neat chignon she wore at the nape of her neck, revealing the scattering of spots that ran from her temples to her feet. “I’m getting occasional communications but they’re all coded just like the last batch.”

Erin wondered briefly if Janira’s symbiote might have been a communications officer in a past incarnation and that was half the reason Janira preferred the earpiece. According to her, the symbiote from which her ‘last name’ came, Triven, was four hundred years old. It was certainly possible.

“Didn’t you break those codes? Can’t you decode what you’re getting now using them?”
“No, Captain. I did break the previous codes. These aren’t the same codes. They’ve changed them already. It’s an entirely new set of encryptions.”

Erin repressed the desire to curse. That meant that news of what had happened at Vendor Station had spread, quickly. If they had already changed their encryption codes everyone in the sector probably knew.

“What did you get out of the previous batch? No one ever did tell me,” Erin said. She cast a slightly perturbed glance at Dean that he avoided acknowledging. It was his job to review and pass along all department reports. He’d taken it upon himself not to pass them along while she’d been declared unfit for duty. He was within his rights to do so but it still annoyed Erin. She hated not knowing what was going on.

Janira shrugged slightly, turning away from her console to face the command pit, her stocking-ed legs crossed primly at the ankle. Janira was probably the only officer onboard who willing chose to wear the skirt version of the officer’s uniform. Erin would have to beaten to be convinced to do so. “Not much. I picked up hints and references to Operation Khellian and confirmation that it is based in the Rator System and has to do with the Federation but their being as tight lipped about it as a bunch of Terran lampreys. I got nothing you didn’t get down on the station.”

Erin sighed. She’d hoped for more but you took what you got. She wished they’d dared to take scans of the Rator System on the way here but it would have given them away as surely as a target painted on the hull. “Alright. Keep working on the new encryptions. Let me know what you get,” Erin said. She started to turn toward the science station to ask Lorian for a status on any possible cloaked vessels detected when his head snapped up and swiveled around before she’d asked.

“Cloaked vessel detected fifty kilometers dead ahead,” he warned. “Massive amounts of thalaron radiation and an increasing amount of antiprotons also detected in the vicinity.”

Dead ahead at that range? Were they insane? It set the Devil’s Trap on a collision course going at high warp. It was suicide for both parties. Thalaron radiation? Erin’s blood chilled at the thought of what that might mean and she had to mentally remind herself to act and not react. Why the climbing presence of antiprotons?

“Drop us out of warp,” Erin ordered. They had to try to slow down or they’d plow into the cloaked ship and kill every one onboard both vessels. “Emergency evasive.”

“Aye, sssir!” Pril confirmed.

“Shields up. Red alert!” Dean barked.

The klaxon blared, the bridge lights turned crimson, and everyone acted with trained precision.

The Devil’s Trap popped out of warp with a metallic wail of protest and directly into the path of the waiting enemy ship, a D’deridex Warbird that was so close to them it took up the entire view screen, blotting out space.

“They are locking disruptors,” the Romulan expatriate Lieutenant Law warned from the tactical station behind the command pit.

Erin didn’t have time to worry about phasers, phasers wouldn’t matter one iota if the Devil’s Trap rammed the Romulan ship, which was making no attempt to get out of the way. Pril, down at the helm tried desperately to pilot the ship out of the danger zone, throwing the Devil’s Trap sharply sideways as the Romulan’s sent lines of green disruptor fire at them. The beams glanced across the
Devil’s Trap’s ventral shields, the energy deflected.

Erin held on to her chair as the inertial dampenors attempted to compensate for the sudden change and the gravity systems tried to adjust. Pril’s maneuver wasn’t enough, they were going to slam through the starboard side of the Romulan ship and sheer it clean off.

“Full reverse!” Erin ordered intending to slow her ship’s speed by essential digging its heels in and backpedaling. “Drop us down underneath them.”

Pril complied wordlessly, forcing the Devil’s Trap’s nose down and sending the ship into a dive.

“Law, fire a polaron burst. Weaken their shields.”

Erin heard holobuttons chirp as Law attempted to comply and Pril’s dragged the Devil’s Trap downward through space. The Warbird finally seemed to decide maybe it should move and attempted to pull it’s forward hull up and away but it wasn’t fast enough.

“Brace for impact!” Dean warned. The two ships collided as the Devil’s Trap curved beneath the Warbird’s belly, both ships’ shields coruscating blue and green energy respectively as they ground against one another. The Devil’s Trap shook like a shaken toy but she held together. Law fired, adding a blaze of purple polaron beams to the kaleidoscope.

The Devil’s Trap managed to slip from beneath the Warbird to freedom behind it and the shaking ceased.

“Damage report,” Erin demanded of everyone else.

“No hull damage. Our dorsal shields at eighty percent. The Warbird’s dorsal shielding also at eighty,” Dean relayed, his eyes locked on the console in his armrest.

“The Romulan ship is coming around and recharging their weapons,” the Andorian Talia warned.

“Pril, come about ninety degrees starboard, zero elevation,” Erin barked. “Mr. Lorian, how about one of those nifty focused tachyon beams?”

“Aye, Captain,” Lorian noted and began implementation of the proper adjustments as Pril hauled the Devil’s Trap around to face her enemy.

“Law, keep them busy for Mr. Lorian.”

“Yes, sir,” the Romulan said.

The aura of tension, battle born, battered at Erin’s mental shield and made her heart beat quicken. It pressed in on her like a palpable force but her shield held, holding the upswing in tension emanating from the rest of the bridge crew at bay.

The Devil’s Trap came about far more quickly than the Warbird could. Erin’s ship was a warship in all but name. Classified as a ‘Tactical Escort’ to placate Starfleet’s sense of propriety she was the fastest ship in the fleet, faster even than the Enterprise and far more maneuverable. The ship was equipped with enough weaponry to send most anything stupid enough to engage them scurrying back into the hole that it came from. Designed to be a brutal covert strike and run vessel, the Devil’s Trap had more than a few tricks up its sleeve. Including multivector assault mode, the ability to separate into three equally armed parts complete with their own warp drives and utilizing the sixty percent of the ship’s firepower normally hidden when it was in one piece.
The *Enterprise*, primary flagship of the fleet, could best her in firepower and durability, but only just. It also lacked the maneuverability or the speed that made the *Devil’s Trap* the superior fighter. The *Enterprise* was a sledgehammer, the *Devil’s Trap* was a scalpel. The goal being to swoop in and disable (or obliterate) the target before they’d had a chance to retaliate.

The *Enterprise*, meant to be primarily a diplomatic exploring vessel capable of defending against any threat willing to try her, had to hunker down and fight. Though the diplomatic exploring bit was in question now. The newest incarnation of the legendary ship, the *Enterprise F*. was a dreadnought. Fully capable and intended to be the toughest ships designed to fight out long term engagements and blast away anything that got in its way.

Starfleet had become a much different organization than the diplomatic, peace-keeping paramilitary explorers of its past. Now it was as much a full-fledged military operation as anything with all the tragic implications therein. That the *Enterprise-F* had been commissioned as a dreadnought, a weapon of war, was a knife in the heart of anyone who wanted a return to their roots. Somewhere Erin was certain Captain Kirk was rolling over in his proverbial grave with anguish.

“In possssition,” Pril announced. The warbird was turned halfway toward them, keeping their vulnerable underside away from possible attack. Disruptor beams flashed from the vessel’s upper port hull and raked across the *Devil’s Trap*’s shields.

The *Devil’s Trap* didn’t budge despite the fact Talia barked from the security station. “Forward shields down to ninety percent.” They couldn’t move for what Erin had ordered Lorian to do, the ship had to remain stationary.

Law sent a blaze of phaser fire back at the Warbird to keep them occupied that crackled like orange lightening over the ship’s shields.

Erin looked down toward the science station anxiously. She didn’t like sitting still. “Mr. Lorian?”

“Ready,” he assured her.

“Fire,” Erin commanded.

An incandescent blue beam shot out from the *Devil’s Trap*’s deflector dish and struck the Warbird, enveloping it in a momentary bubble of energy that ate at the Warbird’s shields like acid.

“Target’s shields are down,” Talia confirmed.

“Law, target their weapons and engines,” Erin demanded.

“Targeting,” Law confirmed.

“They are locking torpedos,” Talia warned. A desperate attempt to inflict damage before the *Devil’s Trap* could launch another assault. They never got the chance.

“Target locked,” Law called out. “Firing.”

Twin lances of phaser fire issued from the forward phaser banks and struck the hull of the Warbird precisely. Both locations exploded in small bursts of green energy and the Warbird’s glowing green nacelles went dark, it listed slightly, now at the mercy of the eddies of space. They made no attempt to hail the *Devil’s Trap*.

“Target’s weapons and engines offline. The ship is disabled, Captain,” Talia announced.
“That was too easy,” Dean remarked warily.

“Yeah it was,” Erin agreed. A *D’eridex* Warbird was capable of far more than this one had even attempted to do. They were slow but heavily armed. “Status,” she demanded to know.

“The enemy vessel is disabled,” Lorian replied dutifully and without hesitation. “However, I am still detecting massive amounts of thalaron radiation and the antiproton levels continue to increase. Tachyon levels are not degrading as expected either. And Captain….the fourth planet of this system, Eos, formerly a Class G, is dead.”

Erin felt a chill of foreboding that had nothing to do with precognition and everything to do with logical deduction sweep over her. A corresponding wave battered at her mental shield from the crew around her. But it held, thankfully.

“There’s another ship,” Dean realized.

“But where?” Erin said. “Janira, hail the Romulan vessel,” she commanded and then to Lorian, “Put Eos on screen,” she commanded and Lorian switched the view from the listing Warbird to a view of the Proxima Rhogana system’s fourth planet. It held none of the rocky terrain and new born oceans of a Geocrystalline planet. No wisps of cloud systems swirled over its surface as the planet started its slow progress to becoming capable of sustaining life forms higher than jellyfish, bacteria, sponges and simple vegetation like algae it should have had. Instead, it was a gray, lifeless orb that hung in its orbit, dead as Earth’s moon, Luna.

Whatever life might have arisen on Eos in the coming millennia now never would. It had all been turned to kilometers of ash spread out like a suffocating blanket. The unmistakable earmark of having been destroyed with thalaron radiation. Thalaron radiation killed any and all organic life it touched within seconds, turning it to irradiated ash from the inside out. It was a devastating and terribly illegal weapon, capable of wiping out entire civilizations in one fell swoop. Even a few particles was enough to kill the entire crew of a starship if they weren’t shielded.

The last such weapon had been aboard the Reman ship, *Scimitar*, commanded by the mad clone of Captain Jean-Luc Picard, Shinzon in 2379. The Bassen Rift, location of the battle where the *Enterprise E* had destroyed the *Scimitar*, was still irradiated with low levels of thalaron radiation thirty years later. Nothing that passed through it without substantial shielding survived.

“We should get the hell out of here,” Sam suggested from down at Ops.

“We can’t until we know we aren’t running into the jaws of the other ship or ships,” Dean reminded him. “We have to figure out where they are first.”

“Mr. Lorian can you locate the source of the thalaron radiation that could have done that?”

“Negative Captain, the dispersal is too wide to accurately calculate the point of origin,” the Vulcan relayed.

“No response from the Romulan ship,” Janira informed her as well.

“What a surprise,” muttered Dean.

“Captain!” Lorian warned. In the breath it took him to say it hell itself wavered out of space to say hello.

Erin stood straight up out of her chair at the sight of it and then immediately sat down again as her knees refused to support her weight under the onslaught of complete terror that sweep the bridge like
wild fire. Her mental shield thinned to the point of breaking and it was all Erin could do to keep it from failing completely. If she hadn’t had the dubious benefit of the Lexorin to repress her telepathy to some extent, she knew she’d have lost it altogether. Lorain looked back at her, face without expression, but his luminous blue eyes held a glint of what might have been worry. For her, the situation or both Erin didn’t know.

“Oh my God,” someone said. It took Erin a second to realize it was her. The crew was gaping in open mouthed horror.

They were staring down the unmistakable maw of a planet killer. The gullet of the beast burning inferno orange and nearly blinding everyone on the bridge. Somehow the Romulans had gotten their hands on what was colloquially called a ‘doomsday machine’. They ate planets, tearing them apart and consuming the debris to fuel themselves and they were completely autonomous, piloted by the poor souls that had the dubious honor of having themselves, body and mind, fused with the ship and encased in a crystalline chamber deep within that they would never again leave.

No one knew what culture had built them or where they came from. Or where people kept finding them for that matter. The Federation had one in a museum on Earth, the derelict hulk of the one destroyed by the Enterprise under the command of Captain James T. Kirk. It was entirely out of operation and thus far no one had been able to figure out how to run one even if they could have repaired it. Apparently the Romulans had.

Most of the current Devil’s Trap crew had faced such a machine once before, when the mad Klingon Ambassador B’Vat had intended to turn one loose on the Federation. They had managed to destroy it, barely, with an entire fleet of ships and the volatile Hargh’peng radiation torpedos developed by the same facility that had been aiding B’Vat. Stolen by B’Vat’s former aide K’Valk in an attempt to stop his crazed superior and then confiscated by the Devil’s Trap while K’Valk gave his life and his ship to distract the doomsday machine for them.

The Devil’s Trap had neutronium alloy hull plating. It was tough as hell but it could be punched through if you tried hard enough. Doomsday machine’s had a hull entirely composed of pure neutronium not just alloy plating. It was completely impenetrable to any weapon known to any sentient life from in the galaxy. The only way to destroy them was to hurl Hargh’peng torpedoes down its mouth until it was destroyed from the inside. Unfortunately the mouth was also where it shot back from on a ten second cycle once the weapon was charged. One blast the Devil’s Trap could survive with their shields at full power, a second one would turn them to space dust.

But this wasn’t just a doomsday machine. It was a doomsday machine that had been swallowed in the thorny craw of the ship built around it. The single largest starship Erin had ever seen outside a Borg Cube, fully as large at the reports of Nero’s Narada had been but wider than it was long. The distinctive Romulan design gave the impression of a ginormous bird of prey, its four wings swept forward as though it mantled over its kill, the flanges of the wings mimicking the ruffled feathers of an agitated bird, glowing green points at the ends of each feather. Thalaron pulse weapons.

Which meant this was what had killed all life on Eos and was probably preparing to eat it before the Devil’s Trap had so rudely interrupted by nearly plowing into what had to be its escort. They’d blundered into a weapons test of a weapon of war that was the most powerful destructive force they’d even seen. The Warbird hadn’t fought back with any zeal because it had merely been distracting the Devil’s Trap long enough for this monstrosity to take position.

Nor did Erin believe for a second that the kamikaze trick the Warbird had pulled to force the Devil’s Trap out of warp was a coincidence. It had been deliberate. Doubtless, they had been detected and the Warbird and its colossal chick had been ordered to intercept them. Why pursue a ship when you
can just relay ahead and have them cut off? Especially when the ship was one they’d want to tear apart as badly as this one?

More over Erin knew this moment in time to be the culmination of her failures on the Romulan Front. The thalaron weapons on that ship were no doubt powered by at least one if the thalaron triggers she’d unknowingly lost to the Remans on Nimbus III. Somehow the Tal Shiar had gotten them back and created…this.

The experiments the Devil’s Trap crew had saved many test subjects from on Installation 18 but had never been able to figure out to what end the experiments were being done, now made sense. The Tal Shiar had been trying to create pilots for the planet killer.

That they’d been intercepted and that the Warbird hadn’t bothered to try and destroy them but instead waited for this thing to do it only proved how very, very much they wanted Erin and her crew dead. This monster was most likely the primary weapon of Operation Khellian, the operation against the Federation they’d discovered based in the Rator System when they’d raided Vendor Station

The thalaron triggers. Installation 18. Vendor Station. Operation Khellian. All built to this moment. Now.

Erin should have felt some vindication that Operation Khellian had proven to be real. That something had come from the events at Vendor Station other than five thousand deaths. That they knew what the experiments had been on Installation 18 and where the thalaron triggers had gotten to. She didn’t.

There was no way to get out of this alive. They were all about to die. Their only chance of survival was to turn and run. But their survival meant leaving this world destroying ship in the clutches of the Romulans who would use it to destroy the Federation and Erin had given them every excuse to start their war whenever they liked at Vendor Station. Something no Starfleet crew worth a damn would allow to happen. Erin wouldn’t be the cause of billions of deaths, not again.

“Evasive maneuvers!” Erin shouted. The ship was about to fire on them and they’d be dead before they knew what hit them. Pril jumped into action from long habit. Captain ordered, he did. It was that deeply embedded training that saved them.

The Saurian pulled every ounce of power Sam could give him and shoved it into the engines then jerked the Devil’s Trap’s nose up and around as hard as he could, sending the ship into a dangerous upward corkscrew that made the hull integrity scream for mercy.

The ship fired its many thronged thalaron pulse a split second too late and it arced out harmlessly where the Devil’s Trap had been, leaving a smoldering green cloud of radiation in its wake.

“Increasing energy to the shield capacitors,” Sam informed them, automatically taking precautions to protect the ship from the cloud of thalaron radiation that was beginning to disperse but was still instantly deadly if it got through their already weakened shields.

“Get us over and behind it Pril!” Erin ordered as the crew held on for dear life, the inertial dampeners and the gravity systems unable to compensate for the very sudden maneuver the ship was not technically designed for. The Devil’s Trap was fast and maneuverable but Pril’s trick was something you pulled in a shuttle not a starship.

“Aye, Captain,” Pril confirmed, whipping the ship out of the corkscrew to do as he was told.

The Devil’s Trap’s maneuverability was, in fact, the only advantage they had. If they could get over
and behind the prototype Romulan ship, they might be able to do something to stop it before it obliterated them.

“Dean, tactical analysis!”

Her First officer didn’t bother wasting time looking at his Captain as though she had lost her mind. He immediately started tapping his armrest console with one hand while holding on tightly to the chair with the other lest he be flung out of it.

“Fifty-two disruptor banks. Twenty-seven plasma torpedo bays. Advanced cloaking device. Exterior neutronium alloy hull plating, interior pure neutronium on the planet killer. Fourteen thalaron pulse emitters. Standard weapons are on a different system than the planet killer and the thalaron generator. Mark XI Quantum Singularity Core. Slipstream capable. Primary and secondary regenerative shields. Captain, their shields aren’t up. I don’t think they can raise them yet, too much energy drain from the weapons and the cloak being used. I don’t think they can fire while cloaked either.”

“Thank God for small favors,” Sam mumbled shakily.

“Captain, I am detecting a large number of transporter signals. They have beamed the crew off the Warbird,” Lorian advised.

Erin swallowed hard and tried to ignore the wave of additional, barely controlled fear emanating from everyone on the bridge save Lorian before it overwhelmed her. They were massively outgunned. The Devil’s Trap was faster with a Mark XII warp core but they had only forty beam weapon banks, fifteen torpedo bays, a photonic displacer and a mine launcher and sixty percent of it was hidden until they initiated multivector assault mode. They had some impressive weapons to deploy through that system but they were a flea compared to the prototype trying to squash them. But the prototype couldn’t raise their shields just yet. They had a chance, a very small one, to disable it.

“They’re locking torpedoes and coming about,” Talia warned.

“Understood,” Erin acknowledged. “Dean take over the beam weapons for Mr. Law. Law, target their weapons systems with a salvo of tricobalt torpedoes and fire. Focus on the one powering the thalaron pulse and planet killer first.”

Dean was up and moving even as Law was busily initiating target locks. “Locking…” he said.

“They’re firing!” Talia barked.

“Dean!” Erin yelled.

“Got it!” Dean promised from behind her, half splayed over the tactical console as he hit holobuttons and sent out a wide dispersal phaser shot that obliterated the plasma torpedos mid-flight with a display of sputtering sparks. He launched a barrage of multiphasic mines for good measure that locked and catapulted for their target almost instantly at such close range. They bit into but did not significantly damage the prototype’s hull.

“Firing on weapons system A,” Law declared and the Devil’s Trap spat out a salvo of three tricobalt torpedoes that raced toward their mark. They moved slower than photon torpedoes but did significantly more damage, with the neutronium alloy hull plating photon torpedoes wouldn’t knock out their weapons system in one shot. The Tricobalts would…if they hit their mark.

Two of the torpedos hit home with a gratifying crackle of green energy as the weapons system supplying to the thalaron generator and the planet killer blew. The other sailed harmlessly over the ship, missing entirely. The maw of the planet killer went dark and the bright tips of the ship’s feather
flickered out. The huge prototype was still trying to come around to face them directly, it is bulk and energy requirements too much to let it dart and dash like the Devil’s Trap could.

“Yes!” Sam crowed triumphantly.

“I would not cheer yet Mr. Campbell. They are still armed,” Lorian said cautiously.

Sam grumbled something about unenthusiastic pointy ears under his breath that Lorian didn’t respond to.

“Initiate multivector assault mode,” Erin ordered into the air. “Authorization Winchester-8-omega-epsilon-2.” She wasn’t going to give that prototype time to get turned around or to fire again. They’d taken out the most dangerous weapons now they had to get the second set disabled and the ship incapable of going anywhere. She was not letting the ship get anywhere near Federation space.

“Acknowledged,” the computer said in a dissonantly calm and pleasant tone as the bridge lights added blue to its increasing rainbow of alert colors. “Initiating decoupling sequence in ten… nine… eight…”

“They’re firing disruptors!” Talia bit.

“Return fire at will!” Erin replied. Dean was all over it, sending an arc of multi colored beams at the ship, firing a combination of plasma beams, phasers, and polaron beams at the vessel. They struck the primary hull and left blackened scorch marks behind them.

The prototype’s disruptors raked the Devil’s Trap’s forward shields hard but the ship only rattling somewhat the shields taking the brunt of the attack.

“Minimal damage to target,” Talia reported. “Forward shields down to fifty percent. We can’t take another hit like that.”

“We won’t,” Erin said waiting apprehensively on the ship to separate and give her access to its full firepower.

“Four…three…two…one…Separation sequence in progress,” the ship’s computer said, finishing its countdown. Erin braced for the familiar sensation of the hull separating and instead something screamed bloody murder, metal wailing in a way that made Erin’s entire body vibrated and the ship itself shudder as though it were being pulled apart. Something had gone terribly wrong.

“Separation sequence has malfunctioned,” the computer said blandly. “Multivector assault mode aborted.”

That had never happened. Ever. And now couldn’t possibly be a worse time.

“Bridge to Engineering,” Erin barked. “Mary, did you break my ship? Now’s a bad time to break my ship!”

The Chief Engineer’s voice came back frantic. “Sorry, Captain! I don’t know what happened. The entire mechanism has fused. Everything checked out earlier.” Voices in the background shouted at one another, Engineering was in controlled chaos.

“Fused?!” Erin said in astonishment.

“I need time to figure out what happened,” Mary said.
“We don’t have time,” Erin said.

“They’re raising shields!” Talia warned.

“Damn it!” Erin bit. “Law, take out their engines. Fire everything if you have to!”

“Yes, sir,” the Romulan said and almost as soon as he said it the Devil’s Trap roared to very angry life as it initiated every available weapon on board. Warning alarms went off like the death cries of hundreds of wounded animals. The only thing that fired were the phasers, zipping through the prototype’s defenses a nanosecond before the ship got it’s shields all the way up and impacting with a wild spark on the engine system.

Something whined shrilly and the security console exploded in a shower of sparks, throwing Talia backward to lie motionless on the decking.

“We’ve lost all weapons but phasers!” Law declared.

“What the hell!” Dean barked.

“Captain, we are in imminent danger of total energy cascade failure,” Lorian warned.

“We haven’t been hit!” Erin cried incredulously. What the hell was going on? The entire ship was malfunctioning very suddenly and she knew there wasn’t a foreseeable reason for it.

Erin cursed that she was on Lexorin to dampen her newly fledged precognitive telepathy. She’d gladly have traded death by adrenaline overdose for having known this was going to happen.

“Nevertheless, that is what is happening Captain,” Lorian said.

“We disabled their slipstream drive and did some damage to their warp core but they can still go to warp. Just not as fast as before,” Sam relayed taking over Talia’s functions instinctively.

“Medical team to the bridge. Medical emergency!” Dean snapped scrambling from his chair to check on Lieutenant Commander Talia. She was alive but she was badly injured, one entire side of her face scorched by electrical burns.

“On my way!” Cass replied the computer automatically relaying the message from the bridge to the sickbay.

“We’ve lost the shields!” Sam warned becoming desperate.

“Get us out of here, Pril,” Erin ordered. They couldn’t take another chance to attack the prototype, their phasers would never crack the ship’s shields and there would be no one to warn Starfleet about the impending attack. The prototype would have to make extensive repairs, now the Devil’s Trap’s job was to run and get word back to the Federation. It’s all they could do.

“Aye!” Pril shrilled and tried to throw the Devil’s Trap into warp drive. Nothing happened.

“Winchester to Harvelle,” Erin shouted. “Mary?!”

“I’m trying to fix it. Everything is overheating. I have no idea what caused this!” Mary shouted back, her voice high and strained. “The warp cores are off line! The injectors melted. I working on replacing them now!”

“We’re dead in the water,” Dean muttered in justifiable terror.
“We’re being hailed!” Janira chimed in the chanced it to, “We’re being forcibly hailed.”

The view screen flickered, changing the image from the prototype that had managed to come all the way about finally and a sudden image of a very angry Romulan Commander. The Romulan prototype had cut through their communications encryptions and forced the channel open.

The Commander was not your typical Romulan. She, for it was a woman, wore the typical uniform of her rank and the typical short shorn style with the pronounced ‘V’ of bangs that directly aligned with the subtle ‘V’ of ridges on her forehead that mimicked the popular Vulcan style and her ears were typically pointed, showing the shared ancestry Romulans held with Vulcans. But her hair was platinum blonde and her eyes, which burned with hate, were pale blue. Empress Sela’s daughter perhaps? The Romulan woman wasn’t pure blooded that was certain.

The bridge was silent as a grave.

“You!” the Romulan Commander seethed. “Captain Erin Winchester of the Federation starship Devil’s Trap.” She spat the words out like they were an epithet. “Murderer! How dare you come into Romulan space again after what you did at Vendor Station. Five thousand innocent Romulans. Wasn’t Romulus and Remus enough!? And you call us monsters.” The Romulan tilted her head a bit. “I am Commander Ael t’Xereth of the Imperial Romulan Warbird prototype Scythe. You should know who is going to kill you and then destroy every planet the Federation has. I am going to thoroughly enjoy this.”

Cass came off the turbolift and raced toward Dean, narrowing in with a doctor’s senses on the wounded. He ignored what was going on around him and dropped to Talia’s side, medkit falling to the floor beside him as he started to survey his patient.

“Wait!” Erin cried turning white a sheet. “I can explain!”

The Romulan Commander scowled. “I have no desire to listen to the excuses of a mass murderer,” she spat at Erin then looking out of the range of the view screen. “Target torpedoes and fire on the scum’s bridge.”

“Please!” Erin pleaded holding her hand out toward the screen for mercy. There was no point in trying to convince the Commander about the Undine that had become Commander Selok. This Commander would never listen. “I take full responsibility for what happened at Vendor Station but no one else on this ship killed anyone. They were my actions and mine alone. It was all me. My crew was only following my orders. You can have me. All I’m asking is that you spare my crew. They’re innocent.”

“Like the doctors and scientists on Vendor Station were innocent?” the Commander seethed.

Erin’s heartbeat slammed in her chest and it seemed almost as if everyone was frozen. “I’ll do anything you want. Just let them live.” She deserved this, they didn’t.

“That’s quite an apology,” the Commander said calmly. Then she grinned viciously and Erin knew her attempts to beg mercy were in vain. Her heart dropped to her feet. “But why would I spare your people, when you didn’t spare mine?” She looked off screen. “Fire.” The transmission cut off.

The view returned to space, the now named Scythe and the full spread of plasma torpedoes streaking straight for the bridge. The Devil’s Trap could never move in time, not with only Impulse engines available. Neither could they shoot them down in time to save themselves.

Erin’s mental shield shook, flickering like a faulty fuse as she turned around to face her crew in
defeat. They all looked mortified. Except Lorian. He simply looked resigned and nothing he might or 
might not have felt leaked out. Erin couldn’t say the same for the rest of them, a cascade of fear and 
grief over their impending deaths washed over her already thin mental shield like tidal wave.

“I’m sorry,” Erin whispered.

Chapter End Notes

Please read and review!
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“I’m sorry.”

Erin waited for the inevitable. They had seconds left to live and there were no words of solace she could offer her crew. None. Their fear threatened to cripple her and strip what was left of her mental shield. At least the rest of the crew had no idea they were all about to die.

Lorian, stoic and expressionless as ever, suddenly lifted one slanted brow sharply. “Fascinating,” he said and bent over his console with the last milliseconds ticking by, long fingers flying over the buttons. Erin gawked at him incredulously.

“What?” Dean said stupidly off the Vulcan’s comment, dumbfounded by it.

“The torpedoes have ceased their travel,” Lorian announced.

Erin whirled around on her heel to see what Lorian was talking about a surge of desperate hope swelling in her breast. There indeed were the five plasma torpedoes on a perfect trajectory to obliterate the bridge. They sat there and didn’t move. Now Erin gawked at the torpedoes trying very hard to get a grip on her mental shield with limited success but it did stabilize.

“Am I the only one seeing that?” Dean muttered.

“Everything outside this ship has ceased to move in any fashion. Physical, subatomic, or temporal. Time has stopped,” Lorian said.

“I’m sorry”? That’s the best you can come up with?”

The voice was arrogant, mocking, apparently amused, male and didn’t belong to anyone on the bridge. Erin whirled back around to see who the speaker was only to see a tall human man in his apparent thirties who was completely enrobed by the perfect rendition of black and red late 21st Century Eastern Coalition Judge’s robes from Earth’s third World War. Right down to the ornate gold and ruby chains of office and the absurd black habit. He had his hip leaned casually against the console for Mission Ops on the back bulkhead of the bridge, his arms crossed over his chest and the most irritating grin on his face Erin had ever seen.

“Quite the predicament you’ve gotten you and your crew into Captain Winchester,” the man mused aloud. “Or Erin? May I call you Erin?”

Erin stared at him. She felt she should know who he was. There was something about him that tickled her memory and said it was important but just at the moment Erin was so confused she couldn’t remember what it was.

“Who the hell are you?” Dean snapped. “Where’d you come from?”

“I’m ‘the hell’ who just pushed pause on the universe to keep your sniveling pathetic excuse for an existence from going ‘poof’,” the man said pushing off the console. He made a little exploding motion with his gloved hands and gave Dean a withering look. The man looked at Erin who was still staring at him blankly. “Why do you keep him around? Aren’t you bored of him yet? He’s so… provincial. No manners.” Then he smiled brilliantly. “Aw,” he cooed strolling across the bridge
toward her. “You’re star struck. I know. It’s perfectly understandable. My roguish good looks do that to all the women I meet.”

“Q,” Lorian observed nonplused. “Or more precisely, Q, son of Q and often referred to derogatorily as Q Junior.”

“Excellent deduction, oh pointy eared one,” Q mocked. “I prefer ‘Your Most High Honor’, frankly. But Q will do in a pinch.”

Lorian lifted his brow at the man but said nothing, merely placing his hands behind his back.

That’s why Erin felt she should recognize him. Every Starfleet officer of command rank was briefed on both Q and Q Junior and advised to remember what they looked like in the event they decided to play havoc with them at some point in their careers. That explained why Lorian knew who he was as well. Lorian had been First Officer of the _USS Bradbury_ before taking a reduction in position to serve on the _Devil’s Trap_. Erin had just been too stunned to dredge up the three-year-old briefing from memory on the spot.

They’d gone from being at the mercy of a planet destroying supership commanded by a seriously angry and vengeful Romulan to being at the mercy of an omnipotent being with questionable purpose and unlimited power. Erin wasn’t sure she wouldn’t rather have faced the Romulan.

“I don’t care what letter of the alphabet he calls himself,” Cass bit from on his knees beside the unconscious and gravely injured Talia. “But if we aren’t going to all die in the next few seconds I have a patient to treat.”

Q laughed aloud and pointed at the Doctor. “Now him I like. Feisty.” Q waved at Cass. “Carry on,” he encouraged. Cass snarled at him and went back to work ignoring the omnipotent being. Castiel Novak had no use for such things. He just wanted people to get out of his way when he was trying to treat wounded.

Q sidled up behind Erin and laid his hands on her shoulders. Erin didn’t bother to move, there was no point. There was nowhere she could go and nothing she could do to prevent Q from doing whatever he desired. She did stiffen though.

Q chuckled at it as he kneaded her shoulders experimentally. “Oh, goodness,” he said in an alarmed manner. “Erin, your shoulders are nothing but knots. You should really relax more. Love the gloves by the way. Nice fashion choice. I’m partial to them myself.” He proceeded massaging her shoulders and Erin ducked out of his grasp. He allowed it and Erin knew it was only because he allowed it. Oddly, she got nothing from him in any capacity, she felt no presence. He might as well not have existed.

“Not that I don’t appreciate the last nanosecond rescue,” Erin said glancing out the view screen where the plasma torpedoes still hung, suspended in time and perfectly capable of resuming course the instant Q felt like it. “Such as it is.” Then she looked back at Q. “But why are you here?”

“Straight and to the point,” Q said with a regretful sigh. “I can respect that.” He took a deep breath. “Very well. If you simply must know I suppose there’s no harm in telling you,” he mused. “I was curious about you. Rumor has it that this is the best ship and crew in Starfleet. Or so my Auntie Kathy insists.”

“Auntie Kathy?” Sam asked speaking up for the first time from the Ops station. He looked like he’d been shaken vigorously and wasn’t entirely sure if any of this was real or if he was already dead and this was some perverse version of Hell.
“According to our records, Admiral Katherine Janeway is allegedly Q’s Godmother,” Lorian answered. “I would presume that is ‘Auntie Kathy’.”

“Do you do anything but repeat the facts you read out of the computer? Or are you like all the rest of the Vulcans? Nothing but a computer with legs?” Q remarked acidly.

“I would take that as a compliment,” Lorian said.

Q rolled his eyes. “Well at least you’re accurate,” he said and strolled around the railing of the command pit, his gloved fingers trailing over the tritanium languidly. He dropped down into the Captain’s chair with a deliberate lazy huff, hands toying with the arm rests. “‘The pride of Starfleet’,” he muttered as if repeating something someone had told him. He shook his head. “I’ve been watching you for some time now and I must say…I don’t see it. One failure after another. If this is the best Starfleet has to offer anymore…” He trailed off. “The ship’s got the right name though. Devil’s Trap. Very apt.” he stroked the chair’s armrest again as though he were quite pleased with the chair’s fit.

Erin resisted the urge to snap at him to get out of the chair. She’d managed to regain control of her mental shield and get a grip on reality again, if you could call this reality. “You came. You saw. We obviously don’t meet with your approval. So now what?”

“Who said I intend to do anything?” Q remarked, rising from the chair, his entire demeanor changing. He radiated an aura of power and presence now. The foppish jester was gone. He could blink them all out of existence if he chose and he wanted them to know it. “Perhaps I’ll just restart time and watch the inevitable happen.”

Erin had no access to her precognitive telepathy at the moment. But she did know people. It was her job as a Captain. Q wasn’t exactly ‘people’ but omnipotent or not he was still a sentient life form. She made a calculated guess. “You won’t.”

“I won’t?” Q snorted disdainfully.

“It’s not a coincidence you decided to show up and save the day at the last possible moment. You won’t kill us. Not yet. You want something,” Erin said carefully keeping the edge of annoyance out of her voice.

“Very observant, Captain. There may be hope for you yet. Nothing is a coincidence. Not my being here, not your ship falling apart around you. Nothing,” Q said, strolling toward her again, now his stride was menacing and dominant not languid and bored. He stopped so close he was almost pressed against her. He dipped his head until it was next to her ear. Erin stiffened, uncomfortable with how familiar he presumed to get with her but figuring it was probably a good idea not to piss off an omnipotent being, at least until she knew what he wanted from them. “I want to know how good you really are.”

Erin twisted her head to look at him askance. Q smiled devilishly and disappeared in a flash of white light only to reappear directly behind her in front of the view screen.

“Auntie Kathy would have figured this out by now, but you’re starting to. I suppose that’s something. Your species is so terribly limited after all. What you don’t yet realize, is that you have no idea what’s really going on. So let’s see if you can figure it out,” he said ominously. He waved idly at the view screen once and the plasma torpedoes disappeared out of existence.

Erin eyed him suspiciously as did the rest of the crew. Save for Cass who had eyes only for his patient, who was beginning to stir.
“Figure out what?” Erin asked.

“What would be the point if I just told you?” Q said, then he appeared to change the subject. “Do you know, Erin, what’s so wonderful about the universe?” He didn’t give her a chance to answer the rhetorical question. “It’s that no matter where you go, there you are. Everything that is anything, is right there. Waiting. All you have to do is encourage this particle or that one and presto. You’ve got the seed of life, death or anything else you can imagine and many you can’t. Here, I’ll show you.”

He snapped his fingers and time resumed. It was a very slight thing, both ships hung in their positions but there was a definite sense that everything was in motion again.

“Like this,” Q said and snapped his fingers again. Nothing seemed to be happening.

“What are you doing, Q?” Erin asked, suspicious. Just because she couldn’t see what he’d done didn’t mean he hadn’t done something.

“Why don’t we ask the walking computer?” Q said and glanced at Lorian. “Go on. Check your instruments. You know you want to.” He motioned for Lorian to resume his station. The Vulcan complied if only because not to was illogical. He obviously wanted them to see something but it wasn’t apparent what.

It took Lorian a second to take in the data the ship’s sensors fed him but then he looked up with both brows raised and a light of offended incredulity in his eyes. “Captain, the disabled Warbird’s singularity core is breaching.”

“What?” Erin said. “The whole ship will implode and take us with it.”

“It is not imploding. It is, impossibly, exploding,” Lorian observed. The singularity core of a Romulan Warbird drew its power from an artificially created and maintained miniature black hole. When the core breached the black hole collapsed and the reactor would overheat then overload, causing the ship to blow up. But if by some impossibility the miniature singularity expanded… it would consume everything of mass around it.

Erin turned to look at Q in disbelief. He was insane. “You’re creating a black hole.”

“No. I’m making a bigger black hole,” Q corrected idly.

“Why?!” Erin shrilled.

“Consider it a test of your abilities. If you’re as good as they say you are, it should be a piece of cake. If not…well…” he spread his hands as if the result would be a foregone conclusion. “Let’s just say that you’ll be responsible for the destruction of life as you know it in two universes.” He raised a finger. “If you pass, I might tell you what it is you haven’t figured out.” He waggled his fingers in farewell. “Ta-ta for now Captain Winchester. I do hope we meet again.” Then he was gone in a burst of light.

Outside the ship a second burst of light flashed, the miniature singularity of the Romulan Warbird’s core expanding until it consumed the derelict vessel and became something much larger. The black hole irised into being with a screaming roar, crackling around the edges with what could only be described as lightning. It looked nothing like any black hole Erin had ever seen.

“Warning. Excessive gravitational pull detected. Warning.” The computer wailed. The ship’s klaxon blared again and Red Alert sounded automatically as the Devil’s Trap started to tilt and careen toward the singularity. Outside, through the view screen, so did the Scythe.
Everybody flung themselves into their station chairs. There was no time to consider why Q had done this or what he meant to accomplish by it. There was no time to consider that the gargantuan Scythe might decide to obliterate them again, having failed the first time by the interference of an omnipotent being. There was only time to try to get out of the singularity’s gravity well before the ship was torn to shreds. Which was impossible at impulse.

“Pril, full impulse,” Erin ordered anyway. They had to do something. She wasn’t giving up her ship or her crew without a fight. Even to a huge singularity created by an egomaniacal omnipotent being.

Evacuating the ship wasn’t an option. The escape pods would never be able to escape the gravity well, despite their lighter mass and there was no way that the crew could get to them before the black hole consumed them.

“Aye!” the Saurian declared frantically forcing the Devil’s Trap’s impulse engines to try, ineptly, to drag them away from the singularity. The Scythe was attempting the same thing, at full warp available to them, and failing.

“Somebody get our shields back up!” Dean ordered.

“Attemping,” Lorian said. “Mr. Campbell reroute power to the shield emitters from auxiliary. Take it from life support if you have to.”

“Yes, sir,” Sam said and went to work.

The Devil’s Trap slipped faster toward the singularity’s center being dragged to its crushing death with inexorably force. The pressure was beginning to cause the hull to buckle, the air filled with the anguished scream of tritanium and neutronium alloy trying to withstand the vacuum of space and the incalculable pull of the singularity.

Cass had hunkered down under the security console with Talia held in his lap, his barely conscious patient muttering as the Doctor tried to keep her calm. Law was holding on to the tactical console to keep from being thrown across the bridge.

Erin hit her armrest. “Mary, we’re being pulled into a singularity. I need a miracle.”

“I’m giving you all I can!” Mary cried in alarm.

“That’s not enough. What else do you have?”

“Uh. Okay. Okay. If we eject the cores and detonate them, the blast might be enough to push us away from the black hole but I can’t guarantee anything!” Mary called through the ship’s comm. system.

“Do it! Do it now!” Erin demanded, she left the line open.

Lorian looked back. “Shields cannot be restored. The shield capacitor has been shorted out.”

“Shit,” Dean muttered.

Somehow the Vulcan kept his cool. Erin didn’t know how he possibly could under the circumstances but he did. “Captain, the probability of this ship experiencing wide spread system failure of this nature due to malfunction is five thousand six hundred and forty two to one. I believe the Devil’s Trap has been sabotaged.”

“Now you tell me,” Erin growled furious at the implication that someone had sabotaged her ship but
she didn’t have time to worry about a saboteur onboard. If they lived, she’d worry about it. They were going to be ripped in two any second. “Mary!” She screeched in what approached a frantic wail.

“We can’t eject the cores. The entire ejection assembly has been disabled!” Mary said with horror.

“There are three warp cores on this ship and we can’t eject any of them?” Erin said aghast. Lorian looked as though it did not surprise him.

“No, sir,” Mary said with a trembling voice. “I don’t know what happened. I take full responsibility.”

“Something tells me it wasn’t your fault, Mary,” Erin whispered as the Devil’s Trap careened toward the mouth of the black hole, it’s impulse engines flickering wildly as it tried very hard to save itself. The Scythe had already been sucked in, the beak of the primary hull disappearing into the black void of the spiraling lightning storm.

It was too late to get away from the gravity well. They were trapped.

“Auxiliary to the structural integrity field!” Erin barked. “Put everything we have except for life support into it.” Then what Erin had meant only as a metaphor, happened. The Devil’s Trap was swallowed whole by the darkness.

***

Somewhere in Federation territory, near the border of Klingon space, a starship Captain sat in his Captain’s chair and gazed, bored, out the view port of his ship.

Nothing was going on. Everything was running smoothly. They were en route to their next destination, which was at least a week away, patrolling their side of the border as they went…at the grand speed of warp five. Everything was so utterly routine he thought he might pull his hair out from pure monotony. Nobody ever told you about the extensively boring wait between the moments of excitement and discovery when you joined Starfleet.

He supposed he should count his blessings. It could be worse. Instead of being bored to death he could be embroiled in a firefight with the Klingons. Then again, he might have welcomed a firefight at this point. Anything to relieve the boredom might have been welcomed.

The Captain grinned to himself. His Chief Medical Officer would have disagreed vehemently. He liked the monotony and the lack of danger it brought. In fact, he’d probably have been happy to never have anything unexpected or remotely exciting happen for the duration of their mission if he had a choice in the matter.

“Captain.”

The Captain turned to look behind him at the sound of his Science Officer’s voice, peering at him expectantly to say whatever it was he was going to say.

“I am detecting a spatial anomaly on long range sensors,” the Science Officer said.

“Define ‘spatial anomaly’,” the Captain requested. He hoped it wasn’t another ion storm. Those were a royal pain in the ass.

Calmly as a summer breeze his Science Officer said, “It would appear to be…” the Officer hesitated
The Captain stood up out of his chair like he’d been shocked with a cattle prod and hurried to the Science Officer’s side, peering down at the console alongside him. “Where?”

Around them the rest of the bridge crew had begun to stir, rattled from their quiet routine by the Science Officer’s observation. Murmurs of alarm began being exchanged.

“Spatial coordinates 22.87.04.11,” the Science Officer said, pushing buttons on his console to bring up a star chart that marked the pertinent position. The Captain looked at it and suddenly he was very much no longer bored. He decided bored wasn’t such a bad thing after all. “75,000 kilometers from Klingon space,” the Science Officer said as if the Captain hadn’t already realized the implication. They both looked at each other, a million unspoken words passing between them.

“We are two light years from the anomaly’s position,” the Science Officer offered as though in recompense for what he must know was going through both their heads.

Close enough to get there quickly, if they pushed the engines. The Captain turned away from the science station.

“Helm did you catch all that?” he asked his heart rate picking up significantly.

“Yes sir,” the Helm Officer admitted, as though he wished he hadn’t. The Captain didn’t blame him.

“Alter course. Head for those coordinates. Warp eight,” the Captain commanded and sat back down in the Captain’s chair, hands curling over the armrests and gripping them tightly.

“Yes, sir,” the Helm Officer said and proceeded to send the Captain’s ship into an arc to head for the coordinates.

“Lieutenant,” the Captain said looking back again but this time toward the communications station. “Get me Starfleet Command.”

The Communications Officer swallowed hard, nodding her head with unveiled apprehension. “Yes, sir,” she said and began flicking switches hurriedly.

As the ship went to warp, the Captain stilled himself for what they might find. Behind him the Communications Officer cast the Science Officer a look that begged to be consoled but the Science Officer could offer nothing.

The Captain cursed silently. He’d just had to wish for something exciting to happen to end his boredom hadn’t he? Careful what you wish for. You just might get it.

***

There was light in the darkness. It brought no comfort only the sense of an angry God menacing them with Levin bolts of wrath. But there was light, presumably the light swallowed along with the Devil’s Trap by the singularity.

There was however no sound. Space was silent. But this was an entirely new kind of silence. It was so profound it was excruciatingly loud, if that made any sense.

Erin’s heart raced and the Devil’s Trap seemed to lurch and rattle in rhythm with her Captain’s
frantic heartbeat. But disturbingly you couldn’t hear it rattle and strain under the extreme gravitational forces of the singularity. She couldn’t move, held in place by that same gravity. Neither could anyone else. They were pressed down into their chairs as though they were under a meter of steel.

Their thoughts and emotions however were not as restrained as their bodies. There was no specific thought or emotion that could be read, only the endless torrent of powerful incoherent thought and emotion that hammered at Erin’s already battered and weak mental shield.

She willed it fervently to stay in one piece along with her ship as she sat helpless to do anything but ride out whatever was in store for them. She could hardly believe they hadn’t been torn to bits by the singularity yet.

It was with some macabre amusement that she watched as the Devil’s Trap, lighter in mass than the Scythe, hurtled past the hulking planet destroyer alarmingly fast and terribly close. Whatever end they were about to meet, the Devil’s Trap would meet it first.

It took only seconds but it felt like eternity. When the end came, it was with a sudden rebirth of screeching sound and the almost painful release of gravity’s hold. The Devil’s Trap was disgorged from the singularity like an unwanted foreign body. Centrifugal force pitching the ship sideways and setting it spinning with the Scythe thrust from the aperture only a second behind.

It wasted no time firing on them.

***

The Captain sat with his knees crossed in his chair and waited, impatiently. His eyes were locked on the view port as if they’d been glued there and he kept thinking to himself, ‘Please don’t let it be what I think it is.’ But he was almost certain it was.

“Report,” he demanded.

“Visual range in twenty seconds, sir,” the Helmsman said.

“Massive gravitational readings on par with those expected,” the Science Officer put in.

“Has Starfleet answered yet?” the Captain asked his Communication Officer.

“Coming in now, sir,” she said. “They acknowledge and advise you proceed with extreme caution.”

The Captain repressed a snort of disdain. That was glaringly obvious wasn’t it? “Thank them for their advice, Lieutenant.”

“Aye, aye, sir,” the Communications Officer said.

“Captain, we have visual,” the Helmsman said.

“On screen,” the Captain ordered and the Helmsman complied. What displayed on the screen made every hair on the Captain’s body stand on end. It was hauntingly, terrifyingly familiar. The sparking crackling ring of lightning that hovered in space before them was exactly what he had been hoping it wouldn’t be.

“Captain, something it coming through the singularity,” the Science Officer warned.

“Magnify,” the Captain ordered and was given what he asked for. The view was zoomed in on the
The aperture of the singularity just in time to see a ship be flung from its maw like a bit of flotsam, careening wildly through space.

The Captain’s eyes widened. The ship was terribly familiar in an odd sort of way. It was in comparable size to his ship and sported a saucer section and ubiquitous warp nacelles like those of a Starfleet vessel, though it bore four nacelles instead of two. It met no design specifications he’d ever seen and its hull was dark gray instead of standard Starfleet silver-white. It wasn’t as beautiful as his ship, no ship ever would be in his eyes, but it was a beautiful vessel.

Directly behind it, the singularity spat out a second ship. An unbelievably huge monstrosity with a dull green hull and swooping wings with a gapping maw of darkness in its belly that spoke of very bad things. It took up all the available space around it, looked profoundly deadly and seriously pissed off. It didn’t make sense but the ship looked angry. He’d had the misfortune of seeing another ship that huge that looked angry. It made the first ship look like a speck in comparison.

Everyone stared at it in horror-stricken awe. The Captain had one thought. Not again.

“Oh my God,” muttered his Communications Officer.

“Readings!” the Captain barked.

“Forthcoming,” the Science Officer promised.

“Zoom in on the hull of the smaller ship,” the Captain ordered. His helmsman looked at him as if he were crazed since the smaller ship was hurtling sideways out of control but he did his best to comply. He managed to catch it as it twisted and for a brief moment, what the Captain was looking for was visible.

The hull clearly read: USS Devil’s Trap NCC-94940

Everyone on the bridge gawked a second time. “They’re ours,” the Captain murmured softly.

The registration number was far too high but it was a Starfleet registry number. The name was Starfleet configuration. Whatever it was, wherever it had come from, the smaller vessel was Starfleet.

“Captain, the larger vessel is locking weapons on the smaller one,” his Helmsman warned.

“Captain,” the Science Officer said. “Readings indicate that the…Starfleet vessel,” he said the word as if he had to force it out of his mouth because he wasn’t sure he agreed with it yet, “is all but defenseless. They have no shields, limited weaponry available and no warp drive. Only impulse engines are online.”

“The big one is firing!” the helmsman yipped. Green bolts of energy streaked from the larger vessel catching the tiny by comparison Starfleet ship in the secondary hull with a burst of power that punctured the hull like a hot knife. It left a much smaller hole than the Captain thought it would but the smaller ship was still going to be blasted to space dust without any defenses.

“Shields up. Red alert. Bring all weapons on line,” the Captain ordered.

“Yes, sir,” the Helmsman said, fingers flying over his station controls.

The klaxon wailed and the bridge lights flashed red.

“Captain, while I firmly agree with your desire to assist the apparently Starfleet vessel, I must strongly advise you to reconsider this course of action. The other vessel is massively armed. It
appears to have taken some damage and some of its weapon systems are offline but it is still a formidable adversary,” the Science Officer advised sternly.

“Noted,” the Captain said. He wondered what had damaged the huge ship. Had it been the small one? Or something else? If it had been the small one then it must, when it had all its systems operational, be quite powerful itself. But right now, it was a lamb to the slaughter and the Captain wasn’t going to sit by and watch while what appeared to be one of their own, however tenuously, was disintegrated in front of him.

“Weapons charged and ready,” the Helmsman said.

“Then let’s teach the bully to pick on someone their own size,” the Captain said.

“We are not their size,” the Science Officer said almost incredulously.

“Take us in,” the Captain ordered his helmsman. “See if you can draw their fire off the other ship.”

“Yes, sir,” the Helmsman replied and the Captain’s ship veered to intercept the huge ship.

“Captain…” his Science Officer said, his voice growing mildly exasperated.

“Not now,” the Captain said. The Science Officer shut up with an air of hopeless despair for his Captain’s sanity.

***

The Devil’s Trap careened through space like a carelessly thrown toy, the hull groaning from forces exerted on it that it was never meant to handle. Erin had one arm looped around the armrest to keep from being flung out of her chair. The rest of the bridge crew was similarly holding on.

Space was a tilting and swirling scape of stars out the view port with no indication which way was ‘up’ other than the orientation of the Scythe which had come out of the singularity behind them. The alarm klaxon continued to blare its discordant song.

“Straighten up and fly right, Pril!” Erin commanded.

“Trying, sssir!” the Saurian assured her.

“Divert auxiliary power to the stabilizers!” Dean shouted.

“Doing what I can!” Sam insisted.

“Damage report!” Erin called.

Lorian answered in Sam’s place, freeing him to help Pril stop the ship from spinning through space. “Hull integrity down to fifty percent. Moderate casualties reported on all decks, no fatalities. No further damage reported. Shields, all weapons but phasers and the warp core are still offline.”

Erin glanced down at Cass, wedged under the security console, holding Talia in his arms and still steadily attempting to repair the burns to her face and neck with a dermal regenerator during all this. He alternated between holding on to the support struts of the console and working. “Hold on Cass,” Erin encouraged.

The doctor looked at her incredulously. “What does it look like I’m doing?”
“Captain, the Scythe is locking disruptors!” Law warned.

“Can we fire back?” Dean asked.

“With the warp core offline we cannot hope to supply all systems concurrently. We must switch them at need,” Lorian advised.

“So, no,” Dean observed bitterly.

They had a choice, they could hurl through space out of control and try to prevent as much damage as possible in their current condition. Or they could try to fire while doing a respectable imitation of a tilt-a-whirl and hope they hit the Scythe.

“They’re firing!” Law bit into the air.

“Pril!” Dean cried forcefully.

“Almost got it!” Pril hissed, his voice high and slurred with anxiety.

“Divert anything not going to stabilizers to the structural integrity field!” Erin barked. They’d have to hope it would be enough to belay some of the incoming damage. “Brace for impact!”

The disruptor blast hit them hard without shields, making the ship quake like a collapsing mountain. As it did, Erin felt a nauseating, sickening wave of something hit her fragile mental shield like a shockwave. Her mouth opened involuntarily and she gasped, stricken and overwhelmed by the force of it. Death. Agonizing pain. Not her own. Her crew’s.

“Hull breeches on decks twelve and thirteen, sections eight through ten,” Sam declared. “Force fields initiated. Fire suppression systems engaged.” His voice became choked. “Severe casualties.”

Those were the locations for astrometrics, the tertiary battle bridge and part of the Junior Officers Quarters.

“Sound evacuation for those sections. Get medical teams down there,” Erin rasped out, panting rapidly and trying desperately to get her mental shield back up and hold it there.

“On it,” Dean said and took over that task.

Lorian looked back sharply at her. “Captain?” he asked with obvious concern.

“I’m fine,” Erin insisted. She was not fine, she’d felt those people die when the hull breeched. It was all she could do to get her breath back, to try and reestablish her mental shield. Lorian looked dubious, perhaps he knew she was lying, but he took her at her word. Erin’s mental shield went back up, more fragile than ever but holding. Every time it faltered the subsequent reestablishment seemed to be an order of magnitude weaker than the previous one.

Pril gave what amounted to a vicious roar for him, a long wavering hiss reminiscing of a rattlesnake and the Devil’s Trap sheered ‘upright’. He’d gotten control of the ship again.

“Full axis tilt to starboard,” Erin gasped out, “Fire all phasers. Try to blind their sensors.”

Pril complied, turning the Devil’s Trap sideways and around so that the injured part of the hull was turned away from the enemy vessel, the primary hull facing them. Sam assisted by switching power to the phasers and Law let loose with a many lanced barrage of fire from all thirteen available phaser banks.
Orange fire slammed into the Scythe, scattering over its shields. The ship rocked with the impact but Erin knew it didn’t do any damage. She wasn’t aiming to. She was trying to distract them. The Devil’s Trap couldn’t possible survive an attack by the Scythe, not without any defenses.

They had no time to figure out where the singularity had spat them out. Federation space, Romulan, Klingon, the Delta Quadrant, another galaxy. Or to contemplate the convergence of circumstances that had gotten them here. It didn’t matter. The only thing that mattered right now was survival. There was only one solution…if they could get a few spare seconds.

Lorian picked up the order where Law had left off the instant Sam switched the power for him. “Attempting to jam their sensors,” he proclaimed, deft hands working rapidly.

“They’re launching torpedoes,” Law warned a second later. “Full spread.”

“Dividing power!” Sam said without prompting, splitting half of what he had diverted for Lorian and sending it back to Law. Lorian grimaced faintly, displeased with the state of affairs but knowing that trying to jam the enemy’s sensors would be illogical if they were obliterated by a spread of heavy plasma torpedoes first. Sam had done the only thing he could do, left the Vulcan with enough power to keep trying and provided Law with something to shoot back with.

“Point defense Law,” Dean barked.

Law complied wordlessly, firing from the now seven phasers banks he could use with only half weapons power and targeted the incoming torpedoes.

Four of them exploded between ships in a shower of sparks but one managed to evade target lock.

“Brace for impact!” Erin warned again. She braced for more than just a torpedo strike, she fed everything she could into her mental shield, knowing what was coming. Knowing more of her crew was about to die. The torpedo hit, with what Erin hoped was shy of its mark...the bridge, slamming into the upper primary hull and exploding. Erin’s mental shield held, barely. The hull of her beloved ship didn’t.

Half the bridge crew was tossed out of their chairs to the decking, including the Captain. Lorian managed to catch the edge of his console and hold on, flat refusing to let himself be torn from his task. Law had to climb from beneath the tactical console where he’d been thrown with a grunt. Dean scrambled for his chair’s armrest, not bothering to get back into it as he checked their status. Cass and Talia were luckily already on the floor to begin with.

“Direct hit on primary hull. Major hull damage. Breeches on Decks Three, Four and Five. They’ve taken out Transporter Room 1, Turbolift Control 1 and the Junior Officers Quarters on Deck Five, Sections Six through Nine. Severe casualties. Emergency protocols initiated. Evacuating the area,” Dean supplied.

“Captain, the enemy ship’s sensors are blind. It will not last. They will compensate in approximately two point four minutes,” Lorian said, announcing his success.

“Good job,” Erin said dragging herself off the ground and back into the Captain’s chair. “I’m initiating General Order 13. Janira, sound evacuation all decks.” Everyone looked at her in shock.

“Aye, sir,” Janira said her eyes glassy. The Trill turned back to the communications console and the words Erin had once sworn she’d never command said echoed through the corridors of the Devil’s Trap. “Evacuation protocols initiated, all decks. All personnel report to your designated escape pods.” She said the last of it as though it were a death knell. “Abandon ship. I repeat, abandon ship!”
The computer took up the call automatically and began calmly repeating it throughout the ship, adding appropriate evacuation procedures as pertinent.

“Erin,” Dean gasped pulling himself up off the floor after her. “It will take too long to evacuate. The Romulans will have sensors back before anyone can get to the escape pods.”

“I know,” Erin said touching her command controls and a harness produced itself from out of the folds of the Captain’s chair, wrapping around her with a series of metallic clicks in a four-point configuration. Dean turned white with the realization of what she was about to do. So did everyone else…including Lorian. “As Captain I am ordering you to abandon this ship. I’m transferring all command functions to this console. I will remain behind and divert all power to life support and weapons.” She pushed the appropriate holobuttons to do so and input corrections to their position so the Devil’s Trap faced the Scythe head on, making the ship as small a target as possible and minimizing the targeting area for the escape pods.

To Erin’s surprise, Lorian said in a mortified voice of awe. “Captain.” Dean was too stricken to say anything as were the rest of the bridge crew. No one moved. Erin set her jaw.

“I am ordering you to abandon this ship,” she bit. “We are utterly defenseless. We can’t fight and we can’t flee. If I don’t stay behind and fight them off the escape pods, none of us will survive.” She glanced significantly at Dean, daring him to argue the decision.

Her bridge crew looked back at her with aggrieved expressions. They knew she was right. Erin felt her eyes sting and half smiled for them, a lump in her throat. “Go.”

There was an inestimable moment were they hesitated, torn between loyalty and obedience. Which would win?

It was broken by Sam, who sounded as absolutely astounded as Erin had ever heard him. “Incoming vessel at warp, bearing 301 mark 038,” he said, then his voice rose with anticipation. “They’re targeting the Scythe.”

Erin looked at him sharply. “Identify!”

Sam scrambled to comply and then turned a full shade whiter if that were possible, his voice loud with exuberance as he looked back, eyes glittering. “It’s the Enterprise!”

***

James T. Kirk, Captain of the Enterprise saw the small Starfleet vessel—the Devil’s Trap, he reminded himself, he refused to think of it as a possible imposter, perform a fancy bit of piloting and regain equilibrium, then tilt completely sideways and around to turn its damaged side away from the monster ship. Whoever their helmsman was they were damn good.

Defenseless as it was, the Devil’s Trap immediately fired phasers in a determined effort to defend itself. Their phasers acted like none he’d ever seen, orange beams consisting of a continuous stream of energy. They did very little to hamper the attacking vessel but it rocked significantly under the assault and had the marginal effect of giving the smaller ship a nanosecond to try to gain a better position.

The monster ship’s response was to return retaliatory fire by launching a full spread of torpedoes. The Captain willed the Enterprise to go faster.
This was horribly familiar. He imagined this was what the *USS Kelvin* had looked like when it had faced down the *Narada*, which had come out of a singularity that looked exactly like the one these ships had, in exactly the same location, twenty-seven years ago. The day he’d been born. The day his father had sacrificed his life to save eight hundred lives, including his and his mother’s.

It was what it had looked like when the *Enterprise* had faced down and finally destroyed the *Narada* little more than a year ago. One tiny ship daring to battle another they had no hope to defeat and trying anyway. The *Enterprise* had succeeded, the *Devil’s Trap* was far too vulnerable to even make a go of it. But it looked like they were determined to try.

The *Devil’s Trap* valiantly cut down four of the five torpedos but the fifth pierced the hull with a blast that made the Kirk’s stomach turn. That had done major damage no matter what the little ship’s capabilities were. He felt a surge of fierce admiration for the little ship and it’s Captain. If they were going down, they were going to go down fighting.

“Spock!” he called. “Give me something on that big buzzard.” He silently pleaded with his First Officer not to say what he dreaded he was going to. Spock said it anyway.

“Additional sensor data concludes that the enemy ship is significantly advanced and capable of cloaking. It has plasma torpedoes and disruptors far more powerful than any currently in use. Initial analysis indicates the vessel’s configuration is unknown but certain elements show a marked similarity to readings of the technology contained on the *Narada*. All indications point to the vessel being Romulan,” Spock rattled off smoothly.

Kirk felt sick all over again. *Not again, not again,* he thought for the second time.

“Also, further sensor readings on the Starfleet vessel show similar advancements. Given past events and the current circumstances, I estimate a ninety four point nine percent chance that both vessels are from the same approximate time as the *Narada*, possibly the same reality.”

Kirk’s jaw tensed and he sat back in his chair, hands gripping the armrest in a determined fashion. Spock’s words only made him more intent on saving that ship.

“Capt’n, de small ship has jammed de Womluan ship’s sensors. They are blind, sir,” Ensign Chekov remarked in his pronounced Russian accent from the navigator’s station.

Kirk grinned devilishly. The *Devil’s Trap* was proving to still be capable of a few tricks after all and its Captain was being smart. If they survived this, and he vowed they would if he had anything to say about it, he was going to buy the Captain of that ship a drink.

“They will not be blind for very long Captain,” Spock warned.

Captain Kirk gritted his teeth. Just a little further. If they could get in there before the Romulan ship got sensors back they had a fair chance. On screen, the *Devil’s Trap* suddenly swerved and straightened, facing the Romulan ship head on. Kirk felt his stomach drop. God no, they weren’t going to try ramming them like the *Kelvin* had the *Narada* were they?!

“Captain! The Starfleet vessel is beginning evacuation. They’re abandoning ship,” Lieutenant Uhura warned from the communications station.

Oh God, that’s exactly what the *Devil’s Trap* was going to do. Get the crew off the ship, keep the Romulan ship occupied and then expend whatever it had left trying to take the bird monster out. Just like his father had done with the *Kelvin*. A last ditch act of desperation to save as many people as possible. The Captain of the *Devil’s Trap* knew they were screwed. It was what Kirk would have
done too in the same position and not on his life was he letting them do it.

“Uhura, hail them. Tell them we’re friendly and here to help. Tell them not to evacuate. We can’t defend the ship and a bunch of escape shuttles,” the Captain ordered. “Tell them to hold position.”

“Yes, sir,” Uhura promised and began flipping switches over her head with an amazing speed to get through to the Devil’s Trap before they could launch their escape shuttles.

The Enterprise came out of warp, phasers blazing, in a hail of red bolts of energy aimed directly at the huge monster of a ship. The blasts hit the ship’s shields and dispersed in a display of menace. Blind, the Romulan ship did not immediately fire back.

“Sulu, get us between them and the other ship,” Kirk ordered.

“Yes, sir!” piped the Japanese helmsman almost enthusiastically and swept the Enterprise down and around putting themselves between the Devil’s Trap and the Romulan vessel, blocking any further attacks it might choose to make on the damaged ship.

The Romulan vessel did what Kirk wanted. They shot at them, though the Captain couldn’t be sure it was them they meant to shoot at. Blind as the Romulan vessel was, they were probably firing in the general direction of the Devil’s Trap and hoping for a hit. The blast of green disruptor fire was wild, catching the barest edge of the Enterprise’s shields since they couldn’t ‘see’ to get an accurate target lock.

The Enterprise rattled like a tin can full of pennies causing the bridge crew to hold on to whatever they could to stay in their seats.

“Status report!” Kirk barked.

“No hull damage but the shields are down to seventy five percent,” Sulu replied looking far less enthusiastic than he had a moment ago.

“Vey barely touched us,” Chevok said in alarmed awe.

“They’re weapons are powerful, sir. We can’t take more than a few hits without sustaining heavy damage,” Sulu said looking back at his Captain with an air of worried anxiety, the rest went unsaid. Or destroyed.

“Keep your nerve up,” Kirk encouraged him. The helmsman straightened his shoulders and nodded curtly. Kirk knew he could depend on Sulu not to give in to fear at a time like this, he just needed a little reminder of the fact.

***

“The Enterprise?!” Erin cried with joyful relief. She hit the release on the safety harness and shot to her feet. She didn’t know where they’d come from or how. She didn’t care. They had back up! Captain Va’Kel Shon to the rescue, she thought. She was going to buy that Andorian a round of drinks if they survived this. But when the Enterprise streaked into view, popping out of warp like something out of a fairytale, red phaser bolts blazing furiously toward the Scythe, Erin suddenly decided she wasn’t sure what she was going to do.

It looked only vaguely like any version of the Enterprise she’d ever seen, past or present. It was too large for the class of ship it most closely resembled, the Constitution-class. It’s nacelles were wrong.
It’s hull wasn’t exactly the right shape. The phasers were the wrong color and they were bolts, not the familiar continuous beam Erin knew so well.

“That’s not our Enterprise,” Erin voiced as the ship swept between them and the Scythe, it’s name emblazoned on the pristinely silver white saucer section clearly naming it the U.S.S. Enterprise, registry number NCC 1701. No A, no B, no C, no D, no E, no F. Just NCC 1701. Like the Enterprise commanded by Captain James T. Kirk, but that was not the ship Erin knew that Kirk had been the commanding officer of.

“I don’t think we’re in Kansas anymore,” Dean muttered.

“Where are we?” Pril asked equally confounded.

“When are we?” Sam muttered.

“I believe the more accurate phrasing may be, ‘when, where and in what reality are we’?” Lorian corrected.

That the crew had rapidly assumed that the singularity Q had created had spat them out somewhere other than their own reality and time based on the appearance of the Enterprise before them was no surprise. This would not be the first time that most of them had been involved in a temporal event. However, Erin was the only one among them that had any experience with an alternate reality and that had at least been in the same time. She’d been backwards in time and she’d been sideways. She’d never been both backwards and sideways, nor did she have time to consider the possible implications because one thing was certain. If they had been flung backwards, no matter what reality they were in, unless there had been outside intervention there was no way the Enterprise was a match for the Scythe. There were at least fourteen decades of technological advancement between them.

She had to do something or they’d be destroyed. They couldn’t have any idea what it was they were facing.

“Mr. Lorian, how long before the Scythe regains sensors?” she asked.


“Standby the evacuation,” she ordered him and looked at her First Officer. “Dean, initial tactical analysis on the Enterprise and make it fast. Sam, keep sensors on them.”

Even as she said it the Scythe lashed out blindly with a disruptor blast in their direction, angry at having been blinded and fired upon. The arc of green fire struck the Enterprise’s shields and shook it hard but failed to strike the hull.

“Their shields are down to seventy five percent,” Sam said.

Lorian was relaying the standby through the intraship comm.system and Dean was surveying the read out on his command console as quickly as he could.

“It’s more powerful than the Enterprise it looks like it’s supposed to be. A lot of their readings come back looking significantly like ours—like they have some of our tech but not enough to make them comparable. They can take a few shots off the Scythe but anything else will destroy them.”

Erin’s brow furrowed. Had this timeline been compromised already? By no means should the Enterprise of the past have any technology remotely equating their own. But it was a question that would have to be answered later, if they survived.
“Janira, hail the Enterprise,” she ordered.

The communications officer turned in her chair. “I don’t have to. They’re hailing us.”

“Put it through,” Erin ordered. Janira tapped holobuttons and did so. It was audio only.

“Devil’s Trap,” a female voice said fervently. Erin raised a brow at the name of her ship being said. They must have seen it on the hull she supposed, as they had seen the Enterprise’s. “This is the USS Enterprise. We are friendly and here to help you. Do not evacuate! I repeat do not evacuate. We cannot defend you and your escape shuttles. We ask that you hold position and allow us to draw off the enemy attack. Please acknowledge.”

Erin hurried over to the communications station and leaned over next to Lieutenant Commander Triven to reply the same way, not bothering to ask Janira to reply for her. Some things a Captain had to do their self.

“Enterprise, this is Captain Erin Winchester of the Devil’s Trap speaking. We acknowledge. Evacuation has been placed on standby and we are holding position. Now let me talk to your Captain.” She glanced toward the tactical station. “Law, you might want to keep your head down.”

***

Uhura turned away from the communications console with an anxious air, her long dark ponytail whipping around like a lash. “Captain, the Devil’s Trap has agreed to stand by evacuation and hold position. Their Captain wishes to speak with you.”

Kirk, who had been sitting there with his teeth gritted, waiting on the next barrage from the Romulan vessel, glanced back at Spock his eyes asking silently for his First Officer’s opinion. The Vulcan simply nodded his agreement.

“Uhura,” Kirk said. “Put them on screen.” He paused a beat. “Did they give a name?”

“Yes, sir. Captain Erin Winchester,” Uhura said. “Putting it up now.” The view screen split, keeping the Romulan vessel visible and putting up the return hail from the Devil’s Trap’s bridge on the other side.

Everyone turned to look, natural curiosity drawing their attention.

Several things became apparent. First, the countdown ticker in the upper left of the Enterprise’s view screen that was keeping track of how long they had left before the Romulan vessel regained sensor capability said they had thirty seconds.

Second, the bridge of the Devil’s Trap was dark to the Enterprise’s light and looked as advanced as Kirk might have imagined. It was far more minimalist and stream lined, a confection of clear panels, burnished titanium and charcoal grey. One console was charred and cracked, it’s sleek form blasted apart, battle damage. A pair were huddled beneath it, one obviously Andorian and injured, the other obviously a dark haired Doctor tending to the Andorian while trying to stay out of the bridge crew’s way.

Third, there was no one in the center chair, the Captain’s chair, of their command pit. Which left Kirk to assume the man sitting in the chair to the right of it, who in a weird twist of fate had the same hairstyle and coloring as Kirk, must be the Captain. He wore a very odd appearing uniform, which was the wrong color for someone in command, red and black instead of gold and black, but still
screamed Starfleet with its star punctured chevron insignia on the left breast that did denote someone in the command division.

Fourth, the Vulcan at one of the stations, whose shoulders wore science blue and whose insignia badge confirmed it, bore a striking resemblance to Spock save for a pair of very blue eyes. There was what appeared to be a silver haired Vulcan behind the command pit but he had his head ducked, intently working at his station.

Fifth, Kirk was struck by how young the crew looked. Most looked no older than he was and a few looked younger. As far as Kirk knew, his was the youngest crew in Starfleet history. Had the future decided to start promoting much younger? Or had the Devil’s Trap crew earned their rank in circumstances similar to Kirk’s?

Both crews stared at each other for half a second, both obviously not seeing what they had expected but not knowing what they should have expected. The Devil’s Trap crew looked positively gobsmacked. The man Kirk assumed to be the Captain was wide eyed and the Vulcan had lifted a brow in such a way it made the resemblance between him and Spock eerie.

“Captain Winchester,” Kirk greeted the man on the view screen. The man blinked at him. He must still be in shock, Kirk thought.

“Uh, Captain,” Uhura said in a loud whisper.

“Not now, Uhura,” Kirk brushed her off. “We don’t have much time.” He never saw Uhura glance at Spock and mouth, ‘the Captain is a woman’, to which Spock lifted a mildly amused brow and said nothing, apparently perfectly willing to watch his Captain embarrass himself.

Kirk didn’t fail to take immediate notice of the very lovely blonde woman with the fierce green eyes that stepped into the frame and took center position. She spoke, her voice, a fine contralto.

“He’s not the Captain. I am.”

Kirk gaped, trying to overcome his surprise and introduce himself. Uhura had meant Erin not Aaron. His crew wisely stifled nervous laughter at the flub. Then Captain Erin Winchester stunned Kirk further, her tone one of reverence.

“Captain James T. Kirk.”

Suddenly Kirk’s embarrassment fled and he was very much alright with Captain Erin Winchester knowing his name. Now he was definitely buying the Captain that drink.

In true Vulcan fashion, Spock took the words right out of Kirk’s mouth. “Fascinating.” …At the same time that the Vulcan on the Devil’s Trap bridge said the same thing…in a voice that eerily matched Spock’s.

Someone was going to have to think up a bigger word than ‘fascinating’. Fascinating just didn’t cover it.

Chapter End Notes

Please read and review!
Several members of the bridge crew were snickering softly at the conversational flub, from of all people, the legendary Captain of the Enterprise himself.

But Captain Winchester stood staring at Captain Kirk on the divided view screen and he stared back. Here was the man she’d grown up idolizing in the flesh. Only he was at least five years younger than she remembered Kirk being when he’d taken command of the Enterprise. He couldn’t have been any older than she was. The most startling difference between him and his counterpart in Erin’s timeline were the vibrant blue eyes instead of warm hazel. This was a different Kirk but it was still Kirk and Erin couldn’t help the reverent way his name crossed her lips despite being mildly amused by his assumption that Dean was the Captain. It made him somehow more human in the moment.

“Captain James T. Kirk,” she murmured. Kirk brightened considerably when she said his name his expression becoming something between serious starship Captain and roguish playboy.

Behind him, a much younger Spock arched a brow and remarked, “Fascinating,” in tandem with Lorian. The word hung in the air for a beat, spoken in nearly the same voice from both Vulcans and making both crews blink. The fact the two bore a marked resemblance to one another only made it stranger.

Down at Ops, Sam muttered quietly. “This just got weird.”

Behind her, she heard Law, his head bowed to keep the Enterprise crew from realizing he was Romulan for obvious reasons mutter. “Well, now that we have seen each other,’ said the unicorn to Alice, ‘if you'll believe in me, I'll believe in you.’” Erin recognized it as quote from Alice in Wonderland. She didn’t know where his fascination with human fairytales had come from but she silently vowed to revoke the weapons specialist’s library privileges.

Back on the view screen Kirk said smoothly, “I see my reputation precedes me.”

“It does indeed, Captain,” Erin said shaking herself out of her star struck state. She was having a hard enough time dealing with the constantly shifting tide of undefined thought and emotion around her to worry about her own. Her mental shield was begging for mercy and it took conscious effort to keep it in place. Erin couldn’t take much more of this yo-yoing and she couldn’t stare at the one and only Captain Kirk. She had a job to do. She screwed up her nerve and got down to business.

“We only have about twenty seconds before the Scythe, the Romulan vessel you saved us from, regains sensors. Listen to me very carefully. That ship is far more dangerous than you realize. We,” she paused trying to think how to phase this while Captain Kirk listened intently and without umbrage, “have advanced weaponry and we can’t defeat them. We managed to disable its most formidable weaponry but what they still have is still stronger than anything you have. We’re from…”


“Can go to hell.”

Lorian blinked and desisted without any argument saying, “Yes, Captain,” and wisely choosing not to remark on that particular sentiment.
Dean was trying not to laugh. Kirk was grinning gleefully at it. Battle had a way of doing that. Emotions swung all over the place from devastation to hilarity. Sometimes it was the only way to survive it sane.

“We know you’re from the future Captain Winchester,” Kirk informed her. “We’ve had experience with a situation very much like this before.”

Erin blinked and then decided that made her job a great deal easier. “That simplifies things then. Nothing you do, shields or no shields would destroy that ship. The best you can hope for is to disable their secondary weapons system. Then, even if they run, it will take them a while to make repairs. That ship is carrying two different kinds of planet killers and they will not listen to reason.”

Kirk frowned deeply, he looked terribly troubled by the revelation but not surprised. Erin almost swore she heard someone whisper something in the background that sounded ominously like ‘Nero’.

“Captain Winchester,” Spock spoke up and left his station to stand beside Kirk. “We are aware you are essentially defenseless. However, you managed to blind the Scythe’s sensors. Could you replicate the process?”

Erin glanced back at her Science Officer. “Mr. Lorian?”

“Possibly, Captain,” Lorain said keeping himself very collected, almost too collected. “However, any attempt to do so would also render the Enterprise’s sensors useless in their current position. Additionally, the Scythe is not likely to fall for the same trick twice. If we blind their sensors a second time, they will undoubtedly retaliate with a search and destroy assault pattern hoping to score a hit on anything they can.”

“Ten sseconds,” Pril hissed from the conn. On Kirk’s ship someone was relaying the same information.

Erin thought hard. If the Enterprise worked as the firepower and the Devil’s Trap as backup enabling the Enterprise to take out the Scythe’s remaining weaponry… The Devil’s Trap was limited to operating one system at a time but if they put everything into a focused tachyon beam they might be able to strip through the Scythe’s shields long enough for the Enterprise to get a shot.

“What about one of your focused tachyon beams? Could we produce one powerful enough to get through the Scythe’s regenerative shielding?” Erin asked Lorian.

“Then the Enterprise could take out their remaining weapons system,” Kirk said, catching on. Both Captains fell into the habit of working in concert with another Captain from their training without effort. Whatever the circumstances it was instinct. That indefinable quality that all starship Captains had.

“Yes but the window of opportunity would be vanishingly small and I cannot blind the Scythe’s sensors and weaken their shields at the same time. We do not have enough power,” Lorian advised.

“We’ll have to divert everything to the deflector to do it,” Sam said.

“How small of a window?” Kirk asked.

“At most five seconds. The Scythe has primary and secondary regenerative shielding,” Lorian explained addressing Kirk directly.

“Sulu, you think you can swing that?” Kirk asked the Japanese fellow at what Erin assumed was the helm.
“It’ll be tight but I think so, sir,” the man answered.

“Spock?” Kirk asked.

“Captain Winchester and Mr. Lorian’s logic is sound. It is the best option available to us,” Spock agreed.

“Time’s up!” Sam yelled into the exchange. Someone on Kirk’s bridge called. “Vey can zee us!”

“Sounds like a plan to me,” Kirk said and headed for his Captain’s chair. “Sulu, take us up and keep the Devil’s Trap covered.” He looked at Erin. “We’ll keep the channel open for communication. You do your thing. We’ll do ours. We’ve got your back.”

“Captain Kirk,” Erin interjected. “Once we are in position we won’t be able to move while the tachyon beam is activated. It’ll break the effect.”

“Understood,” Kirk said his tone completely different. He was all Captain now and he understood the implications. The Devil’s Trap was offering themselves in a possible suicide run. “See you on the other side,” he said his voice tempered and low. “Good luck.”

“You too,” Erin said in the same tone. “We’ll both need it.”

The split screen view returned to the primary exterior view of the Scythe, but the sound between ships remained.

***

As James Kirk retook his chair and Sulu sent the Enterprise up in a hard starboard curve away from the Scythe and out of the Devil’s Trap’s trajectory, he grinned back at his First Officer.

“I like her,” he said low enough the comm. system wouldn’t pick it up.

“There are very few you do not like,” Spock replied just as quietly, the implication obvious.

Kirk didn’t mean it in a sexual or romantic manner, though there was that and he certainty wasn’t going to discount the possibility. He never discounted the possibility of getting to know a pretty woman. But he liked her immediately as a Captain. She’d said to hell with the rules the instant anyone tried to remind her of them. He could relate to that. He had no use for regulations either. He’d rather do the right thing and suffer the consequences. And he’d already seen what she was willing to do for her ship and her crew.

Kirk narrowed his eyes at him and snorted. The Vulcan was unfazed. The Captain was going to get him back for that remark somehow. Smug, pointy-eared bastard. The Captain turned his attention to his crew. In the background, through the open comm. channel that Uhura was manning, he could hear Captain Winchester doing the same.

“Chekov, you ready over there?”

“Wes, sir,” the nineteen year old Ensign assured him from the navigation station.

“Sulu?”

“Just give me something to shoot at,” Sulu said, one hand manipulating the helm controls the other hovering over the Enterprise’s weapons controls. “This should be interesting,” he admitted.
“De Devil’s Trap is on an intercept course for de enemy wessel. De Scythe is on da move, Capt’n. Vey are attempting to target de Devil’s Trap,” Chekov warned.

“Come on Winchester,” Kirk said eyeing the screen worriedly. He was deeply disturbed by the revelation that the Scythe was carrying not one but two planet destroying weapons. It was Nero all over again. Even as he whispered the words, all hell broke loose.

***

Erin resumed her place in the Captain’s chair her mind going a mile a minute. It had become so difficult to maintain her mental shield that now she could focus only on it and the battle. She had no room to consider anything else lest she come apart at the seams. Everyone knew this might be a suicide mission, tension had ratcheted up exponentially, and their fear and tangled thoughts, incoherent but palpable, threatened to engulf her.

Dean seemed to see it and leaned in with concern his voice low.

“Erin, are you alright?”

“I’m fine,” she lied quietly. “Just a little star struck I guess.”

Dean smiled faintly and accepted the excuse. “Hell of a way to meet your hero.”

Erin forced herself to focus and ignore the way Lorian’s eyes followed her every move. His bright blue eyes were imperturbable now, a wall of steel that you could not read. But they followed intently.

She hit the command console of her chair, keying for a channel to Engineering. It sounded like barely controlled chaos down there. “Mary, I need all the power you can give me and I need it now. I don’t care where you get it from.”

“You got it!” the Chief Engineer said. “Is that the Enterprise I saw?”

“Affirmative,” Erin said.

“Hot damn,” Mary said in an uncharacteristic display of unladylike profanity and enthusiasm. “Giving you all I got!” She half whimpered. “But please handle with care. My poor warp cores are in a state.”

“We’ll try,” Dean promised.

The bridge lights became significantly dimmer, Mary was true to her word, she was pulling power from everywhere it could be spared. An instant later, Sam declared from the Ops station, “Full power diverted to the impulse engines.”

“Pril, set a course for the dorsal section of the Scythe,” Erin ordered. “Mr. Lorian are you ready?”

“Ready,” Lorian confirmed, He was still as stone, his long fingered hands held in position for immediate action when they were in position.

The Saurian complied wordlessly, sending the Devil’s Trap in an arc that would sweep them beneath the Enterprise and over the Scythe. The problem was while they were in motion, they couldn’t do anything but that. They would be completely exposed. And the Scythe did not hesitate to take
advantage of it. They moved to target them the instant the Enterprise cleared a path.

The huge ship turned with them, keeping them in their sights as the Devil’s Trap veered to compensate.

“They’re locking torpedoes!” Sam warned.

A beat later a spread of plasma torpedoes spat out from the Warbird’s ‘beak’ hurtling straight for them. In response the Enterprise swept sideways and down, raining a hail of phaser bolts down on the torpedoes and the Warbird as the Devil’s Trap continued curving around the side of the Scythe and beginning their trajectory over its back. The secondary weapons system was located on the spine of the ship, near the ‘tail’.

The Enterprise shot down the barrage of torpedoes and kept harrying the Warbird in an attempt to force the Romulan’s attention on them and not the Devil’s Trap. It worked because in a fit of fury at the suicidally brave henpecking, the Scythe forwent selective targeting and fired all disruptors at once, intent on having its way.

A sweeping maelstrom of green energy beams ripped through space around both Federation vessels.

“Pril, dodge!” Erin barked.

The Saurian did his best but there were too many fingers of energy. One slammed hard into the under port side of the secondary hull, perilously close to Main Engineering. The ship jerked roughly. Beneath them, still valiantly refusing to back off, the Enterprise was struck as well. A disruptor beam slicing through their shields and tearing into the underside of the saucer section on the port side. The Enterprise tilted hard to starboard under the impact and the pristine silver-white hull was left with a gaping black hole.

“Damage report!” both Captain’s barked at their respective crews.

Erin was holding onto her chair for all she was worth and it wasn’t just the rattling of her ship that made her do it. Again she was assaulted by a wave of terror and pain that hit her mental shield, bent it until it nearly collapsed and then bounced off. Though, to her utter relief she felt nothing she could call ‘death’.

“Damn it to hell, stop blowing holes in my ship!” she spat at the Scythe though they couldn’t possibly have heard her.

“They barely missed Main Engineering but the rear landing gear is gone. We won’t be landing anytime soon,” Sam supplied. “Minor casualties.”

Erin hit her command console. “Mary, you okay down there?”

“Little singed but hanging in there!” Mary shouted back.

Somewhere on the Enterprise bridge someone said, “Port shields offline, all remaining shields at thirty two percent. Another hit like that and we’re fried.”

“Pril, step on it over there!” Dean barked at the pilot.

“Sssteping, sssir!” Pril assured him and the Devil’s Trap banked starboard sharply. The Enterprise followed in her wake flawlessly, firing a salvo of torpedoes at the Scythe, in retaliation. They exploded like fire crackers against the Scythe’s hull, sending electric green spider webs over the shields’ surface but any minor damage they did reversed itself almost immediately with a faint
Erin silently cursed Q for everything she was worth for doing this. She couldn’t see what the purpose was but one thing he’d said did ring true, if Erin failed here both the _Enterprise_ and the _Devil’s Trap_ would be destroyed and the _Scythe_ would be free to annihilate this universe.

The Temporal Prime Directive didn’t hold water, not here. It was Erin’s responsibility to minimize any damage that might occur because of their incursion into this universe, whatever the cause of their arrival. The _Scythe_ running amok in an unknown universe at least a hundred and fifty years in the past was far worse than revealing where and when they came from. It was her they hated, it was her fault they were here and it was her past actions that had begun this chain of events. Erin would not allow this universe to be decimated because of it. Besides, Erin had never been much for regulations. Look what following them had gotten her.

Pril whipped the _Devil’s Trap_ over the _Scythe_’s back. It was a decidedly precarious place to be. While the secondary weapons system was located in the aft section of the ship’s spine so were the aft torpedoes. The _Scythe_’s firing arc for their disruptors was limited to a 360-degree range from the alignment of the bank, effectively shielding both ships from the _Scythe_’s disruptors until the _Scythe_ moved but the torpedoes auto targeted and could go where ever their target could.

The _Devil’s Trap_ pivoted on its nose, avoiding direct line of fire from the _Scythe_’s aft weaponry and the _Enterprise_ slid in over them, the saucer hovering slightly forward of the _Devil’s Trap_’s chevron to align for firing.

“It’s now or never,” Erin said

“In possssition,” Pril informed.

“Switching!” Sam declared. Outside the ship, their impulse engines went dark. They were for it now. If something went wrong, the _Devil’s Trap_ could not switch power back to their impulse engines fast enough to move. They were completely dead in the water.

Lorian didn’t wait for a command to fire the tachyon beam, as soon as Sam had the last syllable out of his mouth the Vulcan hit the activation button. A tight blue tachyon beam flashed from the _Devil’s Trap_’s deflector and latched onto the _Scythe_’s shields like a greedy leech. The bridge lights dimmed further, they were almost completely in the dark. At some point, the red alert klaxon had stopped wailing, the power to operate it diverted for the deflector. Erin hadn’t even noticed. As Lorian fed in every bit of power Sam gave him and Mary provided from wherever she was getting it from the _Devil’s Trap_ began to shake under the strain and the _Scythe_ fired.

The _Scythe_ had the maneuverability of neither the _Devil’s Trap_ or the _Enterprise_. It could not suddenly slip out from underneath them without jumping to warp. Plasma torpedoes shot from the aft tubes and arced backward to hone in on the Federation vessels. Seconds started to feel like eons. If either ship moved they wouldn’t be able to complete their objective but the salvo of torpedoes bore down on them with alarming speed.

“Steady, Mr. Sulu,” Erin heard Kirk say.

Orders were being yelled back and forth wildly now.

The tachyon beam pierced the _Scythe_’s primary shielding. The _Devil’s Trap_ quaked as though it were coming apart, with the damage they’d suffered it might be.

“Now!” Kirk barked.
The Enterprise fired on the torpedoes without moving an inch, blasting all three out of existence to Erin’s astonishment. She could hardly breathe; the air around her felt like it was made of cement from all the tension emanating from around her so she breathed cement and dealt with it though she felt like she was shaking as hard as her ship.

The tachyon beam ate through the Scythe’s secondary shields. The Scythe began to attempt moving. They’d realized what they were doing.

“Kirk now! Now, now, now!” Erin shouted.

The Enterprise fired everything at the Scythe. Phaser bolts and photon torpedoes shot through the hole in the Scythe’s shields that Lorian’s tachyon beam held open and the Scythe’s secondary weapons system went up in an acrid billow of smoke.

“Yes!” Erin proclaimed, shooting up out of her chair without realizing what she’d done. Whoops and hollers erupted from both ships. Dean whistled so shrilly that Erin thought she might now be deaf in her right ear. She didn’t care. The sudden deluge of relieved enthusiasm swept her up in it so that she didn’t notice a familiar tingling sensation start somewhere around her solar plexus.

“Thhhey’re running!” Pril announced. And indeed that’s exactly what it looked like the Scythe was doing as they turned out from underneath the Federation vessels and veered away.

“Hail them,” Kirk demanded over on the Enterprise.

“The Scythe has lowered shields,” Spock said his tone perplexed that the Romulan vessel should lower their shields now at their most vulnerable while they were running away.

“Captain!” Lorian cried alarmed at the same time Dean jumped to his feet exclaiming her name in the same tone. That’s when Erin realized with horror that the tingling sensation had nothing to do with the undefined thoughts and emotions of the crew, that it was terribly familiar and that her midsection had already started to sparkle green. Romulan transporter beam.

The only word that came to mind was, “Shit!”

***

“Hail them,” Kirk demanded of Uhura. Now that the Scythe had no teeth to bite back with he intended to offer them terms. But Spock called his attention away from his possible peaceful resolution.

“The Scythe has lowered shields.” The Vulcan was obviously perplexed and so was Kirk. Why would the Scythe suddenly lower their shields when they were apparently fleeing and incapable of fighting back? True nothing either ship could do would hurt them currently but it made no logical sense.

The Enterprise bridge was barely organized chaos, half out of necessity—crewmen were flitting everywhere in an attempt to contain the damage to Kirk’s ship and crew—half out of exuberant triumph at having taken the sting out of the Scythe…for the moment. But through the open comm. channel between the Enterprise and the Devil’s Trap it became very apparent that something had gone drastically wrong.

Kirk whistled loud and sharp, a trick he’d learned from his mentor, friend and the closest thing he’d had to a father figure, Admiral Christopher Pike. “Knock it off!” he demanded of his crew and he got
it instantly. He opened his mouth to ask what was wrong but Spock cut him off.

“Captain, the Scythe has initiated transport. They’re attempting to lock on to Captain Winchester.”

Kirk’s eyes went wide and it became suddenly clear why the Scythe had lowered their shields. “Visual!” he snapped. He needn’t have bothered, Uhura was already in the process. The Devil’s Trap bridge once again appeared on screen only for Kirk to see Captain Winchester starting to disintegrate into sparkling green particles. He’d have been startled by the unfamiliar transporter effect if he’d had the time.

Half the bridge crew had stood up out of their chairs in appalled shock. Uhura had her hand clamped over her mouth to keep from crying out in alarm. The Scythe intended to take a hostage if it couldn’t destroy them.

“Intercept the signal!” the man Kirk had first mistaken for the Captain barked at someone.

“We can’t!” another man with a head of floppy chestnut hair said frantically. Kirk turned away from the view screen before he could tell what anyone else was doing. He didn’t have time to care. Captain Winchester was steadily fading out. She tried to dash sideways to disrupt the transport signal. It was useless.

“Hannity, can you?” Kirk asked of the tiny, platinum blonde Lieutenant at the Ops console. The look of dismay on the woman’s face was enough to give him his answer.

“I can do zat!” Chekov cried and all but jumped over anyone between the navigation station and Ops. “I can do zat!”

Hannity scrambled out of his way and Chekov flung himself at the controls, hands flying. Almost instantly, streaming, swirling beams of yellowish-white light started to war with the glittering green particles.

A disconcerting tug of war ensued between the two transport signals. First theirs predominating then the Romulan one. Everyone on both ships held their breath.

“I’m losing her!” Chekov admitted horrified.

“Boost the matter gain!” Spock bit forcefully. Kirk looked at his First Officer a bit surprised at his vehemence but understanding it. It was horribly similar to the moment that they’d lost the transporter lock on Spock’s mother during the destruction of Vulcan.

Kirk was having his own moment of déjà vu. Remembering when they’d failed to intercept the transport signal from the Vengeance as Admiral Marcus yanked his daughter, Doctor Carol Marcus, the Enterprise’s weapons specialist, off the bridge when her plea to her father had failed to save the Enterprise from the mad Admiral’s wrath.

Chekov shoved up on one of the toggles and for a brief instant, the Enterprise’s transporter effect seemed to be winning even as Captain Winchester became a figure of dim green and yellow-white light. Then she disappeared.

“ё – моё!” Chekov exclaimed.

“Did we get her?!” Kirk asked desperately, unable to tell if his navigator’s ‘yo-moyo’ was good or bad.

“Got her!” Chekov confirmed and collapsed into Hannity’s chair weak kneed.
There was a collective sigh of relief from all, *Enterprise* and *Devil’s Trap*, and then Kirk got pissed.

He hit his command console. “Scotty, get down to the transporter room and make sure Chekov didn’t turn our guest inside out.”

The Ensign shot his Captain a put upon look for the thin joke.

“Aye, sir!” Scotty proclaimed in an excitable Scottish brogue. Then Kirk glared at the view screen.

“Hail that God damn ship.”

***

Being pulled in two different directions while you were being disintegrated by transporter beams was a unique experience. Erin had attempted to disrupt the Romulans’ attempt to yank her off her bridge by moving and to prevent anyone from attempting to seize her in an instinctive but useless attempt to stop the transport. When the other transport beam had seized onto her pattern, attempting to wrest it from the Romulans’ clutches, she’d had the distinct feeling of being pulled apart like a tuft of cotton candy. Her particles didn’t respond well to being pulled from two directions and struggled to reintegrate themselves fiercely. It was not a comfortable experience and terribly disorienting.

So it was when she finally materialized on the *Enterprise’s* transporter pad she could be forgiven for stumbling off it and nearly pitching herself down the couple of low illuminated steps that led to the transporter pad.

Erin blindly staggered forward and caught herself on something bright, shiny and clear, head spinning as her body tried to make sense of itself and her mind tried to maintain the now tenuous mental shield she fought so fervently to keep in one piece.

A flash of red flitted from the other side of the clear thing Erin had caught herself on and her vision resolved it into a man as it came around what proved to be some sort of partition between the transporter pad and the control consoles. Vaguely, Erin realized she recognized him. He was younger, slighter, than she recalled but it was definitely the same man. Montgomery Scott.

“Whoa there, lassie. Take it easy and get ya bearin’s,” he said, reaching out to steady her. Erin stumbled backward to avoid him touching her, gloved hands up to ward him off, and nearly tripped over her own feet.

“I just need a second,” Erin gasped out mildly amused at being called ‘lassie’. She barely avoided calling him ‘Scotty’ and had the absurd notion that he should recognize her.

She had after all spent enough time with Lieutenant Commander Montgomery Scott repairing Drozana Station’s shields to compensate for the triolic energy caused by a Devidian attack in a previous time jump which had proven to be as absurd as it was serious right down to the bar brawl that had occurred. Scotty had proven to be very chatty and subsequently Erin had come to feel as though she knew him to some degree. But that Scotty was not this Scotty.

Scotty gave her a frown of consternation but did not try to steady her again. “Aye, mayhap ye should sit a wee spell,” he suggested. “Awfully strange uniform ye got there.”

“I think you might be right,” Erin mumbled and unsteadily shuffled the few steps back to the
transporter pad and sank down on the steps. “My ship? Is it okay? What about the Scythe?”

“Yer ship?” Scotty said in surprise then he flushed scarlet to match his shirt realizing he’d called someone who out ranked him by two grades ‘lassie’. “A thousan’ apologies, sir…ma’am. I didna realize ya were the Deevil’s Trap Cap’in. Yer ship is alright’. Tha Scythe as ya call it, is disabled. Cap’in Kirk is dealin’ wi’ tha thrice cursed Romulans. Ya jus get yer space legs back.”

“I’m fine,” Erin insisted and tried to stand up again only to become dizzy and promptly sit back down. “Just a little disoriented.” She was more than disoriented but that was a close enough explanation.

“As well I imagine ye should be after that lil escapade.” Scotty’s frown deepened and he shook his head. “I think mebbe I should get Doc McCoy down here to have a look at ye, Cap’in. Make sure none o’ yer molecules got scrambled in tha’ tug-o-war.” He turned away to glance back through the partition at the other two officers in the control area, about to do just that. They were staring at Erin with open curiosity.

Erin reacted to Scotty’s words before she could think about what she was saying. “If you tell Doctor McCoy that, he’ll decertify the transporter and you’ll never get him—or anyone else—in another one. I’m fine really.”

Scotty blinked at her clearly shocked by her accurate assessment of the Enterprise’s Chief Medical Officer. Scotty wasn’t the only one Erin had spent time with during the Drozana Station incident. But again that wasn’t this Doctor McCoy. Temporal mechanics were such a pain in the ass.

“Aye, he might at that.” Scotty agreed with a shade of an amused grin. “Jus tha same, I’d feel better if he had a look at ya. The Cap’in’d tan my hide if anything were to be wrong wi’ ya and I didna.” He nodded at one of the officers to go ahead and page the Doctor and Erin knew it was pointless to argue. Instead, she let them do whatever they were going to do and concentrated on reinforcing her mental shield back to its original condition.

“Doctor McCoy to the transporter room,” one of the officers declared over the ship’s comm. system. It was immediately answered by an irritated southern twang.

“Unless someone’s dyin’ I’ve got my hands full down here.”

“I’m sure ya do Doc but tha Cap’in o’ tha ship we were defendin’ was jus pulled outta the Romulan’s grubby paws mid-transport. She’s a wee dizzy and disoriented. I thought mebbe ye should make sure none o’ her molecules got…” Scotty began to explain.

“Dear God man,” McCoy shot aghast. “Are you tellin’ me you think the poor woman’s atoms got scrambled in transit?”

“I didn’a say tha’ Doctor McCoy,” Scotty insisted. McCoy didn’t seem to hear him or chose to ignore it.

“I knew this was going to happen sooner or later. Did anybody listen? Of course not. Damn death traps waiting to happen. I’m on my way,” McCoy said and the communication was cut off.

Erin started laughing and leaned her head on her knees. The Doctor’s tirade was so like what she would have expected out of his counterpart she couldn’t help it. Scotty looked at her alarmed that something was seriously wrong with her.

“Cap’in?” he asked. Erin looked up, tears of hilarity and pent up nerves, streaming. She’d earned it after the events of the last hour, the last day, the last week, the last six months. It was hard to believe
that it had been less than an hour since they’d encountered the *Scythe* in the Proxima Rhogana System, so much had happened in that small span of time. Time. That was weirdly funny to Erin right now.

“Temporal Investigations is going to have a field day with this one,” she said still laughing. Scotty could only look worried and hope McCoy hurried up. Maybe he should be. Hell, this was Erin’s fifth jump through time in a little over a year. Who knew, maybe it was the beginnings of Temporal Psychosis.

***

“Hail that God damn ship.”

“Hailing!” Uhura promised. She sounded as angry as Kirk was. In fact, both bridges now teemed with an abrupt agitation like a disturbed anthill. “Channel open.”

“Attention *Scythe*. This is Captain James T. Kirk of the starship *Enterprise*. You have committed acts of war by crossing the Neutral Zone, firing on Federation vessels and attempting to abduct a Starfleet Captain. Disengage your engines and retain your current position and I’ll agree to arrange a conference with your government’s leadership at a neutral location. If you do not comply immediately I will consider it an open declaration of war against the Federation.”

Kirk didn’t particularly care that ‘crossed the Neutral Zone’ was a technicality since they’d been spat out by a freak singularity and what he really wanted to say was ‘prepare to be boarded’ but he managed to remain civil.

“They’re answering,” Uhura said.

“On screen and make sure the Devil’s Trap can hear it,” Kirk said his voice low with anger that he bridled with effort.

“On screen now, sir,” Uhura said and the image of the slowly fleeing *Scythe* was replaced with the visage of a fair haired Romulan woman who looked positively rabid. She bore a ‘V’ forehead ridge that was more pronounced than those Kirk had seen on Nero’s crew or most of the other Romulans he’d met nor did she wear the stylistic scars and tattoos Nero’s crew had but the pointed ears that were slightly blunter than a Vulcan’s, marked her clearly as what she was. She couldn’t even speak without snarling like an animal.

“I am Commander Ael t’Xereth of the IRW *Scythe*. War? You dare accuse us of acts of war!? That murdering susse-thrai you ripped from my grasp is a war criminal of the Romulan Star Empire. She cold bloodedly slaughtered five thousand innocent Romulans!” the woman spat.

Kirk didn’t let his shock at that accusation show. Instead he said, “I might be more inclined to believe you if you weren’t joyriding through Federation space in a ship designed to destroy planets and taking pot shots at Starfleet vessels. As I said…disengage your engines and I will arrange for a conference between your government and Starfleet during which any legal grievances you have may be presented, including your accusations against Captain Winchester. There is still a chance for a peaceful resolution to all this.”

Commander t’Xereth snorted in fury, obviously not persuaded. “Peace,” she said her voice dripping with disdain. “The time for peace ended twenty five years ago. I don’t know what game you’re playing Starfleet—with this singularity and this infantile charade about Kirk—who has been dead for over a century, but it will be at your peril. I will complete my mission. You want that susse-thrai? Keep her. Let her live to see what I do to her people. I want her to suffer the same pain those she
killed suffered, that their families suffered. I will have revenge. You want war? I’ll give you war.”

With that the transmission was cut off and the view screen switched back to the *Scythe*, whose warp nacelles flared neon green.

“Are all Romulans from the future insane?” Kirk wondered aloud in exasperation. This was the crisis with Nero all over again but Nero had only had one planet destroying weapon available to him. Commander Ael t’Xereth had two. This was worse, much worse.

“They’re going to warp!” Sulu warned. The *Scythe* disappeared into a flash of green leaving the space where they had been empty. The singularity had long since collapsed, leaving no visible trace it had ever been there. “Pursuit course sir?” Sulu asked.

“No,” Kirk said. “They’re disabled for the moment. Let them go.” He looked to his navigator who was still regaining his space legs at the Ops station. “Chekov, see if you can’t calculate their trajectory and figure out where they’re heading.”

“Aye, sir!” the youth said, standing up on wobbly legs that he still after a moment’s effort.

Kirk looked at Spock, who took a beat to recognize the glance, his head tilted slightly to the side and his eyes holding a questioning faraway look to them almost as though he were listening to something no one else could hear. Spock blinked once and peered back at Kirk.

Kirk allowed his expression to show his distress. Was there any truth to the Romulan’s accusations? It wouldn’t be the first time, nor the second, that Kirk had run across corrupt Starfleet officers bent on their own private wars.

Spock’s expression had gone carefully blank again but the slight nod he favored Kirk with was acknowledgment enough. What had they gotten themselves into this time?

“Uhura, put the *Devil’s Trap* up,” Kirk ordered.

Dutifully, she did so.

The man Kirk had mistaken for the Captain looked fit to be tied. It was impossible to tell how the Vulcan at his side felt, his expression was a carefully schooled as Spock’s. The man didn’t even give Kirk a chance to speak before he leapt to his Captain’s defense.

“Those were blatant lies!” the man spat looking as furious as Commander t’Xereth had.

“I’m sure they were,” Kirk offered though he was anything but. “Mr…?” He hadn’t had a chance to learn the man’s name yet.

“Commander Dean Singer, First Officer,” the man said.

“…Commander Singer,” Kirk amended himself. “Your Captain is safe on our vessel but I need to speak with her promptly as I’m sure you understand. Can you start putting your ship and crew back together without her?”

“Of course,” the Commander said though he sounded displeased with what Kirk was saying.

“Very good,” Kirk said. “If you require any additional personnel let us know. We will happily provide any assistance we can. I don’t know how useful it would be since you have the superior technology but we’ll do all we can.”
“Thank you, Captain,” the Commander said. He still sounded less than pleased. Kirk supposed he understood it. If the situation were reversed, he’d probably be chomping at the bit to get his Captain back on his ship too.

“When you are able, if Captain Winchester hasn’t already beamed back, feel free to come aboard,” Kirk said.

That seemed to ease the Commander’s mind fractionally. His shoulders relaxed half an inch. He mulled it over a moment, looked as if he had to swallow something foul and then said. “If it’s alright with you I’ll send our Second and Science Officer, Commander Lorian over now.” The very blue-eyed Vulcan beside him straightened further, which Kirk would have thought impossible, and placed his hands serenely behind his back.

“No problem,” Kirk said with a friendly smile. “We’ll send over the coordinates and meet him and the Captain in the transporter room.”

Commander Singer nodded and the Devil’s Trap broke the connection, reclaiming the certainly badly needed power it took to keep the comm. channel open from their end.

Kirk rose from his chair. “Mr. Sulu, you have the Conn. Uhura, contact Starfleet Command and tell them what’s going on. Mr. Spock,” Kirk said his gaze bouncing from his helmsman, to his communications officer, to his First Officer. Spock had gotten that faraway look again. “Spock…”

The Vulcan pulled himself together as though he’d only been mildly distracted but it was still unlike him.

“…Let’s go greet our guests.” The rest went unsaid. ‘And find out exactly what the hell is going on.’

“Certainly Captain,” Spock said and followed in Kirk’s wake as though the instant of inattention hadn’t happened.

***

“No problem,” Kirk said with a friendly smile. “We’ll send over the coordinates and meet him and the Captain in the transporter room.”

Commander Singer nodded and the Devil’s Trap broke the connection. As soon as the screen returned to an outside view Dean looked to the side at Commander Lorian who had his hands placidly folded behind his back. It had been very difficult for him to ask that Captain Kirk allow Lorian to beam over instead of himself.

It was Dean’s first instinct that it should be him headed for the transporter room. Not Lorian. But with Erin co-opted into a con fab with Kirk through circumstance command fell to Commander Singer. He couldn’t desert his duties because he wanted to run to the damsel’s rescue. The damsel didn’t need rescuing. She never had.

His place was here. Hers was over there. Where he wasn’t. He might not be able to be there but if he couldn’t he was going to send the next best thing which, to the chagrin of Dean’s ego, was Lorian. That might be Captain Kirk on that ship but Dean wasn’t going to leave Erin over there without some kind of back up.

Besides, now that his brain was working more or less as it usually did, now that he was thinking instead of reacting, he knew Erin would be contacting him any minute demanding reports. There was
nothing that would concern her so much as the state of her ship and her crew.

“Well, Commander Lorian,” Dean said a bit more coarsely than he intended. “You heard him. Get going.”

“Of course, Commander,” Lorian said and turned neatly on his heel to go as Cass finally extricated himself and a sedated Talia from under the ruined security console. The others were in various states of duty but all of them wore slack expressions of weary relief.

“I need to get Talia to sickbay. She’ll be alright but she suffered some neural shock from that jolt,” Cass said as he scooped her up into his arms without much effort. Dean envied him that genetically enhanced strength of his.

Dean nodded his understanding. “Get me a casualty report as soon as you can.”

The Doctor frowned deeply. That report was likely to be far longer than anyone cared for. Even one name was too many, this time it was likely to contain dozens. “I will,” he promised grimly, following Lorian to the turbolift.

Dean gritted his teeth. He needed to say something. He’d needed to say it since yesterday but hadn’t been able to find the time. He didn’t want to but he needed to.

“Mr. Lorian.”

The Vulcan placed his hand on jam of the turbolift preventing the doors from closing. “Yes, Commander?”

“I don’t know what you did but you accomplished what I couldn’t. You got Erin back on the bridge and acting something like herself again. You gave her what she needed, whatever that was. I don’t think we’d have made it this far if you hadn’t. Thank you for that.”

It cost Dean a huge measure of injury to his pride to say that but credit where credit was due.

“I shall endeavor to accept your gratitude in the spirit in which it is intended. However, I gave the Captain nothing,” Lorian said blandly.

“What did you do then?” Dean asked confused.

“I listened,” the Vulcan said and let the doors shut, the turbo lift whisking him and the Doctor off to their task. Frankly it was amazing the thing still worked.

“Sam how do we look?” Dean asked Lieutenant Commander Campbell and trying not to consider the implications of the Vulcan’s remark. Sam sighed with resignation. “Major hull damage, weapons, shields and the warp core offline. Power levels are minimal but holding.”

Pretty much what Dean had expected. “Noted. Have you sent all that down to Engineering yet?”

“Yes, sir,” Sam said. “We took a helluva beating, Commander. Even with all the materials Admiral T’Nae had us take on it’s going to take a while for us to get repaired.”

“Maintain necessary systems but don’t push it,” Dean said. Sam nodded.

Dean sighed in resignation over their situation and looked toward the communications station. “Janira, get Lieutenant Sheppard up here to take over Lorian’s post. Then get Nilsa up here. Once you’ve done that, start scouring the computer banks for anything about Ael t’Xereth or anything else
that might be relevant: intelligence reports, logs from other ships on the Romulan Front, ex cetera. Routine and classified information, both. Send it through to the Ready Room when you’re done.”

He wanted Sheppard up here to begin the assessment of their computers and begin tracking the Scythe’s warp signature for a possible destination. He wanted Lieutenant Nilsa, Talia’s second in security because he wanted whoever had sabotaged the ship found immediately. Whoever it was might think twice about incurring the short-tempered Klingon’s formidable wrath. The rest was self-explanatory.

“Aye, sir,” the pretty Trill said. Despite her apparent frailty and extreme feminine personality she looked the least flustered of them all save the Vulcan.

“Bridge to engineering.”

“Engineering,” Mary’s voice said sounding flustered but focused.

“Sam sent down a summary of our damage. Have you had a chance to look at it?”

“Briefly. I’ve been a little busy trying to keep the warp core from exploding,” Mary said with a note of testiness in her voice. Which was par for the course when anything went wrong with the ship. Mary was attached to the thing as much as Erin was in her own way.

“Can you give me a ball park on repairs?”

Mary scoffed incredulously. “Without a dry-dock? Bare minimum is a week just to get us operational again. Half my staff is either already working on repairs, trying to figure out what went wrong so they can make repairs…or in sickbay. We just don’t have enough people.”

Dean pinched the bridge of his nose. Erin was not going to be happy with that figure. All of them should probably be happy just to be alive at the moment, but with the Scythe god-knew-where and planning to wreak havoc on Earth—the only plausible target given Ael t’Xereth’s tirade—it was hard to be thankful.

“Alright. Work on getting our power levels back up and figuring out what was done to sabotage the ship first. Keep me posted. Singer out.”

The comm. channel closed automatically. Dean muttered into the air to no one in particular. “Just once, I’d like the mission we’re sent on to be the mission we end up completing. Just once.” Then he looked up over the command pit railing to Law, who was standing at the tactical station with a tortured expression.

“Law?” he asked worriedly.

“Fool. Child. Beast with no honor, no mnhei’ sahe,” Law spat with complete and total vehemence. It took an instant for Dean to realize Law was not talking about him. “That…” the Romulan seemed to struggle for something to say couldn’t find anything adequate and settled for a simple descriptive that carried the inflective intent anyway, “woman… makes me ashamed to be Rihannsu.” The man’s expression changed to one of personal pain and he shook his head. “How far my brave people have fallen.” Then he trailed off in a hushed string of Romulan that Dean hadn’t a hope of understanding—universal translator or not.

Law gritted his teeth snarling and reverted back to Standard. “How dare she call my Captain a susse-thrat. I will bury an Honor Blade in her gray, cold, passionless heart if I ever have the chance.”

“Whoa,” Dean said. “Calm down, Law. You want to kill her then how about helping me?” He
didn’t ask what a *susse-thrai* was, he thought it might just set Law off again and he suspected he might not want to know the translation.

“*In what way?*” Law asked bitterly. It was obvious he felt helpless and betrayed by his own race for a second time.

“*By doing what guys like us do best. Figure out how to blow up that ship,*” Dean said. “*It’s not a Romulan Honor Blade but the fireworks oughta be pretty spectacular.*”

Law’s expression became terribly serious and set. He nodded curtly, bringing his feet together sharply, his eyes going straight ahead and his right arm, fist clenched to rap on his left shoulder. A Romulan salute. Dean didn’t know if he should be terrified, honored or both. He’d never heard of a Romulan saluting a human in such a manner.

***

Kirk strode down the brightly lit corridor heading for the transporter room with a long determined stride. His face was set in an expression of grim contemplation. He honestly didn’t believe that Captain Winchester had done what Ael t’Xereth had claimed—Winchester’s behavior thus far did not speak of someone who killed five thousand people for the fun of it and Kirk’s instincts said that wasn’t who the woman in his transporter room was—but he could not discount the possibility.

“What do you think, Spock?”

The Vulcan didn’t respond and Kirk glanced at him. He was looking inward again, distracted.

“Spock!” Kirk bit irritated by his First Officer’s sudden lack of attention. The Vulcan snapped out of it and looked serenely at him, covering the momentary lapse.

“Okay,” Kirk said. “That’s the third time you’ve wandered off into la-la land. What gives?”

“’La-la land’?” Spock asked perplexed. Kirk brushed the query aside with a wave of his hand.

“Answer the question,” he insisted.

Spock looked hesitant for a moment as though he were unsure if he should. “I allowed myself to become distracted. I apologize. It will not happen again.”

“That’s not an answer,” Kirk insisted.

Spock gave him a look that said it was indeed an answer. It just wasn’t the one Kirk wanted. Kirk gave him look for look. Spock relented.

“I thought I felt another telepathic mind. It was erratic and faint but I no longer sense it.”

“Well,” Kirk suggested. “*The Devil’s Trap*’s Science Officer is a Vulcan. Maybe you were picking up on him. He *is* on his way over here.”

“It is possible,” Spock said and did not offer to elaborate further. But to Kirk Spock looked doubtful of his suggestion. Figuring that was all he was going to get out of his First Officer on the subject Kirk returned to his original question.
“What do you think of what t’Xereth said?”

“I do not have enough information from which to draw a conclusion. Currently there are too many unknowns to begin to postulate,” the Vulcan said calmly.

Kirk looked at him sideways and then shook his head. “No,” he said as though convincing himself as well as denouncing any protests Spock might have had but not voiced. “I can’t believe that what that Romulan said is true. Captain Winchester doesn’t strike me as the type to wantonly slaughter five thousand people for no reason.”

“May I remind you Captain, that while you may ‘like her.’, you know absolutely nothing about Captain Winchester.”

Kirk shook his head again as they walked. “It’s instinct, Spock. Gut reaction.”

“While I will not deny that your human propensity for following ‘your gut’ has proven to be accurate and successful in the past against all logical arguments to the contrary, it is hardly an accurate measure of a person you have no knowledge of. We do not know what timeline Captain Winchester and the Devil’s Trap come from. While it is obvious they are from the future, it is entirely possible they are from this timeline’s future and not the alternate reality that Nero was from. And there is the possibility that Captain Winchester and her ship are from another alternate reality entirely.”

“You saw that black hole. It was the same exact kind. That’s not a coincidence. It has to be connected.”

“Indeed I did and I am inclined to agree but it would be folly to assume such without evidence.”

Kirk sighed heavily. “There’s always something.”

Chapter End Notes

Please read and review!
Erin had gotten a grip on her laughing fit, and for the moment, her mental shield. With Doctor McCoy’s arrival the transporter room had erupted into chaos. Erin had no intention of letting McCoy scan her for fear he’d pick up the slightly off readings that would give away that she was a bit different from other humans. She had no way of knowing if he’d managed to pick up anything on it already. She kept dodging any attempts to touch her in the process as well whilst also trying to ascertain what was going on, on her ship.

McCoy was equally determined he was going to examine her for her own good and Scotty was caught in between. The whole thing had devolved into an argument very much akin to one she might have had on the Devil’s Trap with her own crew…or the McCoy and Scotty she was acquainted with. She kept having to remind herself she didn’t know this McCoy and Scotty but it was difficult when they reacted so like their other selves.

The poor officers in the control area had given up any pretense of attempting to intervene and let the senior officers have at it. Choosing instead to gawk at Erin as she seemingly spoke into the air and Dean’s voice replied. The whole thing was terribly awkward.

“I don’t know how they do things where you come from but in my world when a Doctor tells you it’s in your best interest to let him examine you it’s usually a good idea to let him!” McCoy shot at her.

“Doctor McCoy,” she said firmly. “I will tell you again, I am fine and if you wave that thing at me one more time, I’m going to break it.”

McCoy snorted in disbelieving outrage at her. She ignored him and Scotty’s exasperated plea that Erin cooperate.

“How long are repairs going to take?” she asked the air.

“Mary says preliminary estimates are at least a week just to restore us to operational levels,” Dean replied. His voice sounded around them much to the others consternation.

“A week?” Erin shook her head. “A week isn’t good enough.”

“You can’t change the laws of physics…” Dean argued.


“The hell I can’t. Find a way!” Erin insisted fiercely, then her voice turned quiet. “How bad are the causalities?”

“Cass is getting me a report as quick as he can,” Dean said equally as somber. Erin grimaced and for a beat McCoy and Scotty shared it. Everyone knew the kind of damage the Devil’s Trap had taken. That there were dead among the casualties was a certainty.

“Now listen to me young lady. You may out rank me but in medical matters I have the authority to…” McCoy tried again, in a less irritated tone but still insistent.
“To leave me alone,” Erin shot back. “You’re as persistent and stubborn as the other you.”

That made McCoy blink. “Other me?” the Doctor said. “Wait. You know some other version of me? I thought you were from the future?”

“It’s complicated,” Erin said regretting she’d said what she had.

“I’ll say,” Scotty said. “Ya don’t know anotha me do ya, Cap’in?”

“Yes….no….this is awkward and confusing.”

“Obviously. Now if you’ll just stand still….” McCoy said and waved what Erin assumed was a hand scanner, its magnifying like glass end whirring, at her. Erin snatched it.

“Give that back!”

Erin glared at him and put her thumb on the magnifying glass like piece, poised to snap it to make him desist, daring him to try to get it back. “I am fine. Now if you don’t mind I have a ship to worry about.”

“I’m the Doctor. I’ll be the judge of that!”

“Relax, Erin. We’re handling everything. It’s just a preliminary estimate…,” Dean insisted. Dean had handled it. Everything she could have asked him to do was already in progress. She’d felt an enormous sense of relief when she’d learned that Talia was going to be alright. But with everything she might have been concerned about in the immediate moment being taken care of, it led her back to why it needed to be taken care of in the first place.

McCoy made a grab for his hand scanner and Erin jerked it out of reach. He gave her a frustrated glare.

“Damn it Dean, someone sabotaged my ship! I want them found and I want it done right now.” Erin growled forcefully. That bothered her deeply. That despite all their precautions somehow, someone had managed to circumvent them all and sabotage her ship. To her it was tantamount to defiling holy ground.

“Nilsa’s already on the way up here,” Dean assured her.

Erin allowed herself a sigh. “What would I do without you?”

Dean made a noise over the comm. channel open between them via their comm. badges but McCoy interjected without regard for what she was saying before Erin could ask about it. Scotty gaped.

“Yer ship was sabotaged?”

“Give me my hand scanner back. I swear you’re a worse patient than Jim is. What is it with Captains and medical exams?”

“What the hell’s going on in here?”

It was Captain Kirk and he looked confused by the ruckus and bordering on angry.

“It would seem the Doctor is implementing his bed side manner with his usual grace,” Spock , a step behind his Captain, said dryly.

Everybody paused in place, chagrined…except McCoy.
“I’m gonna have to call you back,” Erin said to Dean and hit her combadge to disconnect the communication. Scotty’s eyes got big as sand dollars at the action. He stared at it with unveiled interest and blatant lust. It might be the first time in Erin’s life she’d had a man stare at her chest and know beyond a doubt that he was not looking at her breasts.

“So tha’s how yer doin’ it. Yer badge is a communicator. Marvelous lil bit o’ technology.”

“My bedside manner is perfectly fine,” McCoy groused at the Vulcan. He reached out and snatched his hand scanner back from Erin, who made no attempt to resist him this time. She had eyes only for Kirk. Captain James T. Kirk. In the flesh. She didn’t know whether to babble like a star struck idiot or hide in a corner. She took no notice of the way she chose to stand, hands clasped behind her back in an unconscious effort to avoid touching or being touched. Just like Spock was standing.

McCoy began waving his free hand animatedly in Kirk’s direction. “Jim, tell her to let me examine her. Scotty called me up here because she was exhibiting dizziness and disorientation after that stunt you pulled with the transporter…”

Spock, silent behind his Captain, glanced once from McCoy to Erin then away again. Erin felt a thrill of apprehension jolt through her. Lorian had warned that it would be nearly impossible to hide what she was from another telepath. It had been part of the reason the Undine posing as Admiral Zelle had been all but impossible to detect until it was too late. It had posed as Deltan, an inherently telepathic species and so it’s own much more violently utilized telepathy had been disregarded as natural. Did Enterprise’s First Officer know what Erin was? But if he did he chose to say nothing about it.

Kirk put his hands up and tried to calm McCoy. “Bones, hold up just a second. She looks like she’s okay to me.”

“Since when did you become a Doctor? You could have scattered her atoms all over space with that stunt you pulled. I’ve half a mind to decertify the damn thing until it’s pulled apart and every circuit checked. What were you thinking?” McCoy insisted with displeasure.

“That it was a better alternative than being captured by the Romulans,” Kirk said mildly. “Now, unless the Captain is in danger of dissolving into thin air I need to have a discussion with her.”

McCoy looked displeased, scowling deeply but he desisted. Kirk stepped past him and Spock followed quietly, his dark eyed gaze never impolite but penetrating in a way that made Erin want to hide all over again. She’d never in a million years have thought that meeting Spock, from any reality, would have made her think of fleeing. Scotty stepped back obediently without any further objections, still eyeing Erin’s combadge with desire.

Kirk flashed her a brilliant smile. “Since you’ve obviously met Doctor McCoy, my Chief Medical Officer and Mr. Scott, my Chief Engineer I won’t bother you with introducing them again. It’s nice to meet you in person, Captain Winchester.” He extended his hand for a handshake and Erin hesitated uncertainly. It was partly because it was Kirk offering to shake hands and partly because she was unsure if shaking his hand would have some telepathic effect despite the gloves she wore. Finally she decided she had to go through with it otherwise she’d look odd.

Erin extended her hand almost shyly. Spock looked to her gloved hands with a quick flick of his eyes that betrayed nothing. Did he suspect? But then Kirk took her offered hand with his own, clasping it firmly but gently and covered their joined hands with his other in a very friendly manner. To Erin’s relief nothing telepathic happened. Apparently the gloves were enough to block it. And… she was shaking hands with Captain Kirk!

“It is an honor to meet you,” Erin said in the same awe struck voice she had used before. “You’re
something of a legend where I come from.” Kirk beamed wider obviously enjoying the attention. She inclined her head to Spock respectfully. “Commander Spock.”

Spock returned the gesture; his hands ever clasped at the small of his back “A pleasure, Captain.” It sounded so genuine that Erin blinked. Not a formality of language, honest truth. The why behind that possible truth made Erin uneasy. He knows, she thought.

“A legend?” Kirk said releasing Erin’s hand. He glanced at her gloves but made no remark. Erin hoped he thought they were just part of her uniform. “Hear that Spock? I’m a legend in the future.”


“And now you will undoubtedly be insufferably pleased with yourself for at least a week,” Spock said in what was obviously a humorous jab at his Captain, or an exasperated admission that he was going to have to put up with Kirk being insufferable.

“You all are,” Erin said. “There’s not a being in the Federation that hasn’t heard your names a thousand times.”

“Well look at that. Now everybody gets to be insufferable. Spock’s going to have an aneurism from all the inflated egos floating around. Mine included,” McCoy commented from behind them. Spock turned to give him a long-suffering look for it. McCoy grinned slightly.

“I am certain I can manage to endure your stroked-ego with very little effort,” Spock retorted. “You however might wish to seek precautionary medical intervention. I believe large quantities of hot air cause humans undue gastrointestinal distress.”

McCoy glared at him and Erin almost burst out laughing. Kirk was grinning with great amusement. “Fun as this is,” Kirk said. “This is a time sensitive situation. So if you’ll excuse us?”

“Course Jim, but if she starts actin’ funny again you call me immediately,” McCoy said all business again. Kirk nodded and McCoy looked to Erin.

“Pleasure to have met you Captain Winchester. If you happen to find the time, I’d certainly like to hear about your acquaintance with my other self. Bet that’s a mighty interesting story,” he said and ducked out before anyone could ask him what he was talking about. Spock looked after him with curiosity and Kirk openly gaped.

“Och, aye. Pleasure to have met ye Cap’in Winchester. I look forward to the same abou’ me self, should ya fin’ tha time,” Scotty said and exitied as quickly as McCoy had.

Kirk looked back around at her and thumbed over his shoulder. “You know Scotty and Bones in your time?”

Erin sighed. She felt more relaxed after the short bit of joking but she was still not comfortable. “I do, sort of. This isn’t my first time playing time traveler. But I can tell you that your Doctor McCoy and Mr. Scott are not mine. Unless something has drastically changed in the timeline prior to our coming here, this reality is not the one I’m from.”

“Which brings us to the issue at hand,” Kirk admitted. “We aren’t sure what reality you’re from either and that presents a number of problems. But let’s discuss it after we beam over the party from your ship.”

Erin’s brows went up. She hadn’t realized anyone from the Devil’s Trap was beaming over. Kirk looked back through the glass-like partition toward the control area. “Do you have the coordinates
“from the Devil’s Trap?” he asked of anyone willing to answer.

“Aye, sir,” a fellow with wiry brown curls said. “We just didn’t think it’d be a good idea to beam them over with…a difference of opinion going on.”

“Understood,” Kirk said. “Go ahead with it.”

The officer nodded obediently and keyed the controls and the transporter began the beaming process. Erin watched with great interest as one of her officers began to coalesce out of the swirling streams of light. It was certainly a different effect than she was familiar with.

The transporter beam solidified into Commander Lorian and Erin had to stop herself from crying out with relief. Of all the people on her ship that she might be most in need of, it was the Vulcan, and it had nothing to do with official business.

“Lorian,” she said, unable to keep all the enthusiasm out of her voice despite trying. Spock glanced at her unreadable for it. “What are you doing over here?”

Lorian stood very straight and formal, hands behind his back, eyes impenetrable and his face a perfect expressionless sculpture. He’d never looked more Vulcan. He’d also never looked more like Spock. Was this what a nervous Vulcan looked like? Erin knew Spock, or the Spock from their timeline, was something of a hero for her Science Officer. “Captain Kirk kindly invited Commander Singer and I to beam over at our earliest convenience. Commander Singer is busy with repairs and other such necessities so he suggested I precede him. I presume you are unharmed by your alteration with the transporters, Captain?”

“Got a little dizzy and disoriented but I’m fine. Their Doctor McCoy wasn’t convinced though,” Erin admitted. Lorian’s left brow arched ever so slightly and she knew he’d gotten the message very clearly. Erin didn’t know for certain but McCoy might have gotten enough of a scan to count for something.

“I see,” Lorian said. “Nevertheless, it is acceptable to see you are in stable condition,” Lorian replied. Another message. He’d noted her mental shield was stable but would it hold? It was less of an effort now that the undefined thoughts and emotions battering her had calmed significantly but Erin had been due for her second dose of Lexorin two hours ago. It was wearing off and if Lorian was aware of her mental shield had Spock picked it up on it yet?

“McCoy’s a little overly enthusiastic in the practice of medicine sometimes,” Kirk chuckled unaware of the subtext. “He means well.”

“Captain Kirk,” Lorian greeted still stiff as a board and as formal as a white tie affair. “It is an honor to meet you.”

“Nice to meet you too Commander Lorian. You can get off the pad anytime you like,” Kirk said with mild amusement. Lorian complied, stepping off the pad with almost exaggerated care and grace. He stopped before Spock and raised his hand in the typical Vulcan manner.

“Peace and long life, Commander Spock,” Lorian said in a complete monotone but was it Erin’s imagination or had there been a nanosecond of hesitation before Lorian had said Commander? Surely he could read the stripes on Spock’s sleeve as readily as she could. They weren’t the braids from their timeline but it was close enough as to make no difference.

Spock returned the greeting smoothly. “Live long and prosper, Commander Lorian.”

Lorian bowed his head deeply in recognition and Spock arched a brow at him. “It is quite
satisfactory to have had the opportunity to meet you.”

“And I, you,” Spock said. “I was most intrigued by your use of a focused tachyon beam to negate the Scythe’s shields. If there is time I would ask to speak with you about the technique.”

“I would be pleased to explain it to you as soon as we are able should my Captain give me leave to do so,” Lorian said.

“Most understandable,” Spock said.

“Geez,” Kirk said. “These two make me feel like a bull in a china shop when it comes to manners. Okay, enough with the formality. We have a lot to talk about and not enough time to do it in.”

“Of course, Captain,” Spock said dutifully and moved back, which seemed to be an indication between the two Vulcans that Lorian could join Erin. He stepped into exact synch with Commander Spock, taking up a position to the right just behind her shoulder.

“Right this way,” Kirk said and led them out of the transporter room into the corridor. The formation they preceded in down the very white, brightly lit corridor drew more than a few stares and Erin thought it was more than half the contingent’s odd uniforms and the onlookers natural curiosity. To someone outside the group, the foursome walked in neat order, two Captains with their two Vulcan officers close on their heels--worlds apart and yet still perfect mirrors of each other.

Kirk took them around a curve and down another corridor, finally stopping at a set of doors that whooshed open to reveal a small briefing room.

It was sparsely furnished with a very simple oblong black table ringed with ergonomically padded white chairs that could be moved at will on casters or locked into position with an almost invisible gravity pad hiding beneath the spokes attached to the casters. Besides that there was only a series of blank clear screens on the wall, Erin would have judged were something approximating the holoscreens on the Devil’s Trap. This Enterprise’s technology was definitely much further advanced than the one she remembered. There was no way they could have accelerated their technology to this level without outside intervention from a significantly advanced source and one that had reached nearly the same level of accomplishment her own time had.

He motioned for the rest of the group to enter and favored Erin with a warm, comforting smile as she preceded him inside. The group filed in and the doors closed softly behind him. The four of them knotted together in the unconscious huddle of people intent on serious discussion. A common sight on any starship in any time period.

Erin spoke first. “Captain, your ship, your crew are they…”

“They’re fine,” Kirk assured her. “Nothing Scotty and Bones can’t fix.”

Erin gave a small sigh of relief at that. She would have felt worse than she already did if Captain Kirk had lost members of his crew saving them.

“And the Scythe?”

“Turned tail and ran, just like you thought they would,” Kirk admitted. “Which gives us a little time but only a little.” His expression grew serious, tempered as though he were reserving judgment about something.

“Captain Winchester,” he said. “You strike me as a particularly straightforward person for all of the thirty minutes I’ve known you so I’m going to get right to the point. The Enterprise has dealt with a
situation very like this before. We don’t doubt that you are from the future, we even suspect you’re from the same reality as the persons involved in the last incident. There are too many coincidences. But we can’t be sure not without something to link both events other than coincidence.

“Now, you have the dubious luxury of not having to answer to Starfleet for the moment. I don’t. Which means that a soon as Starfleet Command gets done bouncing my communications officer’s message about what happened here all over the North American continent I’m going to have to have answers for them. So I’m going to come right out and say it before we go any further,” Kirk said then drew in a deep breath as though he did not want to ask what he felt he needed to ask.

“Before the Scythe warped out of here, their Commander responded to the Enterprise’s hails. She gave every indication that she still has no idea she’s in an alternate reality and she made some pretty serious accusations against you. Considering she said she intends to destroy Earth in order to seek revenge on you because of those accusations, I need to know if there is any truth to them.”

He put things in the most succinct terms possible without revealing an iota more of what he knew than was absolutely necessary to make his objective and the need for it perfectly clear. Kirk had carefully not said what the accusations were and her reaction or lack thereof would spring the neatly laid trap of his words. It was a smooth bit of maneuvering, one Erin would have employed in the same circumstances. And exactly everything Erin dreaded having to answer. That it was this universe’s incarnation of her hero asking it only made the depth of her shame and guilt far worse. As at no point in her reality’s history had Captain James T. Kirk made such a grievous error in command. Never had his actions, or in action, led to the deaths of five thousand innocent people.

***

Kirk stood there, watching Captain Winchester expectantly for a hint of a reaction to his direct question. He hoped fervently the answer would be ‘no’. He felt in his gut that the answer must be ‘no’. No one capable of the things he’d already seen her try to accomplish in the service of her ship and her crew could be capable of the mass slaughter of five thousand innocents, for any reason. No one who had been about to pull the same stunt his father had would be such a depraved murderer.

And damn it, he wanted to like her. It wasn’t that she was a gorgeous woman or even that she wore a Starfleet uniform, albeit the high collar and the cut looked terribly uncomfortable and formal to him. It was that he’d seen what she could do and he couldn’t help respecting it.

It was the particular way she’d said ‘It is an honor to meet you’ with a tone not of coy flirtation but reverence. He’d joke all day long about it and deliberately misconstrue it with the characteristic rebel arrogance he was known for but it had touched something in him. He’d never had someone greet him with that kind of difference before.

It made him feel bad for the verbal trap he’d laid. It was glaringly obvious and unavoidable on her part. He’d had to do it but he didn’t like it.

So when the Captain’s response came it only served to crush Kirk’s hopes more thoroughly than he’d prepared himself for.

“There is truth to them,” she said very softly. She wouldn’t even look up at him but what of her face he could see beneath the lowered fringe of her golden hair showed a tremendous amount of shame… and guilt. Jim didn’t know what to say or think in that moment.

“I could offer you a million excuses. But the fact is that no matter the reason, I am guilty of causing
the deaths of five thousand innocent Romulans. Even beginning to explain the events that led up to their deaths and subsequently to our arrival here would take hours if not days and even if it would not, I seriously doubt you’d believe me.”

“Damn it,” Kirk spat in unveiled disappointment. Captain Winchester flinched like he’d slapped her and her Science Officer stepped a shade closer, expression as controlled as Spock’s ever was, but there was something behind those far-too-blue-to-be-full-Vulcan eyes that dared Kirk to do something—and live to regret it.

Spock regard them all with a cool contemplative air, as though he were not in the least bothered by the news that the Romulan t’Xereth had been telling the truth and that their ally against a threat potentially worse than Nero had been—was a cold-blooded murderer.

“Captain, the Temporal Prime Directive clearly states,” Commander Lorian interjected calmly but with obvious disapproval.

Captain Winchester looked over at him. “I thought we already had this discussion?”

“I do not recall such a discussion,” Commander Lorian said.

“I do. You reminded me of the Temporal Prime Directive and I told you it could go to hell.”

“Captain, surely you do not intend…” Commander Lorian protested.

“I intend. Our mere presence here is a violation of the Temporal Prime Directive, Mr. Lorian. Nothing I tell them could possibly compare to the damage we’ve already done, intentionally or not. We brought the Scythe with us through that black hole. Now, instead of annihilating our universe it will try to annihilate theirs. This is what Q was talking about. His ‘test’. The Temporal Prime Directive states that any interference must be minimalized to maintain the integrity of the timeline. The biggest threat to this timeline is the Scythe and the reason for it is because of me. I intend to do everything and anything I have to, to rectify the situation,” Erin said firmly.

Spock continued his infernal silent contemplation and Kirk considered yelling at him to say something simply because he was the only one doing any of the talking. His First Officer seemed content to allow things to play out however they liked.

“I would argue it with you but I know it would be pointless,” Commander Lorian said to Captain Winchester beleaguered.

“Who is Q? What test?” Kirk asked more frustrated and confused than ever. “And what was that back in the transporter room about your ship being sabotaged?” What she kept saying kept contradicting the picture t’Xereth painted of her and the Captain had confirmed was true. Why would a cold-blooded murderer of thousands be intent on preventing the Scythe from destroying their universe? “None of this makes any sense.”

“Captain,” Spock spoke up. “If I may, there is a simple solution to our problem assuming that Captain Winchester would be willing to undergo the process.”

“What’s that, Spock?” Kirk said almost distractedly.

“A mind meld between myself and Captain Winchester. In the interest of our limited time and the confusing nature of the events leading up to this moment it would be the most logical answer. Additionally the question of the Captain’s guilt or innocence in the deaths t’Xereth has implicated her in would be certain. You can not lie during a mind meld.”
Before Kirk could either consent or disagree Captain Winchester spoke up. “I have already told you
I’m guilty Commander Spock.”

“So you have,” Spock said. “What you have not done is defend yourself in any manner. A trait I
have not found to be a common one among humans. It is their very nature to be defensive to some
degree. You offer none. Instead, in one breath you confess your guilt and in the next, vow, against
your own incarnation of Starfleet’s regulations, to do anything required to stop the Scythe and
Commander t’Xereth. That is not the behavior of a person who killed five thousand people with
malicious intent. If you would, as you insist, do anything to accomplish your objective, I am offering
you the opportunity to prove it. Consent and remove all doubt or refuse and prove you cannot be
trusted.”

Kirk didn’t know if he should pin a commendation medal on his First Officer or beat him about his
pointed ears for what he was suggesting. Spock had just given them the neatest possible solution to
all of their questions and in doing so set Captain Winchester up far more efficiently than Kirk had. If
she refused any question of her being trustworthy would be answered, if she accepted they got the
answers they needed even if she couldn’t figure out how to provide them.

To Kirk’s surprise the Captain looked more uncomfortable with Spock’s suggestion than she had
about confessing to killing five thousand people. She shifted from foot to foot and fidgeted. Her
Science Officer was looking from his Captain to Spock, waiting on an answer as though if it were
not in line with what he thought proper he intended to protest vehemently. Which, Kirk admitted,
wouldn’t come as a surprise at all. Vulcans seemed to thrive on objecting to their Captain’s decisions
with a vengeance.

After what seemed like an eternity of consideration and with a very long exhalation Captain
Winchester started to answer only for Commander Lorian to interrupt.

“Captain, I must strongly object.”

“To what?” Captain Winchester said. “I haven’t said anything yet.”

“As you have a storied history of compromising your own safety in the interests of others it is quite
obvious you intend to consent to Commander Spock’s request. An action that given recent events I
believe is firmly not in your best interest at this time.”

“So noted,” Captain Winchester said, “But he’s right. I did say I’d do anything and if this is it so be
it. We have to be able to trust each other or we’re doomed to fail before we start.”

“Commander Lorian, I assure you no harm will come to Captain Winchester during the meld. I am
extensively trained in various Vulcan mental techniques and have a great deal of experience,” Spock
assured him. Lorian all but ignored him to Spock’s eyebrow raising surprise.

For Kirk’s part he couldn’t understand why Commander Lorian would have a problem with Captain
Winchester’s decision. It wasn’t him who was going to have to sit in the hot seat as it were.

“Captain you realize that a mind meld will strip you of any privacy barriers. He will know your mind
as no one has or ever will again,” Commander Lorian said with what for a Vulcan amounted to a
desperate plea.

Captain Winchester looked at him and smiled weakly and Kirk swore he saw something flash
between them that approached the understanding between him and Spock. “I know,” she said
quietly. “But desperate times call for desperate measures. My privacy means little against the
destruction of a universe.” She looked back at Spock. “I consent to your request but only if Lorian
stays and Captain Kirk goes.”

Commander Lorian sighed with dejected resignation and what might have been a flash of fear behind his carefully controlled mask.

“What? Now hold on a minute, I’m not gonna let Spock do a mind meld…” Kirk began to vehemently protest, fearing a trick.

“I accept your terms,” Spock said before Kirk could finish. Kirk stared at him wide eyed.

“No, you don’t.”

“I do, Captain,” Spock said firmly.

“And as your Captain I say you don’t,” Kirk said just a firmly. “You’ve never needed me to exit the room when you did one before.”

Spock looked at him with that expression that meant he would not be moved. “You have never been present when the subject was conscious. All such occurrences have been conducted under extenuating circumstances that precluded the proper protocols of a mind meld with a consenting individual.”

“Spock,” Kirk tried again.

“No, Captain. If Captain Winchester is willing to trust me enough to consent to something she clearly fears to prove herself at my request then I must in turn be worthy of that trust. If she wishes the meld to be conducted privately with Commander Lorian to stand watch I find it acceptable,” Spock said. “A mind meld between two conscious individuals is a deeply intimate undertaking. I will not subject Captain Winchester to an audience she is not comfortable with.”

“Okay, I’ve had a mind meld done on me and I…”

“During which you were most assuredly alone with the individual conducting it,” Spock pointed out.

Kirk resisted the urge to remind him that was because Spock had marooned him on the ice bound planet of Delta Vega for mutiny in a fit of violent emotion.

“And during which,” Spock went on, “you were the recipient of the information neither the giver nor the seeker. Would you care to be watched by an audience while undergoing a full body cavity search? It is not a dissimilar analogy to what you are attempting to order me to allow.”

Kirk stopped and flushed with embarrassment more for Captain Winchester’s sake than his own. He hadn’t realized that what Spock intended to do would be so…personal. He swallowed. “Point taken. I’ll just go stand outside,” he said and started to leave.

“The bridge would be a more acceptable location for you to wait,” Spock said.

Kirk started to argue again and then thought better of it. “Alright, fine. I’ll wait on the bridge.”

“Thank you, Jim,” Spock said as he left and that above all else proved to Kirk that this was terribly serious to the Vulcan. Spock never called Kirk by his given name during duty hours or official business. Now Kirk just hoped Spock wasn’t going to live to regret what he doing.
Spock waited with unending patience for Captain Kirk to distance himself enough that there was no chance he could overhear them and to be sure his Captain would not try something as foolish as attempting to double back.

Behind him, silent and also waiting but with far less patience with the matter, stood Captain Winchester and Commander Lorian. The former radiated a barely controlled aura of nervousness though not true terror. She was doing a remarkably commendable job of containing her emotions, for a human. The latter, despite his calm exterior, had the distinct air about him of a very displeased Vulcan. Spock could not understand why Commander Lorian seemed so opposed to the mind meld but did not trouble himself with it. Whatever reservations Captain Winchester’s Science Officer had were irrelevant. This was ultimately between Spock and Captain Winchester though he did acknowledge the propriety of Commander Lorian’s steadfast loyalty of his Captain.

Finally, satisfied Jim would not come back unless he was called, Spock turned to them, speaking directly to Captain Winchester, “We may begin when you are ready.”

Captain Winchester nodded and pulled one of the chairs away from the briefing table, taking a seat. She sat very straight and very stiff. Spock went to join her.

“Captain, I implore you not to do this,” Commander Lorian asked of his Captain once more as Spock took a chair and sat opposite Captain Winchester.

“The choice is made, Lorian,” Captain Winchester said not unkindly. She looked up at the Vulcan whose eyes betrayed him when his expression did not. He was very disturbed about this entire thing.

Spock understood. If Spock were a man of less integrity, if he were not a Vulcan trained in the mental arts of his people and bound by all the oaths they entailed, a mind meld could be used to control the mind of another, to rape and pillage it as the one administering it saw fit. Commander Lorian had no way of knowing what kind of person Spock was nor could he be expected to judge him on any knowledge he might have had on his reality’s version of Spock. That one might be honorable and forthright, it did not follow that the other would be though the chances were substantially increased.

“I swear on my honor as a Vulcan that no harm will come to your Captain,” Spock promised him. It was a potent oath. No Vulcan of any incarnation would dare to break it. “I do not make the offer of a mind meld lightly.”

Commander Lorian looked at him reluctantly, then his eyes fell and he inclined his head in acceptance.

“Very well,” he said and stepped back. Captain Winchester favored him with a nervous wan smile.

“Just stand watch and make sure nothing….weird happens. Please?”

“I would not have it any other way, Captain,” Commander Lorian said, dropping into a watchful stance nearby. Spock had no doubt had he had ill intentions that he would have found himself assaulted in a moment with swift efficiency.

“But unless something goes wrong. Don’t interfere,” Captain Winchester added. “No matter what happens.”

“I understand,” Commander Lorian said. It was clear he did understand. It was also clear that he had no intention of pretending to like it. He looked very much as though there was something he wished
Spock flicked a glance between them, allowing them this moment to settle themselves to the course ahead. There was something there, intangible but ever present that he could not quite discern. Again Spock did not trouble himself with wondering what it was, shortly he would know or he would not. It was not his right to pry further than he was permitted and he would not.

“I must warn you,” Spock said seriously. “A mind meld comes with certain unavoidable risks.”

“I’m aware of the risks,” Captain Winchester said, wiping sweaty palms on the knees of her pants. “Let’s get this over with.”

Spock nodded. It was not surprising that she might know the rudiments of the Vulcan mind meld and indeed she had scooted to the edge of her chair, feet flat on the floor and her gloved hands folded in her lap in a pose amicable to the performance of a meld. Such knowledge was not uncommon among Starfleet Officers with Vulcans under their command though one could not truly understand unless one had experienced it.

“I will endeavor to maintain as much of our privacy from each other as I can,” Spock promised. He did feel some disquiet from the situation. Captain Winchester had consented but it was patently obvious that she did not want this. Spock did not want it either. To share minds with another was not only profoundly intimate it could be quite uncomfortable to know another’s mind as you knew your own.

The Captain nodded and drew in a long slow breath in preparation.

“It is best if you do not resist the meld. It can be very uncomfortable otherwise,” he advised and edged forward in his chair to reach for her. The Captain gave another nervous nod.

“Do not be afraid. I mean you no harm,” Spock said in a soothing voice, nearly a whisper, as he slipped one hand behind the Captain’s head to stabilize her. Movement during the meld was not advisable.

“I’m not afraid,” she insisted sternly.

Spock knew better, it was written in the nervous way she kept swallowing convulsively, the sweating of her palms, the rigid set of her shoulders but he would not impugn on her pride. He placed the fingers of his other hand on her face gently, thumb on her chin, forefinger on her cheekbone close and middle finger on her temple. The other two fingers rested next to her ear and he locked his eyes with hers.

In that moment, Commander Lorian who stood by watching them like a hawk, ceased to exist for Spock as he reached out with the tentative first tendrils of his mind for Captain Winchester’s and found himself touching a mental shield that only another telepath would possess and experiencing a rare moment of astounded surprise. Spock broke physical contact to look at her with open curiosity, both brows raised markedly.

“It was you I sensed. You are a telepath,” he said.

The Captain’s gaze fell with barely concealed fear. She was afraid to be seen for what she was. That explained her hesitancy to allow Doctor McCoy to examine her, it explained the gloves she wore and the way she had avoided physical contact strongly.

“A human telepath. Fascinating.”
Commander Lorian looked very grim nearby but said nothing.

“May I proceed?” Spock asked again, feeling that now that he was aware that she was a telepath he was required to obtain consent again. Now he was slightly eager to mind meld with Captain Winchester. He’d never met a human telepath before. Why did she feel the need to hide her nature?, he wondered.

Captain Winchester nodded wordlessly and sat still for him. Spock replaced his hands appropriately and tried again.

“Close your eyes,” he advised. The Captain complied. “Try to focus on my voice.”

Spock reached out again with his mind and met her mental shield that while thin and potentially frail stood resolutely against his contact, making his mental touch slid across the surface of it and away.

“You are resisting. Relax,” he soothed.

“Sorry. It’s habit. We train against telepathic interrogation,” the Captain said. She drew in another breath through her nose and he felt her relax fractionally beneath his hands. Spock was mildly alarmed that wherever Captain Winchester was from that resistance to telepathic interrogation was a normal part of a Starfleet Officer’s training. It was eminently logical but it was very disturbing.

Spock himself had training on performing telepathic interrogation, allowing him to block the one he intended to interrogate from their own mind to preserve their private thoughts but never would he have violated the oath required of him for such training. That he would rather die than violate the privacy of another’s mind against their will.

Spock stilled himself and tried again. His voice a low murmur meant to be soothing. “My mind to your mind. Your thoughts to my thoughts. I know what you know. I see what you see. I feel what you feel.” The chant itself was in no way a requirement for a mind meld but it had the virtue of allowing both parties a method of bracing themselves and focusing properly.

This time when Spock reached out with his mind he found the Captain’s mental shield again but there was a sense that she was only waiting for him to touch her to allow him through. “Our minds, one and together,” Spock said reaching out a thread of his mind for hers. “Open your mind to me.”

And she did. Her mental shield did not so much open to allow their minds to touch as it fell completely. Spock had the horrible realization as his mind was yanked toward hers that Captain Winchester had scant training in her telepathy. She’d never melded before with anyone. Not even to learn training techniques. Not even to be shown how to properly shield her mind. He was than’tha—one who guides, the individual who conducts (and guides) another telepath through their first meld.

Spock was furious. How had her teachers, her parents allowed this? No one in their right mind with any sense of propriety or logic would leave a telepath untrained in this manner and they would certainly not have shown her only how to shield from without and not within. To be than’tha was a sacred right. It was not something one stumbled into or did without great consideration. The superiorly trained mind improperly controlled could have devastating effect on the tender untrained one. The preconceptions and prejudices of the former could become irrevocably burned into the mind of the other, damaging it forever.

Spock’s mind reeled and sought purchase in the kaleidoscope maelstrom of the Captain’s upper consciousness which was unbound and uncontrolled. The torrent of emotions roiling in the maelstrom threatened to consume him. With a great deal of will Spock asserted control over himself. He did neither of them any good by allowing himself to become overwhelmed.
I am with you.

The response Spock got was wordless. Undeniable. Absolute fear and deep shame of that fear.

Do not be afraid. I will not hurt you. Trust me. You can sense my thoughts. Sense them now. You can trust me. You must, he said. His mind voice had a particular ‘echoing’ quality to it as it reverberated through the Captain’s mind and back again.

Spock extended a hand in entreaty, seeking an answering one in the rainbow maelstrom around him. Seeking the Captain. It was tentative and shy, frightened and knowing that it could not hide that it was frightened but the Captain’s hand slipped into his.

You are with me, her mind said.

Spock threaded his fingers through hers and thendrew his own mental shields around both their minds. The wild aurora calmed somewhat. We are together.

Then gently he began to descend through the colorful maelstrom, wave after wave of it washing over his mind as he carefully navigated through the upper layers of the Captain’s consciousness. He met some resistance as he started to break through to the deeper part of her mind. Let go, he said gently.

He felt her release the last vestiges of her resistance and the link was made.

We are one, they said.

How did this happen to us?, they asked of themself.

We were born this way, they answered.

How is it that we do not have any training?

We do have training.

Only part of us. The other part does not.

There was no time. That part of us did not know what it was before.

How could part of us not know if we were born this way?

That part was repressed very young.

We understand. But all parts of us must be trained.

We will be. When there is time.

We must make time. We cannot continue this way. We will be overcome. We will lose control. No part of us can tolerate loss of control.

We must serve.

We cannot serve if we cannot function. We must, all of us, be trained. To do otherwise would be illogical.

We serve. We will be logical.

The part of the oneness that knew itself to be called Spock struggled to reassert itself. It was difficult.
The oneness enjoyed being in unity. It did not want to acknowledge that there was identity other than its oneness. The merging of their minds had happened so effortlessly, so seamlessly that they had lost their separate identities and become Spock-Erin.

The Spock identity refused to allow it and urged the Erin identity to remember that it too was itself and not an undefined oneness. The Spock identity had not been prepared, had not expected to be so readily joined. The Erin identity had been stronger than the Spock identity had expected and unable to control itself. The Spock identity must ask the Erin identity the three questions of First Meld or neither identity would regain itself. Without them there was no definition of self.

Who are thou? The Spock identity asked in the formal manner of the other half of itself. The other part was long in answering.

Erin Morgan Winchester.

Whose child art thou? The Spock identity continued.

We—I am the daughter of Robert Winchester and Gillian Byrnes.

What art thou?

Captain of the U.S.S. Devil’s Trap.

The Erin identity became itself again, still of one mind but able to keep her hold on her identity. The Spock identity answered the three questions without being asked them a reassertion of itself.

I am Spock. Son of Sarek and Amanda. I am Vulcan. Spock regained his sense of self again with a most intense sense of relief. He and Erin—for now he knew her, she was no longer simply Captain Winchester—were still of one mind, still merged but cognizant of that merging.

It came as something of a bemusement to realize that Erin’s answer to what she was had nothing what so ever to do with her species and everything to do with being the Captain of a starship. It was very simply what she was and what she always would be.

With the reestablishment of their individual personalities Spock could better ‘see’ Erin. It came with the brutal realization that her neural pathways, the conduits that her telepathy ran on were… contaminated. Spock thought he was going to be sick. He was utterly revolted. They were permeated with a vile residual signature of something that had forced its way into her mind and violently tried to tear it apart quite recently.

How she had resisted it without training was a mystery to him for the moment. The pathways of her mind had been subtly altered and injured. They were healing but the trace evidence of the assailant’s mind would remain. How she was not further affected mentally and emotionally than she was, was astounding in his summation.

All mind melds left trace evidence, a signature, a subtle alteration of the synapse and neural pathway. Each mind retained some minute part of the other. There would always be a ‘sense’ of one another between those who shared a mind meld. A sort of echo, sometimes even vestiges of the other’s personality indelibly becoming a part of the other, each mind retaining some minute part of the other. And any subsequent link made between them would be much more easily established as they ‘remembered’ each other. It was another reason why Vulcan’s did not undertake mind melds lightly.

Whatever had invaded Erin’s mind had not left behind any part of itself. It had simply tried to tear her mind apart and left the taint of its violent act in its wake. For that Spock was glad. To be subject to the remnants of the personality of one’s assailant was abhorrent.
He ‘tightened’ the grip on the ‘hand’ the Captain had so tentatively offered him with something approaching a protective stance. To be *than’tha* and find this. It was only natural. Vulcans took the arts of the mind very seriously. They were sacred. The sanctity of one’s mind was sacred and inviolable.

*We must discuss much at a later time. But for now allow me to show you the proper way to shield. We must do so quickly. The longer we are one, the stronger the temptation to remain so will become,* Spock said.

*That was terrifying,* Erin said, sounding as though she meant it but was confused as to why she didn’t feel terrified. *Then why am not I terrified?*

Spock’s mind voice colored with amusement. *Because we are as one. Just as I can control my emotions so can you control yours. I am not afraid so you are not.* Then he grew serious. *I most fervently apologize for what happened. Had I known you had not been trained, that you had never merged minds I would have gone about things differently. If I had known you had been such a recent victim of kae’at k’lasa…* All the connotations and reasons behind his words came with the words, understood implicitly by both selves without need for explanation. *Your teachers should be ashamed of their lack of responsibility. I have given you what they deprived you of. Never again will you lose yourself in the mind of another or cause them to lose themselves without desiring to do so. I have guided you through First Meld.*

*There was not time for anything else. Lorian tried to convince me to allow him to do a mind meld but I refused.*

*I see,* Spock said with complete understanding of all that went behind those words. *I apologize again for my assumption. Nevertheless I am here. I offer my services if you will have them.*

Alright, Erin said a bit reluctantly. Spock felt that she did not like having someone do for her what she believed she should do herself. Erin Winchester was a very stubborn person, he realized and a self-possessed one.

Then with quick efficiency Spock guided Erin in the proper construction of her mental shields. Layer upon layer. There was not time for more than a few. One between the subconscious and the conscious mind. One between knowledge and private thought. And one between herself and the outside world. Then he took it one step further, he wove a part of his own strength and calm into her own, lending her what she did not have. Stability and the beginning nudges to her neural and synaptic pathways to prompt proper healing, to erase as much as possible the mark that her assailant had left behind. He did so subtly so as not to be intrusive. She would never have asked for it of her own accord so Spock gave it willingly.

*That was easier than I thought,* Erin said with surprise when they were done.

*It was hardly easy as you put it,* Spock said. *We are one mind and so what I know you know. We share knowledge.*

*And you know what I know?* Erin asked a little apprehensive.

*To a degree but I have not pried,* Spock said.

*Thank you,* Erin said honestly. He felt the wash of gratitude that came with it and returned it with warm welcome. It was pointless to deny that he had emotions here; you could not lie in a mind meld. To try would be illogical.
But now I must pry. I must know what you know. I must understand, Spock said with reluctance of his own.

I would have to go back to the beginning of all of it. That would take far too long, Erin said concerned with both her privacy and the time available to them.

In that way time is irrelevant here. What would be years of memory is but a moment in reality, Spock said. He reached his hand out for hers again. Take me to the beginning. He made it a request. Knew as he knew himself that to make it a demand would meet with immediate resistance. This was not a woman who cared to be ordered about, she was used to giving the orders.

Erin took his hand in hers and he felt her dubious dark amusement. Careful what you wish for. It is not pleasant.

Then without warning Spock was swept along with Erin, floating backward through the blur of her memories to the beginning then plunged forward again. He felt what she felt, remembered it as though remembering his own life, knew it as she did and knew her as no one else ever had or ever would.

Spock broke the meld as gently as he could. Trying desperately to get a grip on himself and his own emotions. Erin sucked in a great gasp, eyes full of tears and scrambled away from him, holding onto the table for support. The chair she had been sitting in went skittering across the floor, forgotten.

“I apologize. Emotional transference is an effect of the mind meld,” Spock rasped.

Erin made a choking noise and tried as desperately as he was to get a handle on herself. Spock could think of only one thing that began to express anything about what had happened.

“I grieve with thee,” he said sadly, blinking several times to prevent himself from succumbing to the desire to shed tears as Erin was. It was unseemly for a Vulcan.

But now he knew everything they’d needed to know and more. His own pain and grief at the loss of his world, at the loss of his Mother felt as fresh as the day it had happened. For now he knew that Erin and her ship were definitely from the same reality that Nero had been from and that like Spock, Nero had murdered her mother cutting a swath of unremitting violence across the quadrant before he’d been sucked into the black hole that had brought him here.

Spock had barely kept her from the knowledge that the incarnation of himself from her reality had survived the transition. But he had shared the knowledge that Nero was dead and how gladly.

Now he knew that Jim’s ‘gut instinct’ had been right all along and that he was more correct than he could possibly have realized. Spock struggled to understand how the woman had survived this long with her sanity intact to say nothing of suddenly having her precognitive telepathy reawaken savagely. Her reality was a bleak future indeed. If even a fraction of it awaited them, Spock despaired for the continued existence of the galaxy. Captain Winchester was one soul against an entire universe intent on stopping her. The forces working against her were astronomical.

“I don’t have words,” Erin rasped, her voice rough and low.

“None are required,” Spock said and the comment carried a great deal more meaning than the simple acknowledgement that no response was needed. He cast a knowing glance at Lorian then pushed himself out of his chair.

“Come with me.”
Chapter End Notes

Please read and review!
Spock didn’t give Erin much recovery time as she awkwardly made to follow him feeling…. she didn’t know what she felt really. She needed time to consider it and probably a dictionary to find new words to describe it.

She supposed that she should feel some vindictive elation in the knowledge that Nero was dead. That he’d gotten what he deserved, killed by the crew of this ship. She’d always felt a bit robbed when Nero had been swallowed by a black hole never to face some sort of justice she could see. Once she’d thought knowing Nero had gotten his comeuppance would have given her closure. But somehow, she couldn’t. Instead all she felt was a reserved acceptance of it.

His death wouldn’t bring her mother back, or she now knew Spock’s mother or Kirk’s father, or the billions of Vulcans he’d slaughtered, or the thousands he’d killed before the black hole had brought him here to ravage this universe far worse than he had ravaged her own.

She could take no solace in his death when she was as bad as he was. Could take no joy in his demise when she’d been the cause of five thousand innocent lives and was now the root cause of the Scythe being unleashed on this universe.

Lorian hastened to her side, his face impassive but his voice hushed. “Are you well, Captain?”

“No,” Erin admitted her voice a bit shaky. Spock had paused outside the door waiting for them patiently. “I am not well. I am…,” she struggled to find a word and couldn’t. “No two people should ever know that much about each other.”

“K’oh-nar,” Lorian said reaching to withdraw something from within his uniform jacket.

“What?” Erin asked as he pulled out a hypospray.

“What you are most likely experiencing is called k’oh-nar in Vulcan. It is the condition of being completely exposed in a vulnerable situation. Particularly emotionally,” Lorian said. He reached for her, careful not to touch skin and pushed up her sleeve. “Lexorin, courtesy of Doctor Novak. You are overdue for your usual dose.”

“I’m going to have to learn more Vulcan. Your people have words for things no Human language can define,” Erin observed idly. Mostly to distract herself from what she had just experienced. It had been, unique, to say the least. It had also been wonderful in a terrible sort of way and completely terrifying though she’d die before admitting that to anyone.

With a quick movement Lorian administered the hypospray and tucked it away again.

Erin sighed softly with relief. “Thank you. Because I don’t think I can take anymore mind sharing or telepathic anything today.” The Vulcan did not offer a response to her thanks. Erin frowned. He was particularly reserved.

“I’m sorry if I breeched some protocol between student and teacher. I know you’re supposed to be my teacher and I appreciate that. But I had to do what needed to be done. There was no other way. I hope I haven’t offended you,” she said gently. “I didn’t agree to it to slight you.”
“He took you through First Meld.” It was not an accusation it was a very cold observation. Lorian looked up at her then, his very blue eyes an intense azure but icy. “You proceed from a false assumption, Captain. I am a Vulcan. I have no ego to bruise. And I am aware of what it cost you.”

Erin didn’t quite believe that remark but what could she say. Despite the hardness of his expression and the completely unemotional way in which he spoke she was still caught by those damn eyes of his. They seemed to go on forever, an endless unknown depth to them that no one would ever be able to fathom, shadows flickering too far back for anyone to discern their shape. She had to say something.

“I wouldn’t have been able to go through it without you here. I couldn’t have done it,” her voice caught for an instant because she hated admitting any vulnerability, “alone.”

Some of the warmth seemed to come back into his eyes then. “Then I am pleased to have been of some service to you, Captain.” She wasn’t sure if that meant he was alright with what had happened or not but she felt it would probably be best to leave it alone. She didn’t dare venture further with it…for either of their sakes.

She glanced toward the door Spock was still waiting for them, looking back occasionally to see if they were ready to follow but neither intruding or rushing them.

“I know him, Lorian,” Erin said in a hushed tone. “He knows me. I didn’t realize how…intimate it would be.”

She did know him and they shared a commonality of self that she hadn’t thought to see in someone else. That same abhorrence for loss of control because without that control there was a volatile and violent core that would overwhelm them. The rejection of personal ties that went too deep because they’d both experienced the loss of such before and couldn’t go through it again. That anger, pain, rage, confusion, loneliness and fear. Couldn’t acknowledge it or they’d be lost to it perhaps irretrievably that warred with the genuine desire for a gentler, peaceable way. Forever living their lives dancing on the edge of knife.

They went about it in different ways but the result was the same. Denial and avoidance.

“I did warn you, Captain,” Lorian said. His voice was no longer inflectionless.

“You did,” Erin admitted. “And somehow, knowing I know him makes this all so much worse.”

“In what way?” Lorian asked genuine perplexed curiosity coloring his voice.

“Because, he’s an honestly good man with the best intentions. Which means I don’t even have the luxury of being able to be angry with him for it. I have to be fair.” She looked at Lorian and grinned a bit. “Sort of how I had to be with you.”

She had. Erin had wanted to hate him when she met him. Had been fully prepared to loathe Lorian on sight for daring to take her previous Science Officer, Rixx’s, place. Rixx, who had also been her close friend and had died on a previous mission. But she’d had to be fair in spite of herself. She didn’t regret that decision. Not even a little. But it was a trial sometimes that a Captain hadn’t the luxury of being biased.

“You object to an unprejudiced assessment of others?” Lorian asked confused. There was a glimmer of what Erin would have called surprise there too.

“I object to being denied refuge in denial,” Erin clarified. That was a good word for how she felt. Clarity. She had a calm, quiet sort of clarity now she hadn’t had before. She grinned sheepishly to
break the mood which was in danger of becoming melancholy or introspective again.

“This was worse than the time Tyler Lockwood got hold of my diary in seventh grade and read it to
the entire school over the comm system.”

That made Lorian raise one brow. “That would seem a most uncomfortable circumstance.”

“Oh it was,” Erin admitted as she made to follow Spock. “I made sure he experienced worse
discomfort.”

“Oh?” Lorian asked as they followed in Spock’s wake, his pace quick and purposeful.

“I got him back by stealing his clothes when he was in the locker room before the football game that
weekend…and broadcasting him stark naked on the stadium screen.”

Both of Lorian’s brows shot up. “A most apt turnabout, Captain.” He gave no indication whether he
approved of her behavior or not but there was a certain light in his eyes that firmly spoke of repressed
humor.

Ahead of them, Spock, who had been listening to the latter part of their conversation after all said,
“Perhaps it would behoove me to implement security protocols on my quarters for the duration of the
Devil’s Trap’s visit.”

To which Lorian responded without missing a beat, “The Captain possesses an A7 computer expert
classification. I would suggest a physical locking mechanism.”

Erin broke into a gale of laughter. Who said Vulcans had no sense of humor? Damn she’d needed to
laugh. She’d almost forgotten how.

***

Spock led Captain Winchester and her steadfastly watchful Science Officer, Commander Lorian
down the corridors of the Enterprise with purposeful intent. The Vulcan moved with such obvious
focus that any crewmen they happened past neatly stepped aside to let them pass though many of
them stopped to peer curiously after at their peculiarly yet still faintly identifiably attired guests.

When they reached the short passage that led off the corridor to the airlock that separated the bridge
from the corridor proper, Spock swung right unerringly. He led Captain Winchester and Commander
Lorian through the dual doors of the airlock with a pressurized hiss and the low thrum of diligent
activity that always filled the Enterprise’s Bridge hit them.

Behind him he heard Captain Winchester say with evident mild surprise. “It’s so….shiny.”

Kirk looked up from his position at the back of the Bridge in front of the Auxiliary System Display
where he was speaking in serious but hushed tones with a very fervent but equally hushed Doctor
McCoy. The Doctor cast Erin a very suspicious glance and Spock noticed that he had a tricorder in
hand he kept jabbing in the Captain’s direction.

“About time. Starfleet Command’s breathing down my neck. Uhura can’t keep them waiting much
longer,” Kirk said. He did not look happy, his mouth set in a firm line of concern.
Spock left Kirk to ponder and Captain Winchester to peer at her surroundings and lifted his head in the direction of the auxiliary science station that sat just behind and to the right of the command chair. “Lieutenant,” he said in a crisp tone. The bald pale humanoid, which appeared decidedly male, glanced over at him with milky blue eyes and upon taking notice of him and immediately came over, the circular cybernetic implant in the back of his smooth pate glowing the same cerulean blue as the inset in the bridge’s ceiling.

While the man made his quick way to them, Spock turned on his heel to address Captain Winchester in his usual efficient manner, all hint of what had transpired between them no longer outwardly in evidence. “Captain Winchester, if you will excuse me I must confer with Captain Kirk.” The man he had called over arrived at Spock’s side. “This is Lieutenant 0718. Please feel free to look around at your leisure. If you have any questions the Lieutenant is well qualified to answer them.”

“Of course,” Captain Winchester said with dignified grace. She knew as well as he did that Spock was about to confer with Kirk about her.

Spock favored the other Vulcan with equal courtesy, “Commander Lorian.” Lorain acknowledged him with a slight inclination of his head. Then he gave the Lieutenant a brief nod, which the man, who was Starfleet’s first and only humanoid mainframe interface, returned.

“Commander,” Lieutenant 0718 acknowledged in his distinctive reverberating voice. Spock was almost instantly on his way.

Kirk turned to Spock as soon as he had come even with the group, “What did you get?”

“Far more than I expected,” Spock admitted.

Kirk’s brow rose significantly with interest that was carefully tempered against hoping for any particular outcome of what Spock had found.

McCoy was saying, “I am telling you Jim, something is drastic wrong with that woman. She reads human but her subcortical synaptic firing rate is far too high and her memory and executive function centers are hyper stimulated,” his head bent and hissing in an insistent tone as he thrust the tricorder in Kirk’s direction again.

“I assure you Doctor,” Spock said calmly, “that your findings are perfectly normal for a person such as Captain Winchester.”

“The hell they are!” McCoy spat. “I need to get that girl into sickbay immediately. I can’t even begin to come up with an explanation. It could seriously endanger her life.”

“Doctor, while your dedication to the medical wellness of others is admirable, in this case your concern is misplaced. An explanation will be forthcoming however for the moment you will have to be patient, a condition I know you will find most uncomfortable but necessary,” Spock said. He knew well enough what those readings on McCoy’s tricorder meant. He would have to explain them but not now, in private where he could make the Doctor and the Captain swear never to reveal it.

McCoy’s jaw dropped in outrage and he began to rail at Spock but Kirk cut him off with a wave of his hand. “Bones, that’s enough. If Spock says it’s normal, it’s normal. You’ll just have to accept that.” He looked at Spock seriously. “But I want a full report later.”

McCoy grumbled but didn’t argue further.

“Yes, Captain,” Spock assented.
“Now tell me what you found. What didn’t you expect?” Kirk prodded.

“Captain Winchester, is a—unique—individual to say the least. Truly one-of-a-kind,” Spock said.

“No argument there,” Kirk agreed, “But that’s not what I need to know. Did she really kill five thousand innocent people?”

McCoy turned white at the implication. No one gave him a chance to interject so he had to make do with glancing back and forth between First Officer and Captain with an incredulous expression.

“Yes,” Spock said. Kirk’s entire face fell dramatically and he bent his head, dismal at the news. “Through no fault of her own. However, she would have continued to allow you to believe so.”


“They were deceived by an alien race fiercely set on destroying their universe. There was no reasonable way for the Captain or anyone else to know at the time they were being manipulated or to avoid the events that resulted in the deaths the Captain is accused of short of suicide. That has not prevented her from shouldering full responsibility for it and the subsequent guilt that accompanies it,” Spock explained. Then as succinctly as possible he briefed the Doctor and the Captain on the state of affairs in Erin’s universe and how it had led them here by way of the being known as Q.

“Dear God,” McCoy muttered when he was through. “Their universe sounds like hell itself.”

“Indeed Doctor it is swiftly becoming just that,” Spock agreed.

Kirk shook his head and looked awe-struck. “And she’s still alive?”

“She was not intended to be. She was meant to die on that station and quite probably in the battle that resulted in their emergence into our universe. Captain Winchester has cheated death no less than five times in the last Earth-Standard month,” Spock said. His expression grew rather grim though it would have been hard to tell to anyone who did not know him well. “I cannot stress this enough, Captain. In her universe the Federation is at war on three fronts and has been so for the last six years, during three of which the Captain has been on the front line. She has more battle experience than anyone on board this ship. The Devil’s Trap is a warship. What we saw it accomplish is far less than what it is capable of. Had it not been sabotaged they might well have defeated the Scythe, and none of this would ever have occurred. That is not a coincidence.”

“That little ship is a warship?” McCoy said incredulously.

“I would hardly call it ‘little’ Doctor,” Spock said. “I dare say if it were in full operating order you would have little doubt of its status as a warship.”

“Dynamite comes in small packages,” McCoy muttered in answer.

“Can she be trusted?” Kirk asked.

“Completely,” Spock assured him.

“She’s so young,” Kirk said looking down toward the space in front of the command chair and just behind the helm and navigation station where Captain Winchester stood, forlornly gazing out at her seriously damaged ship as though she were gazing at her sick child in a hospital bed. At least someone had gotten the Devil’s Trap’s inertial dampeners operating properly again, it no longer listed to starboard like a derelict. Beside her stood her science officer, quietly contemplating the view as well in silence. The pair made an eerie mirror. Spock followed his gaze and said with some ironic
amusement.

“Captain Winchester is the same age you are Captain. In many ways, she reminds me of you. Which considering that she aspires to be like you, comes as very little surprise.”

Kirk gawked at him, pulling himself from his commiserating consideration of Captain Winchester and her battered vessel. “She does?”

“As illogical and unlikely as it might seem Captain, in her universe you went on to become an esteemed and renowned historical figure. As a child she listened to her Grandfather’s stories of his Father’s time spent serving under that Captain Kirk. Captain Winchester grew up idolizing him. I would suggest you tread lightly with her in that regard.”

“Wait, you’re saying her,” Kirk had to pause to calculate things in his head, “Her Great-Grandfather served under her universe’s version of me?”

“I am saying Captain, that he currently does,” Spock pointed out. Kirk blinked without understanding. It was the Doctor who came to the realization first.

“Lieutenant Christian Winchester, one of the computer scientists down in the computer lab. That’s her Great-Grandfather?”

Then the true weight of what Spock was saying hit Kirk. “You’re saying this is the continuation of the universe trying to repair itself that,” he paused, looked for a word, “the other guy,” he suggested without saying his name but to whom he was referring perfectly clear, “suggested happened with all of us?”

“Indeed I am Captain. I suspect that the Captain’s existence to this universe in a hundred and fifty years will be no less important that it is in hers. Her previous forays through time all directly connect her to this vessel and crew in one universe or another. It would not be inconceivable that Captain Winchester is a temporal focal point.”

“You’re not saying our universe is going to end up in the same state hers is?” McCoy said aghast.

“Not necessarily but the possibility must be considered that a similar occurrence is likely,” Spock admitted. McCoy looked decidedly unhappy about it.

“I don’t understand why her universe is even in the condition you say it is. Why not tell Starfleet about what happened?”

“Because Doctor,” Spock said his voice grave, “The Undine are a shape shifting species with powerful telepathic abilities and are undetectable by even their technological advancements. Starfleet is infested with them as are the Klingon Empire and the Romulans. She has no way of knowing who is and is not an Undine. She has no one to trust with the information.”

McCoy looked rather stricken by that line of logic and Kirk showed evidence of sympathy. They’d been deceived by Admiral Marcus in much the same manner but it hadn’t begun to reach this scope. “Jesus,” Kirk muttered. “She’s the only one who knows the truth. No wonder everyone is trying to kill her.”

“A possibility she has not yet realized,” Spock pointed out.

“While this is all horrible beyond words, I don’t see how it connects to this crazed Romulan piloting a planet killing super ship across the quadrant. Why wouldn’t Captain Winchester tell her the truth?”
“She did try Doctor but t’Xereth cannot be convinced. She would not even give her the opportunity to explain. Even if Captain Winchester did, it is unlikely she would be believed. The Undine that deceived them became the Romulan Commander of that station. The Romulans are not going to believe a person they view as a murderer, when they, to their knowledge, have an eyewitness that says otherwise and no way to tell they are lying. Additionally the Romulans are still upset over the destruction of Romulus. They still blame the Vulcans and the Federation for ‘not helping’ them. The events that led to the deaths of the five thousand Romulans t’Xereth is so angry about is merely further ‘proof’ to them that the Federation is trying to wipe them out and gave them every excuse they needed to start the war they were looking for. They will be very hard if not impossible to convince otherwise. That would not keep the Captain from attempting to explain given the chance. It would probably guarantee her attempt to do so quite strongly.”

“That poor girl,” McCoy muttered. It seemed to be the only thing he could think of to say.

“And this connects to Nero how? Nothing else has been a coincidence I seriously doubt that is either,” Kirk said sounding slightly exasperated over the whole thing.

“I do not yet know the entire reason but both the deviance in our timeline and the destabilization of her universe began with the Hobus supernova in her universe. More over the fact that Nero killed Captain Winchester’s mother cannot be disregarded. Nor can the similarity of current events to those that transpired during Nero’s destruction of Vulcan and his attempted destruction of Earth.”

“He killed her Mother?” Kirk said his voice tight, the reason very well known to those present.

“Yes, it would appear he destroyed a large number of vessels in his rage before he was pulled through the black hole into our universe. Her mother was a Doctor on board the first ship he destroyed. A hospital vessel sent to aid survivors of Romulus’s destruction.”

“Bastard,” McCoy breathed. Even if the good Doctor could not related to the loss of a parent at Nero’s hands Spock knew where he would stand in relation to the murder of doctors who had been on a mission of mercy.

Kirk shut his eyes and shook his head for a moment, rubbing his forehead with one hand as though to deflect an oncoming headache. “And this Q person orchestrated this whole thing for what purpose?”

“Unknown Captain,” Spock admitted. “But considering that he is truly omnipotent it would stand to reason that any explanation might be beyond our comprehension. The only thing anyone knows is that he has alluded that if Captain Winchester fails to save this universe from the Scythe’s wrath, her own universe will be annihilated along with it. It seems to be some test of character the being has devised. Given his intervention at the instant the Devil’s Trap would have been destroyed suggests that he does intend for the test to be winnable but to what end and by what method I cannot say. Further I fail to comprehend why this being chose to not only catapult the Devil’s Trap ‘sideways’ into an alternative universe but ‘backward’ as well.”

“And with that, the entire conversation just went over my head,” McCoy said.

“A cosmic Kobayashi Maru?” Kirk speculated.

“Possibly,” Spock said.

“Why does this Q need to test her character? Isn’t her past behavior more than enough?”

“Who knows, Jim. Sounds like the guy might as well be a God. Who can begin to understand what a
God is thinking,” McCoy said.

“He is not a God Doctor McCoy,” Spock assured him.

“Close enough as to make no difference,” McCoy retorted.

Kirk sighed heavily. “Okay so what do you suggest we do? Because I don’t particularly like the fact this Q set this whole thing up and has endangered our universe and hers in the process.”

“I would suggest Captain,” Spock said, “That we focus on the immediate problem and contact New Vulcan as soon as possible. It stands to reason that certain individuals there might be able to shed light on our extended circumstances. We can do nothing about the events that have caused our predicament at this time and if we do not survive nor will we in the future.”

“Agreed,” Kirk said. He cast a pitying glance toward the Captain’s back.

“I would tender a further suggestion, Captain,” Spock said. “It would be unwise to treat Captain Winchester with pity. She will not welcome it nor does she require it. In fact she will despise you for it. She is a very private individual.”

Kirk smiled faintly with approval, “Understood.”

Also,” Spock added, “Do not. You cannot handle her.” His gaze flicked toward Captain Winchester and her science officer again. ‘But a Vulcan might,’ he thought privately to himself. ‘One day.’

Kirk gave Spock a sideways glance, the meaning very clear to him. McCoy picked up on it too and clapped Kirk on the shoulder with a grin. “Finally found a girl you can’t handle, Jim.”

Kirk snorted petulantly. “I love a challenge.”

“Unfortunately for you,” Spock said without hesitation. “So does she.”

***

Commander Singer was in his element now. This he was good at and he knew it. Beside him, at the Mission Ops station on the bridge which they had reconfigured to work as a Tactical Lab station, was Law. They were shoulder to shoulder as they both peered at the computer generated schematics of the Scythe, reconstructed from Devil’s Trap’s sensor scans. They had forgone going down to the actual Tactical Lab, which was on Deck 14. It was too difficult to get to currently, what with half the turbolifts having to be rerouted to compensate for those that didn’t work at all.

Around them the hub-bub of a starship deep into battle damage repair could be heard. The whine of engineering instruments, the constant thrum of conversation as the bridge crew worked. Everyone worked in dimness. With the ship on auxiliary power only, everything not necessary to accomplish a specific job at any given moment, was shut down. Half the holopanels were blank, lights were set to minimum illumination. People were going to be eating rations for dinner and the environmental controls kept the atmosphere barely habitable with no consideration for comfort.

“The thing is almost completely weapon,” Dean noted looking at the schematic. The Scythe was monstrously huge but most of its size was because it housed a planet killer, a ship built around another ship. To say nothing of the space the thing required for its energy supply systems to power
its devastating weaponry. There was very little space left for the crew that ran it. “Its crew complement can’t be more than fifty and they took on the crew of that Warbird. Talk about overcrowding.”

“It’s a flying collection of reactor cores and weapons,” Law amended. He pointed at the holoscreen. “Look here. This would have to be where the thalaron generator is located.”

“If we can start a reaction we should be able to blow the whole thing up without them being able to stop it. All those reactors will go like dominos. The problem is those dual layered regenerative shields and the fact that unless whatever we start the reaction with can go through pure neutronium, the planet killer will still be operational. Question there being can the thing operate on its own,” Dean noted. “Every other one we’ve seen can.”

“And doing it before they can charge either the thalaron pulse or the planet killer. And not getting blown to pieces by disruptors and plasma torpedoes in the process while getting it through those regenerative shields. That’s reengineered Borg technology. It won’t be easy to defeat,” Law said.

“Let’s pray the damn things can’t adapt. Plus from what the scans picked up the neutronium alloy they are using on the exterior is more neutronium than ours is. It’s going to be a pain in the ass to shoot through even if we can get through the shields,” Dean said. “And where the hell did they get Borg technology?’”

“Where did they get any of it?” Law countered.

Dean gave a dark barking laugh at that and then frowned at the screen, the framework image of the Scythe rotating slowly at a slightly tilted angle for maximum view ability. “There’s a way to blow that damn ship up. There’s always a way.” Something tickled in the back of his brain, that familiar feeling of some stroke of brilliant tactical deduction that was waiting for him to tease it out. But it wasn’t forthcoming and he was interrupted by a cursing, disheveled redhead who looked ready to spit nails.

Chief Engineer Mary Harvelle, fought with the turbolift door which had decided it didn’t want to work properly after all and stumbled out onto the bridge. She’d somehow pulled her long locks, which were indeed singed a bit, back at the nape of her neck in a messy ball to get it out of her way and her peaches and cream complexion was smudged with dirt. It did nothing to hide the angry fire in her hazel eyes.

With her came Nilsa, the Klingon assistant Security Chief who looked grumpier than usual.

“When I find whoever did this to the Devil’s Trap,” she growled. “I’m going to throw them into the warp core. That will be poetic justice.”

“Not if I find them first,” the Klingon seethed. “I will rip out their heart and feed it to them.”

“Promise?” Mary said as they picked their way over to Law and Dean.

“With pleasure,” Nilsa growled quite literally, her pointed teeth showing through her snarl of anticipation.

Mary was all bluster. She might beat whoever it was senseless with a hyperspanner but she would never kill someone in cold blood. She was too soft hearted. Nilsa however, would very happily do exactly what she said.

“Take a number,” Dean said, he glanced down at the stack of padds Mary was holding. “What have you got for me? And why didn’t you just send the reports instead of fighting your way up here?”
“I didn’t want to risk it,” Mary said handing him the padds. He took them without looking at them right away perplexed by her answer. “That’s the current repair schedule and a summary of everything that’s needs fixing. The other one is the causality report from Cass, he asked me to bring it up when we had to take the turbolift to Deck 13 and back track to a different one to get here. Sickbay is overflowing and he’s swamped.”

“Didn’t want to risk it? What are you talking about?” Dean asked.

Mary twisted her head a bit in an anguished sort of way. “I’ve figured out what happened in a few places but not why. The plasma injectors melted Commander Singer. It’s going to take a team with plasma torches to cut them out before they can even be replaced. Which I have Kizan working on now,” she said of the situation and her assistant Orion Chief Engineer. “But as far as I can tell, it shouldn’t have happened. There was nothing mechanically wrong.”

“So it what? Just decided not to work?” Dean said incredulously.

Mary shook her head dismally. “No. Whatever was done told those systems to malfunction. They were not tampered with mechanically.”

“A computer virus?” Law speculated from beside Dean.

Mary shrugged. “Seems the most likely. That’s why I came up myself, Nilsa too. We didn’t want to send the reports up by computer in case whoever did this is monitoring.”

Dean’s head snapped around to look toward the science station where Lieutenant Sheppard was still busy with the computer diagnostics and tracking the Scythe’s warp signature. “Sheppard, what’s the status on that diagnostic?”

“Almost complete, sir,” the Lieutenant said swiveling his closely shaved head to peer back at the Commander.

“What’s the status on that diagnostic?”

“Any evidence of a computer virus?” Dean asked.

Sheppard shook his head. “No, sir. Not so far and even if there were this is an M16a tri-core bio-neural gel pack isolinear III system. A conventional virus wouldn’t work and a biological one would have been identified immediately by the internal watchdog subroutines.”

Dean bit his lip thinking. “Then tell me one way that our computer system could have been compromised to allow someone to program system failures.” Computers were not his forte, that was Commander Lorian’s department…or Erin’s. She had been a scientist before she had become a Captain and a soldier like him. He wondered if she missed it sometimes.

Sheppard shook his head immediately. “There isn’t a way. This system is state-of-the-art. Doctor Robert Winchester himself oversaw its development. There are layer upon layer of security protocols installed, you’d have to circumvent every one of them to be able to do what you are suggesting.”

“I’m well aware of who developed the computer system on this ship Lieutenant. Doctor Winchester is the Captain’s Father. Obviously there is a way or we wouldn’t be running on backups. Now how would someone do it? Doesn’t matter how crazy you think it sounds.”

Sheppard looked at him incredulous and maybe a little surprised to have realized the obvious about the computer’s creator. “You can’t. Period,” he insisted. Dean gave him a hard look.

“Think harder. I don’t know that much about computers. You are supposed to. You’re a Computer Scientist. I need an answer.”
Sheppard spit and spurted for a moment trying to comply. “The only thing I can think of is impossible.”

“Tell me anyway,” Dean prodded.

Sheppard gave a sharp sigh and threw his hands up. “If you had the ship’s prefix code you could command it to do anything from anywhere. But it’s not possible. That code requires at minimum a voice print authorization and this system is too smart not to recognize a fake or a recording, no matter how good the person using it thinks it is. On top of that, if the voice print fails the only other way to authorize the use of the prefix code is via retinal scan or DNA and they have to be live scans. You cannot fake them. There were too many incidents where someone used a prefix code for terrorist attacks on the affected vessels in the past so they found a way to prevent it. Besides the only people who have access to the prefix code on board are the Captain and the top three senior officers in the chain of command. It has to be something else.”

Around the bridge the senior staff had gone very still. What Sheppard wasn’t aware of they were. There was, conceivably, a way to do all of that. It was very hard for Dean to keep that knowledge a secret in that moment. Terribly hard not to let all the blood drain out of his face and stand there with a stricken expression. So Dean did what Dean did very well indeed. He played dumb.

“You’re right,” he said careful not to exaggerate the way he sighed with resignation. “But just for a second, assume they could have. Could you trace the commands back to their access points?”

“Maybe, if they hadn’t deleted them. But the gaps in the logs would be a giveaway that something had happened even if I couldn’t pinpoint who it was that did it,” Sheppard said.

“And if I wanted to change the prefix code just to be on the safe side,” Dean said, “How long would that take?”

Sheppard blinked several times. “A few minutes at most with the proper security authorizations.”

Dean nodded acceptingly. “Okay. That’s all. I was just curious. Continue with the diagnostic and get me whatever you have on the Scythe’s course. The Captain is bound to be contacting me soon for a report and you know she hates not having it immediately.”

“Yes, sir,” Sheppard said he shook his head briefly as though mystified at the Commander’s questions. Dean heard him mutter something about the Commander not knowing the right end of an isolinear chip if he saw one. Commander Singer said nothing. That’s exactly how he wanted it.

He turned back to Mary who had not as successfully hidden her horror at the possibility outlined in the naïve Lieutenant’s information. She had gone a full shade whiter than usual. Of course, Dean thought with a jolt of paranoia, if he was right she could be the saboteur. Anyone could be. He had absolutely no way of knowing who he could and couldn’t trust but he had little choice but to trust someone. He’d have to do what he could and pray he wasn’t giving himself away.

“How many of your people have the kind of knowledge required to pull that off if they had access to the materials?” he asked in her in a whisper.

Mary swallowed hard once. “All of them, sir. Anyone on this ship could.”

“But not everyone on this ship would be suicidal enough to blow it up while they were still onboard,” Law pointed out in just as hushed a voice.

“And they are onboard. I have posted security teams in both transporter rooms and the shuttle bay. Additonally, the escape pods are being monitored. Whoever it is cannot escape without revealing
themselves,” Nilsa growled. To her, that one of the transporter rooms was inoperable and the other had to request power usage to be used currently made no difference to the Klingon security officer. She’d lock down the vegetable storage units if she thought there was a possibility they could be used to harm the ship and the crew. Talia had trained her well.

“What are the repair estimates right this minute?” Dean pressed Mary.

“There are eighteen plasma injectors on this ship, Commander. It wasn’t just the ones in the primary nacelles that were fused it was all of them. It’ll take at least three days to replace all of them and that’s if we could separate the ship to get to them. Which…we can’t because the Multi-vector Assault system was fused too,” Mary said.

“Don’t worry about the others. Focus on the primary nacelles. How long then?”

“Two if we work around the clock but we still wouldn’t have warp capability. I’m drastically understaffed at the moment. I don’t have enough people to work around the clock. I can get it done in maybe four days with my current staff. That’ll give us back main power but I still haven’t figured out…” Mary began to go into a full dissertation of the whys and what-fors.

“Just worry about the power right now,” Dean said cutting her off. She could go on at length about the engineering aspects of the ship if you let her, especially if it was to rant about the damage to the engineering systems. “I also want you to take anyone who was on that shady ass transfer roster off anything having to do with the damaged systems and the computer. Put them on welding duty or something but get them away from anything they might be able to use to cause more damage.”

“But I thought that you cleared them all,” Mary said blinking wide eyed and probably slightly appalled Dean was taking away more of her staff when she’d already said she was low on manpower.

“So did I,” Dean said. “But Occam’s Razor, Mary. The simplest answer is usually the right one. They were the last ones assigned to the ship and nothing like this happened before now.”

Mary nodded. “Yes, sir.”

Dean looked at Nilsa. “What have you got?”

“Nothing yet Commander. Of the twelve that you have instructed me to pay close attention to, four are dead of injuries suffered in battle and three more are in sick bay. Fully half the quarters assigned to them are unsearchable, they were in areas where the hull breeched,” Nilsa said.

Dean nodded. “That leaves you with five.”

“They’re all in my department,” Mary put in.

Dean frowned he did not like this. “Nilsa, keep an eye on those five but make sure they don’t know what you’re doing. Do not search their quarters, not yet. We don’t want to give away that we think it’s one of them.”

“Commander!” Nilsa began to protest.

“You heard me,” Dean said sharply. Nilsa lifted her lip in dislike but she nodded in acknowledgment. He looked to Law, “Keep working on a way to blow up that ship. And get me a padd with everything we have so far on it.” Then he peered over Mary’s head toward the communications station.
“How’s that intelligence report coming Janira?”

“How’s that intelligence report coming Janira?”

“Ready sir. I’m downloading it to a padd now. There isn’t much,” The pretty Trill said.

“Understood,” Dean said and then turned his attention to Sam. “Sam, get over here.”

Sam made a face at being called away from his station when he was juggling power requests from all over the ship but he tapped several buttons as he groused, “You’ll just have to wait a minute,” to the latest one and came over.

“Sir?” he asked.

“You have the bridge,” Dean said.

“What?!” Sam asked in surprise. Everyone else gawked at him as well. “Where are you going?”

“I have to talk to the Captain,” Dean said as Janira trotted over on slim ankles to give him the intelligence report. “Don’t tell anyone I’m gone.”

Sam’s mouth opened and closed several times as he thought about it but Dean gave him no further time to protest. He took the padd from Janira, took the one Law thrust at him over his shoulder and headed for the turbolift to make his circuitous way to Transporter Room 2.

The last thing he saw before the doors shut was Mary reaching out to embrace Sam in need for comfort. Dean didn’t allow himself to feel envious of Sam for what he had and Dean didn’t. He couldn’t not right now.

What Dean did allow himself was the time to look at the casualty report was the turbolift grinded toward its destination. Then he’d allow himself even think the thoughts going through his head about the saboteur that he dare not do in the prescience of any living being.

A hundred and fifty two names showed on the padd’s small screen. Forty five confirmed dead. Seven unaccounted for but presumed dead since they’d been in areas of the ship that had been damaged. Twenty seven critically injured but alive and seventy seven walking wounded. Thirty eight percent of the crew was dead or injured.

Cass must be beside himself. Erin was going to have a heart attack and be guilt-ridden worse than she already was. But Dean couldn’t think about that right now. He couldn’t let the names of the dead, all of which were known to him—That was a rule on this ship. The command staff had to know the names of every person onboard and they made some effort to get to know them to some extent. Every one—effect him. He could mourn later.

Dean was fairly sure that the saboteur was one of the twelve so surreptitiously assigned but in that time it would not have been out of the question for one of them to have become one of the command staff. The only person Dean could be certain of…was himself. His only advantage was that if it was one of the command crew, they thought the suspicion had been directed away from them.

Dean just hoped that he wasn’t leaving the ship in the saboteur’s hands with complete control. With the Prefix code…they could literally do anything with the ship and there was nothing anyone could do about it. The saboteur was Undine and they were loose on the ship.

“Captain to Commander Singer,” his combadge announced.

“Singer here,” Dean said after tapping the badge without thinking about it.
“I need you to beam over with…,” Erin began to say.

“Already on my way. Hotel California has gotten a little boring. Singer out.”

***

Erin stood looking out the view screen at her ship with a grim expression while she awkwardly pretended not to notice the three men behind her discussing her and her intentions. It was necessary but it made her feel no less ‘naked’ for it. That it was being done by people she’d grown up admiring deeply and one she idolized only made it more exposing. She was acutely aware of the glances thrown her way, the curious questions that went unasked in the eyes of the bridge crew.

Lorian stood at her side, an ever present but quiet anchor. At least she wasn’t alone on this ship. She found that mildly comforting. She glanced sideways at him and let a very faint smile tug at her lips.

Lorian didn’t return it of course but he did notice it the way he downcast his eyes and returned his gaze toward the view screen was answer enough.

She too returned her gaze to her damaged ship but not before her eyes slid over the myriad of consoles and panels on the way. Some distant part of her that she never got to indulge anymore whimpered with desire. The computer scientist in her would have loved to have an in depth look at the Enterprise’s computers. She knew now that their technology was reverse engineered from data collected from the Narada twenty eight years before. It would be terribly interesting to see how that had played out. It would be even more interesting to have an in depth discussion with Lieutenant 0718 who Erin had come to learn through the snatches of conversation Lorian had engaged him in, was a humanoid mainframe interface for the Enterprise’s computer. But there wasn’t time for such frivolities. There never were anymore.

There drifted her ship. The incarnation of an ideal and a dream. Home. Broken and burnt and its crew along with it.

Captain Kirk eased down the dais to stand beside her. Apparently the briefing of Erin’s integrity as a person was over. She stiffened a bit, stood a little straighter as he came to a stop and looked out at the Devil’s Trap. He didn’t look at her.

“She’s a beautiful ship,” Kirk said. Erin looked at him with surprise. That had not been what she was expecting. Kirk caught her gaze and held it for a moment. A thousand words were said in that look, a million understandings one Captain to another in a way no one but another Captain could comprehend. That implicit understanding that the ship under their command was as much their partner as any marriage and always would be, the bond between Captain and ship. They were both in love…with their ships.

Then he broke it just before it could become too intimate a moment. “She’s no Enterprise of course. But I’m biased,” he said with that lopsided good natured grin.

Erin couldn’t help but respond in kind. “Then we will have to cordially agree to disagree.”

Kirk chuckled softly. “Yes we will.” Then he grew serious again. “She can be fixed,” he said consolingly.

Erin shook her head slightly. “I know. That’s not what bothers me. The Devil’s Trap has taken worse damage than this over the years. So has her crew. More times than I care to admit. As long as
there is a frame left, she can be rebuilt. The crew will press on. But it’s never been because of me before.”

She said this with all the same emotions roiling inside her that had been there from the start but still that calm and clarity she’d found coming out of the mind meld with Spock was there. She didn’t know if that terrified her or comforted her.

“And it’s not now,” Kirk said firmly. “Spock told us what happened. He also tells me I’d be ill advised to try to convince you of that. So I won’t. But that’s where I stand.” Then that slightly mischievous grin played over his features again. “Besides Starfleet Command is still waiting on hold and you know how they are.”

“Seems some things are a universal constant no matter what universe you’re in,” Erin said. She appreciated him not prying. Not trying to convince her that she was not somehow responsible for this mess. That he had not idly flung about some tidbit Spock had revealed to him during their brief exchange that Erin would have found cringe-worthy.

“True that,” Kirk agreed. “So what do you say we get the bureaucrats off our asses so we can actually do something?” He gave her a look, one corner of his mouth raised half in invitation half in dare.

“You are not who I expected you to be,” Erin admitted.

Kirk tilted his head a little, his brows pulling together with a mischievous wariness. “How’s that?”

Erin couldn’t help herself. It wasn’t the truth but it begged to be said. “I thought you’d be taller.”

“That’s okay,” Kirk said mildly. “I thought you’d be a man.”

Ouch, Erin thought, Captain Kirk gave as good as he got. He grinned again, this time with something more than mischief. “I’m glad I was wrong.”

That left Erin blinking without any comeback at all. No, this was not at all the man she’d expected. He was young, he was brash and he was forward. She’d been expecting...something else. Of course she knew that’s who he was thanks to Spock but still. Lorian lifted a brow and looked at his Captain.

“I’ll just...get my First Officer over here for the debriefing,” Erin muttered. She tapped her combadge as Spock stepped down to join them. “Captain to Commander Singer.”

“Singer here,” came Dean’s acknowledgment.

“I need you to beam over with.....” Erin began to say, intending to request all available data and reports regarding what had just happened. She knew he would have already seen to gathering it but wanted to be sure he brought all of it.

“Already on my way. Hotel California has gotten a little boring. Singer out,” Dean said and cut the communication. Erin’s felt a chill sweep over her. Beside her Lorian gave her a knowing glance.

“’Hotel California?’ You like the ‘Eagles’?” Kirk asked amused. Erin had no time for amusement.

“Damn,” she hissed.

“What?” Kirk asked confusedly, which was after all the purpose of having a code word in the first place.
“Something has gone wrong. Hotel California is our code word for trouble.”

Kirk reacted without having to think about it. “Lieutenant Hannity can you get a transporter lock on that com signal?”

“Aye, sir,” Hannity announced small hands whipping over the controls expertly. She might not be the prodigy Chekov was but she was an excellent officer. If she said she could do it, she could do it. “Got him. Beaming him to the Transporter Room.”

Kirk strode a couple of paces back to his chair and hit the command console in the arm. “Transporter Room, escort the person beaming aboard to the Bridge immediately.”

“Aye, sir,” came the reply.

“Kirk out.” He rejoined the group. And to Erin’s surprise without hesitation launched into questioning but not the near interrogation he had the first time. This was…one Captain discussing possibilities with another. He crossed his arms over his chest. “Any idea what the trouble is?”

Erin shrugged slightly. “The only thing I can think of is that he’s found the saboteur.”

“It is the most logical conclusion. There is no other incidence that would require him to engage in such secrecy,” Lorian noted.

“If he knew who it was why would he need to sneak around?” Kirk asked. “Why wouldn’t he just throw them in the brig?” He never got to hear anyone answer because with quick response the Bridge airlock opened and Commander Singer, holding a stack of padds and escorted by one of the Transporter Room operators popped onto the Bridge.

Kirk forwent a cordial greeting as Dean hesitantly tried to decide between protocol and necessity. “Don’t stand on ceremony,” Kirk encouraged.

Dean shot over to them and nudged Erin away as the others started to gather in a knot to hear what was going on. Erin stopped him by side stepping much to his consternation. “They’re to be trusted,” Erin said firmly before he could protest as she knew he was likely to do. Lately he protested every decision she made.

He glowered unhappily but complied, his voice low so that no one else but them could hear. “Our saboteur is Undine and their loose on the ship with the prefix code.”

Erin gawked. “You’re telling me an Undine has complete control of my ship?!”

“Dear God,” McCoy said aghast.

Erin’s initial gut reaction was to become enraged with black hatred. The second was an inclination to demand beam over immediately and hunt the Undine down that very instant. The third was to have a panic attack. But training took over.

“How do you know this?” Erin asked. No one interrupted they listened with sober intensity. They knew the seriousness of what Dean was implying. Around them they’d begun to garner furtive glances from otherwise well behaved and busy bridge crew.

“The sabotage was routed through the computer with no trace. The affected systems were told to malfunction,” Dean explained. As proof he passed over a padd with Chief Engineer Harvelle’s
report on it as well as one from Lieutenant Sheppard about the computer system. It was passed around the group for review without so much as second thought.

Starfleet training and the innate trust instilled by her mind meld with Spock made Erin completely disregard any need for secrecy in regard to the matter. She had not failed to notice the repair estimates for total repair. Three weeks minimum in their current state. Two if they weren’t short on manpower. One if they had access to a dry dock. But she couldn’t concern herself with those figures right now, as disheartening as they were.

“Does anyone know you know this?” Commander Lorian asked passing the thoroughly reviewed padd back to Commander Singer.

Dean shook his head while saying, “Only the senior staff. I played it all off as impossible just like Lieutenant Sheppard insisted it was. But you and I know better. It has to be one of the twelve assigned to the ship the last time we were in Space Dock.”

“Did you change the prefix code?” Spock asked carefully not revealing he knew precisely to what Dean was referring.

“No. I didn’t want to give away anything if they were monitoring the computers,” Dean said.

“Did you lock down all avenues of escape?” Erin asked. Erin was thinking rapidly. Considering and dismissing one scenario after another.

“Yes. Nilsa has guards posted on the transporter rooms, the shuttle bay and the escape pods. She’s keeping an eye on the suspected crew members but I told her not to give herself away until I get back.”

“Good thinking,” Erin said with a sense of minor relief.

Behind them Erin heard the communications officer, Uhura, saying in an evidently vexed tone she was keeping tightly controlled. “They are gathering intelligence Admiral Barnett. They will be right with you. Just a few more minutes please.” She immediately pulled the transponder out of her ear and held it at arm’s length. Even at this distance the sound of an impatient voice was audible if indiscernible. “Captain, Admiral Barnett is becoming,” she paused. “Impatient.”

“Just a few more minutes Uhura,” Kirk promised apologetically.

“Yes sir. I am trying,” she said. She took deep breath, plastered on a smile and crammed the transponder back in her ear. “Admiral Barnett…” Her voice faded into the background again as they resumed their conversation but Erin didn’t miss the fleeting warm glance Spock threw Uhura’s way. She politely pretended not to notice it and he politely did not acknowledge that either of them were aware of the significance of that glance.

“Give me the prefix code and we’ll take control from here before this Undine can do anything else,” Kirk suggested reasonably.


Kirk looked at her as though she’d lost her mind so did Dean. “Captain we have to get control of the ship out of that Undine’s hands and hunt it down,” Dean insisted vehemently.

“It doesn’t have control. It had control. Prefix code or not, it can’t do anything. Not right now,” Erin said.
“Except, I dunno, blow up the ship,” McCoy out in.

“To what purpose? We are in the middle of nowhere. Where would it go? Here? What for? It’s alone. In an alternate universe and in the past. Whatever its objective I seriously doubt it took into consideration being flung across space and time by an omnipotent jackass,” Erin said.

“Its purpose was obviously to render us incapable of defending ourselves so we’d get blown up the first time we ended up in a fight with another ship,” Dean said unable to understand her logic. Both Vulcans however had gone quiet and contemplative.

“Okay, I’m starting to agree with Bones and your First Officer here,” Kirk put in.

“The Undine has very few options left to it. It can’t become someone else. There’d be a body and with no way to dispose of it discreetly it would be discovered and so would the Undine,” Erin said. “It can’t flee without being caught and it can’t use our deflector to open a subspace rift to return to its realm in fluidic space. The ship doesn’t have enough power. The Undine is well and truly stuck. Just like the rest of us.”

“Flawlessly logical, Captain,” Spock noted.

Erin blinked in spite of herself. Had Spock just complimented her on her logic? A human? Surely he knew she was not logical. “Thank you, Commander.”

Spock inclined his head slightly in acknowledgment. Lorian stood a little straighter and looked…was it possible for a Vulcan to look prideful? No, of course not.

“So you’re going to just let it run around loose?” Dean asked gaping at Erin.

“Yes. I am. For now,” Erin said.

“Erin, it tried to destroy the ship and everyone onboard. Including itself! What makes you think it won’t now?” Dean spat incredulous. “Those things are powerfully telepathic. God knows how it’s screwing with our heads without us realizing it. Frankly, I’m more that tired of having my head messed with by telepathic anythings. We have to kill it before it can do something else,” he said he looked in the direction of both Vulcans. “No offense.”

“There is no offense where none is taken,” Spock said his voice very carefully modulated. But Lorian looked rather, unsettled, by the comment his eyes flicking for an instant in Erin’s direction.

Erin wasn’t quite that unfazed by the comment herself.

“‘ Shoot it!’ is not the answer to everything, Dean,” Erin said careful not to sound annoyed or chastising. She was however feeling a little irritated that she had to explain this in such detail for him. “Have you forgotten Undine can survive in the vacuum of space? It was never in any danger unless it blew the warp core and atomized us all. Which it didn’t do,” Erin said far more calmly that she’d have thought possible. “Whatever its plan it had no intention of dying. As for it being telepathic and screwing with our heads, I hardly think that would be a productive waste of its time. We’re already doing anything it could want. Which is to fix the ship.”

“Oh? Then where exactly would it have gone after getting us destroyed?” Dean said in wide eyed disbelief.

“The enemy ship,” Erin answered as if the answer were obvious.

“The Captain has a point Commander,” Lorian said in her defense. “Any action on our part before we are prepared to launch a surprise attack on the Undine will only result in fatalities and needless
injury. Allowing the Undine to presume your actions prior to coming here have nothing to do with it and our subsequent appearance of inaction gives us the advantage. It will believe that you truly do not know. The Undine have proven they are very intelligent and incredibly clever. It will not be foolish enough to attempt escape until it can be certain it will succeed. Something it cannot do until security is relaxed or the ship is repaired sufficiently for it to attempt escape to fluidic space.”

“The latter of which is its most likely course of action,” Erin said. “Any other method would prove fruitless under the circumstances.”

“Then what are you going to do?” McCoy asked.

Erin looked at Kirk and Spock. “After our briefing with Starfleet, we quietly storm the castle.”

Light dawned in Kirk’s eyes and he made a ‘huh’ noise of approval. “You’re sneaky.”

“I may need additional security,” Erin pointed out.

“Which we’d be happy to provide,” Kirk responded.

“Thank you Captain.”

“This is why no one will play tri-dimensional chess with you,” Dean remarked.

“Don’t you like a challenge Commander Singer? I’ll play tri-dimensional chess with her,” Kirk said with a decidedly pleased expression that Erin couldn’t figure out. “I love a challenge.”

Chapter End Notes

Please read and review!
Once in the Briefing Room again—Sulu in charge of the bridge and with orders to initiate the Devil’s Trap’s prefix code if it so much as looked like it was about to do something untoward—Erin slipped to the side with her First Officer as Spock went about powering up the blank clear screens on the wall and the others bustled about finding seats on the side of the table facing them. She stilled herself for what she was about to ask. She knew she was not going to like the answer but she had to have it. Not to be left out Lorian joined them, crossing his wrists at the small of his back as Erin had taken to doing. This time she had addressed the issue of where to put her hands that avoided unwanted contact by folding her arms over her chest in an unconscious gesture of withdrawal from the inevitable truth.

“How bad are the casualties?” She asked Dean without preamble, her voice quiet.

Dean’s jaw tensed and he half shook his head. “Erin,” he said hesitantly. “I’m not sure now is the best time to discuss that.”

“I know it’s going to be bad,” Erin assured him. “How bad?”

Dean sighed and handed over a padd with a grim expression. Erin immediately hung her head at the figures and the far too long list of names, wincing.

“77 relatively minor wounded, 27 critically injured, 45 confirmed fatalities and 7 others unaccounted for but presumed dead. Three of the twelve suspects were among the injured, four of them are dead. One hundred fifty two casualties in all,” Dean said as though Erin couldn’t see the numbers glaring back at her in illuminated text from the padd.

“Thirty eight percent of the crew,” Erin breathed and drew in a hard breath through her nose to keep from breaking down, remembering what it had felt like to feel them die. People who had died because of her. She shut her eyes against it and promised herself later, alone. She couldn’t. Not here. Not now. She wouldn’t allow herself to. She had to be in control.

“Erin…” Dean started to say. Lorian looked completely unfazed by the news except for a tightening around his mouth and a slight furrow between his slanted brows. Erin brushed Dean’s concern off briskly.

“Make the necessary adjustments to the duty roster as soon as possible,” she said thrusting the padd back at him, her voice far more ragged than she’d intended but it was still a better result than she’d expected from herself under the circumstances. Dean lowered his gaze and nodded.

“Of course, Captain,” he said. He knew impending ‘Captain’ mode when he saw it.

Kirk sidled up to the group, his expression carefully controlled but the sympathy was there in his eyes. Why was it blue eyes seemed incapable of hiding everything the owner felt despite their best efforts not to? “We’re ready,” he said quietly. The others looked just as contained. Obviously they had heard but politely chose not to comment on what would be a very fresh wound.

Erin turned away with a nod of acknowledgment from Dean and Lorian while taking a last deep breath long and slow in through her nose and shedding the vestiges of ‘Erin Winchester-person’ to be ‘Captain Winchester of the USS Devil’s Trap’. She had no time or luxury to be a person. She’d
be a person later. Alone preferably.

Everyone not already seated took a chair. They ended up arranged without discussion in what was probably the expected order. All six chairs on the side of the black oblong table facing the screens were quickly occupied. McCoy on Kirk’s left and Spock on his right, Lorian on Erin’s left and Dean on her right. A sort of unspoken and unconscious arrangement by rank and position. It put Lorian and Spock side by side. Again Erin was struck by how much they resembled each other. As though someone had tried to make a sculpture of one or the other of them by description alone and gotten it almost but not quite right so that the other was the result.

Spock reached forward and lightly tapped the surface of the table. Much like the embedded holopanels on the *Devil’s Trap*, a panel in the table’s surface disengaged, flipped over and lifted to reveal a control screen like the one’s on the *Enterprise*’s Bridge. It glowed colorfully as it came to life and Spock glanced at his Captain for permission to proceed. Kirk nodded and Spock quickly touched a few of the controls on the interface, which proved to be more like the holopanels of Erin’s ship than unlike it.

Instantly the screens on the wall became active displaying what looked like repeater images from bridge consoles and computer library access portals on the side screens. In the middle a communication came through revealing a dark skinned man in his forties with a neatly shorn head that was as regulation as it came. He wore a uniform quite different from the more familiar but slightly altered ones Erin had seen the crew of the Enterprise wearing. His was gray and white with a ribbed very high collar, five gold rank lozenges attached to the shoulders on either side and his insignia badge in gold instead of silver, circled by a ring. It bore some resemblance to uniforms from the late 23rd century in her universe but with a bit more stylistic flair than she remembered from the old holoimages. It was still an ugly uniform. There wasn’t much one could do with that color scheme to make it anything else.

The man was sitting in front of a white wall that had a block pattern created by silver metal crosshatching and he did not look happy. This then must be Admiral Barnett. He spoke in a tightly controlled, crisp tone that might have been pleasant under calmer circumstances.

“Captain Kirk, you had better have one damn good explanation for putting me on hold.”

“I do, sir. We were not prepared to present you with the necessary information. Things have been a bit chaotic on this side of things,” Kirk said with just enough firmness he made it apparent he was not intimidated by the Admiral but enough politeness to accord him the respect deserved to a superior officer. “As I’m sure you’re aware from the information we sent initially any and all information we can obtain in regard to this situation is of the utmost importance to us and to Starfleet Command.”

The Admiral looked displeased with the answer but he relented in the face of a perfectly reasonable explanation. It wasn’t a lie. It was more like the most obscure way of describing their ‘information gathering’ possible.

“Very well,” the Admiral said. His tone remained crisp but it lost some of the hard edge and replaced it with real fear. “Has the situation been contained?”

“For the moment, sir,” Kirk said. “The Romulan ship—the *Scythe*—has had its weaponry disabled for the time being. However, they have made it clear that their next target is Earth. That being said, they will require some time to make repairs before they can launch an attack.”

The Admiral barely contained his obvious terror at the idea. Whatever data the *Enterprise* had been able to send had been enough to make it clear that the *Scythe* was a substantial threat. “God, it’s Nero all over again. I assume that the people to your right are the senior officers of the allegedly Starfleet
vessel that you indicated came through the black hole with this *Scythe*?"

"Yes, sir they are," Kirk said. "May I introduce the commanding officer of the *USS Devil’s Trap*, Captain Erin Winchester."

The Admiral’s eyes flicked over and centered squarely on Dean. "Captain," he said with a bit of a skeptical note. He eyed his uniform suspiciously. Why did everyone keep assuming Dean was the Captain? Were there no female captains in Starfleet suddenly? Kirk cleared his throat faintly.

"Admiral," he said carefully, "He’s not the Captain." He pointed at Erin. "She is."

The Admiral blinked and his dark complexion took on a rosy tint. "I apologize, Captain," he said his eyes shifting to Erin. Kirk’s mouth twitched and Erin wondered if he’d done that on purpose.

"Perfectly understandable, Admiral. You wouldn’t be the first," Erin said. Kirk had the grace to blush. The Admiral nodded slightly and moved on efficiently.

"While I don’t wish to sound inhospitable. How can we be certain that you are who you say you are? We’ve dealt with an incident similar to this and without being rude, I see no reason not to question your origins."

Spock spoke up. "The Captain’s identity, her organizational affiliation and the timeline from which she came have all been emphatically confirmed Admiral. There is no reason to doubt it. The Captain, her ship and her crew are from the same universe as Nero twenty five years after the events in their own which led to Nero’s incursion into our timeline. They are from the early 25\textsuperscript{th} century. Specifically 2411 by the Old Earth calendar."

The Admiral’s gaze shifted to the Vulcan. "And how was this accomplished?"

Without flinching Spock answered. "The Captain obliged our request for confirmation by submitting to a mind meld which I conducted. It seemed the quickest method of information exchange available under the circumstances."

Beside her Erin felt Dean go stiff. She didn’t look over at him to find out why. It would have been unseemly to turn her attention away from the Admiral but she couldn’t understand why he would be bothered by the revelation. She’d had her mind forcibly plundered and nearly broken by the Undine on Vendor Station, against her will, and he hadn’t blinked twice about it. This she had consented to.

"I see," the Admiral said. He turned his attention back to Erin. "In that case Captain Winchester we would be most obliged if you could provide us with any information you have."

"Certainly, sir," Erin said. She looked toward Captain Kirk. "With Captain Kirk’s permission."

The Admiral frowned but then he wasn’t a starship Captain. He would see no point in the little respects paid another Captain. You didn’t go taking control of someone else’s command while onboard their ship unless given permission. It was bad manners. Kirk dipped his head in acknowledgment of the gesture. "Please. Go right ahead," he said.

"If you two are done posturing," the Admiral said. Erin didn’t dignify that with an answer. Neither did Kirk. Some things the Admiralty just did not get. "I’ll take Commander Spock at his word. He has proven himself to be one of Starfleet’s most distinguished members. Now, tell me everything you know about this *Scythe*. We must launch a counter-strike immediately, while the enemy is vulnerable."

Erin immediately disagreed. "That is a terrible idea."
“I beg your pardon?” the Admiral said with clearly shocked outrage. Erin was unmoved by it. She had long since stopped feeling intimidated by anyone wearing Admiral’s stripes. This guy didn’t begin to compare to Admiral T’Nae’s ferocity and she’d argue with her without blinking.

“It’s a terrible idea,” Erin reiterated. “We were engaged in battle with the Scythe when we were pulled through the black hole to your universe. My ship sustained heavy damage and casualties. We are on auxiliary power and defenseless. Forgive me for saying so but while your technology is far more advanced than anything we could have expected due to the reverse engineering of the Narada’s technology nothing you have is a match for the Scythe.” Oddly Erin did know that. She knew she knew it and yet she knew she had no business knowing it. She remembered knowing it. One of Spock’s memories surfacing without prompting. It was a little odd to remember something you hadn’t lived through.

Erin went on and ignored the new sensation. “You thought Nero was bad? The Scythe is capable of far worse, far faster. It’s damn near impenetrable and indestructible. Its inner hull is pure neutronium, its outer hull is a neutronium alloy impervious to most weaponry in the 25th century. It’s certainly impenetrable to anything from this one.”

She carefully left out the bit about Q tossing them through that black hole or that most of the damage on her ship had been caused by a saboteur that had they not sustained might have enabled them to defeat the Scythe without this disaster. No sense in alarming the Admiral needlessly. Kirk seemed to be of the same mind.

“I have to agree Admiral Barnett,” he said. “The Scythe was already severely compromised when it came through the black hole. They only had secondary weapons capability and if not for some ingenuitive tactics from both the Enterprise and the Devil’s Trap working as a team we would not have been able to disable them. That ship is carrying two planet destroying weapons with, by our data, so far unknown power. If it could make mincemeat out of a 25th century ship, we’d be fools to launch a counter strike with no hope of success.”

“I assume you were the ones that inflicted this damage on the Scythe?” the Admiral said to Erin.

“By pure dumb luck. They had their shields down. We took advantage of it.”

“Alright. I agree that a counter strike is not advisable at this time,” the Admiral said. “I’ll begin procedures to launch a planetary defense fleet.”

“Another bad idea,” Erin said without hesitation.

The Admiral bristled visibly. “Captain Winchester…” he began, teeth gritted. Erin didn’t let him finish.

“The Scythe is damaged. They ran. By our estimation to Romulan Space to lick their wounds.”

“We can confirm that assumption. The Scythe’s trajectory indicates a direct path toward the Neutral Zone,” Spock put in.

“I can take it a step further,” Lorian added. “The Devil’s Trap’s sensors are more advanced than your own. We can track it where ever it goes by its warp signature.”

“If you haul out a planetary defense fleet they will detect it. They can’t do anything to Earth. Not yet. But they will make repairs as quickly as they can. If they have even secondary weapons capability by the time they pass the Sol System and detect that fleet, your ass is grass,” Erin said. “What are you going to do? Throw proverbial pebbles at it?”
McCoy made a choked sound that might have been a repressed laugh and Kirk’s eye brows shot straight up at her audacity. Expectedly, neither Dean nor Lorian were surprised, having seen Erin speak with their own admirals similarly. Erin was mildly surprised that Spock wasn’t.

“You expect us to do nothing?” the Admiral spat in outrage.

“That’s exactly what I expect you to do.”

The Admiral seemed to puff up. “The Scythe will have to get past Earth’s border defense grid.”

“No it’ll just blast it out of existence,” Erin corrected. “Let me be very clear about something, Admiral. At full power my ship could pick off your border defense grid with very little problem. The Scythe will eat it for lunch. Moreover it has advanced cloaking technology that you couldn’t possibly see through. You wouldn’t even know they were there until it was too late.”

She knew this, again, because Spock knew the border defense grid’s capabilities and Erin remembered what he did. Cleverly she did not know the access codes to disable the grid. Spock had avoided revealing too much of Starfleet security information while still remembering enough to give her a grasp on the universe she found herself in. Not that it would have mattered. Not when the grid could be blasted out of existence.

The Admiral swallowed hard at the information looking as though he wanted to defend their ability to defend themselves but at the same time daunted by Erin’s allegations about the Scythe.

“You’re painting a picture of a no win scenario,” the Admiral said.

“I don’t believe in no win scenarios,” Kirk and Erin both said at the same time. They looked at each other in surprise, exchanged a half grin with each other.

“Admiral,” Kirk said. “Captain Winchester is right. We shouldn’t be hasty. We have an advantage. The crew of the Scythe doesn’t realize they aren’t in their own universe or their own time. They think it’s some elaborate ruse. It’ll take them time not only to make repairs but to figure out where and when they are.”

“I hardly understand how that is possible. Surely they became aware of it the instant that they encountered the Enterprise Captain Kirk,” the Admiral said disbelievingly.

“Oh it’s possible,” Erin said. “In my century the Federation has been at war on multiple fronts for years. As I’m sure you are aware with war comes an ever escalating arms race. We are constantly launching new and improved ships and weaponry in attempt to stay ahead of our enemies. The Scythe has no reason to believe that the Enterprise isn’t one of those new ships. But they will figure it out. Now, unfortunately I’ve been on the front line of that war for three years. I am offering you the benefit of my experience. I have defended no less than four planets and starbases against planet destroying weapons of this ilk before. I know how to defeat them.” Erin allowed herself a small, ironic smile. “Using some methods which you and,” she looked to Kirk, “Captain Kirk developed in my timeline.”

It had the expected impact. The Admiral perked up slightly with a hint of pride and Kirk didn’t bother to hide his stroked ego even a little by the smirk he was suddenly wearing.

Erin grew serious again. “The Scythe is more powerful than anything we’ve ever seen. But it’s a prototype. We happened upon it during a weapons test. It isn’t a perfect weapon yet. It does have bugs that haven’t been worked out.”

Okay so that was a stretch. She didn’t know exactly how to defeat the Scythe. She was confident she
could figure it out. Or rather than her crew could figure it out.

“Then how do we defeat it?” the Admiral asked briskly.

“You can’t. I can,” Erin said without an ounce of arrogance. “We have significantly advanced weaponry. Had we not been taken by surprise by the Scythe we might have been able to stop the Scythe before we were sucked through the black hole. We have time to plan our next attack. With Nero you didn’t have the benefit of having a Starfleet warship capable of going head to head with the Narada. This time you do. Use it.”

“Captain Winchester, while I’m impressed by your scope of knowledge and the unconventional methods you are willing to employ, both you and Captain Kirk have made it clear that your ship has sustained serious damage. You are suggesting we let the Scythe run and repair itself when, if as you say, your ship is the only one capable of defeating it, is in no condition to even attempt stopping them,” the Admiral said.

“For that I refer you to my first officer, Commander Dean Singer,” Erin said and looked to him to answer. The Admiral fixed his stern gaze on him.

“You are correct. We have been severely damaged and taken heavy losses. As it stands we would have no hope of facing the Scythe. But the Devil’s Trap and the Enterprise did more damage to the Scythe than we thought at first,” Dean said. “We were able to obtain advanced scans while the Scythe’s shields were down before we were pulled through the black hole.”

He set one of the padds he was holding on the table face up and tapped at the holobuttons shifting it from 2D to 3D mode. A three dimensional holo image of the Scythe showing marked areas of damage and significance in glowing red against the blue framework sprang up from the face of the padd and floated in the air. With another few taps Dean enlarged it until the image took up half the table, well large enough that the Admiral could see what they were seeing.

Then Dean began something very few people ever got to hear him do outside those who had attended the academy with him. Dean gave a dissertation on the Scythe with all the confidence of an Academy instructor.

“As you can see, the Scythe is not a ship. It’s two ships, technically speaking. What you are seeing is a planet killer device that has had a Warbird modified to house it. Presumably this allowed the Romulans to utilize the planet killer in tandem with the thalaron pulse weapons onboard the Warbird. The pure neutronium hull of the planet killer would have precluded them being able to disassemble it to incorporate into another ship so they simply built around it.” Dean said. “As a result the Scythe is plagued by a number of problems. One, it is almost completely weapon. There is very little space for anything onboard it but the weapons themselves and the systems used to power them. They have fifty personnel at the most and any room they have for cargo space is severely curtailed. Additionally they took on the crew of a damaged Warbird prior to being pulled into this universe further hampering the space available. This means that while they can make repairs they can’t have all the materials they need to conduct them. They will have to obtain them to fabricate replacement parts. Nor do they have much by way of auxiliary power. Everything has to be dedicated to the weapons.”

As he spoke Dean touched the pertinent areas on the holoimage and they highlighted in yellow. There wasn’t much blue left of the ship when he was done.

“We managed to seriously damage their singularity core as well as disabling their weapons systems, along with their quantum slipstream drive. Normally the Scythe is capable of slipstream travel as well as a maximum warp of 9.9. In their current condition I’d be surprised if they can reach warp 8 and slipstream is out of the question,” Dean said. He touched the red areas, making them pulsate for
emphasis. There was no blue left.

“Warp 9.9?” Kirk breathed with obvious wanton awe as the Admiral added. “Slipstream?”

Lorian spoke up. “A method of travel utilizing a tunnel through subspace allowing for speeds equivalent to warp 20 for short periods of time.”

“Warp 20?” Kirk said. “I want one.”

“I am certain you do, Captain,” Spock said with a beleaguered but amused note to his voice.

“Scotty’s going to have raptures,” McCoy said. “I’m going to have a seizure. No one in their right mind should go that fast. It’s insane.”

The Admiral ignored the desirous and paranoid side talk to focus on the primary conversation. “And what is the Devil’s Trap capable of?”

“At full capability the Devil’s Trap can achieve warp 9.99, an increase in velocity over the Scythe of 4859c in addition to slipstream capability,” Lorian said.

“That is more than twice the velocity of warp 9.9!” Kirk said his eyes were beginning to bug out.

“Yes Captain Kirk, it is,” Lorian said.

McCoy moaned as though he were becoming ill. “Angels and ministers of grace defend us,” he muttered.

Erin almost snickered. The McCoy from her universe shared this one’s dislike for transporters but apparently this McCoy also had issues with going very fast through space.

“That is impressive,” the Admiral said. “Do you have an estimate on how quickly the Scythe will be able to repair itself?”

“Assuming they obtain relatively easy access to the materials needed approximately one week at the earliest,” Dean said.

“And how quickly can your ship be repaired?”

Here Dean hesitated and looked grim. “As noted earlier we sustained heavy damage and casualties. Thirty eight percent of our crew is either dead or seriously injured. With current conditions and without enough personnel or a dry dock repairs would take three weeks to a month.”

“By then the Scythe will have not only escaped to Romulan Space and completed their repairs. They will certainly have already attacked Earth. No matter how superior your ship is it’s useless to us,” the Admiral pointed out.

“Not necessarily Admiral,” Kirk put in. “I’ve already offered to supply Captain Winchester with additional support to complete repairs and Starbase 24 is only two days away at Warp 8. The Enterprise can tow the Devil’s Trap into dry dock there. If we put everyone on it that should drastically reduce repair times.”

“That would put us at one week for repairs if we do what we can enroute,” Erin said attempting not to let her voice hitch at the mention of Starbase 24. In her universe there was no Starbase 24. Not anymore. It had been destroyed by the Klingons two years ago. The Devil’s Trap along with several other ships had been able to evacuate most of the people on board to the station to, ironically, the
USS McCoy, in time but the station had been lost. One of those ‘planetary defense’ maneuvers she’d mentioned earlier.

“Alright. Let’s assume repairs can be made with appropriate accommodation,” the Admiral said. “The Scythe will still be in Romulan Space by then. Even if you can track them wherever they go you cannot cross into the Neutral Zone. It would be an act of war.”

“On the contrary, Admiral,” Lorian said. “We most certainly can with no risk of inciting a war.” Everyone at the table looked at him incredulously, save Erin, Dean and Spock. Erin didn’t know if Spock seemed unsurprised because he was already aware of what Lorian was about to say from the knowledge he’d gained from the mind meld or if it was because Vulcans did not see showing surprise as acceptable.

“Pardon me?” the Admiral said obviously completely confused.

“The Devil’s Trap is equipped with exterior holo emitters designed to allow it to appear as any ship that has been programmed into them. With a sufficiently accurate schematics and authorization codes it would be quite easy to alter the ship’s appearance, warp signature and power signature to mimic said ship. It would be indistinguishable from any other Romulan vessel currently in operation.”

That had been exactly the ploy Erin had wanted to use on the Vendor Station mission. But ‘Admiral Zelle’ had flat refused to allow it.

“That smacks of Section 31,” Kirk said darkly.

“Oh the Devil’s Trap has been shanghaied by Section 31 on several occasions and that is where we got the tech from. I despise them. No, I loathe them. But it is not itself a part of it,” Erin assured him. “It’s called the Devil’s Trap for a reason. It was designed as a covert tactical strike vessel. Needless to say that’s why we are always on the front line of the war. Why fight an all out engagement when you can send us?”

“If we all survive this I am going to have to see this ship for myself firsthand,” the Admiral said with an awed expression. “I’m not certain I can provide you with the schematics you’d need however.”

“Ask our Section 31. I’ll guarantee they’ll have it,” Kirk grunted.

The Admiral favored him with a jaundiced eye for the comment but then sighed. “I’m sure you’re right. Very well. The appropriate arrangements for docking at Starbase 24 and appropriation of the required schematics and codes will be made immediately. Now tell me about the weapons capability of the Scythe and the Devil’s Trap.”

What followed was a tedious hour of weapons specifications, dominated by Lorian and Dean, that Erin hadn’t had to suffer through since the Academy. By the end of it there wasn’t a person at the table who hadn’t gone considerably paler. McCoy was white as a ghost.

“Dear God. And you call the Devil’s Trap a covert tactical strike vessel?”

“It is a warship Doctor,” Spock said.

“I’d hate to see their dreadnought class,” McCoy said aghast.

“Yes, you would,” Erin said with a sad note. Little did he know the incarnation of the Enterprise in her time line was a dreadnought. McCoy glanced at her and frowned. Erin returned it morosely.

“Not like they have much choice. I mean look at that thing,” Kirk said waving at the still present
holoimage of the Scythe. “The Narada was a kid’s toy by comparison. That ship was designed solely to destroy planets.”

“The upside is the trade off for its terrifying weaponry is an inability to fire while cloaked. A delay in shield deployment when coming out of cloak and delays to switch the power between systems,” Dean said. “The thalaron pulse and the planet killer device take seven minutes and two minutes to charge respectively and they can’t be charged at the same time.”

“So the odds are against us, the situation is grim and the chance of our success is…,” McCoy began to say.

At the exact same time Spock and Lorian broke in together, “Approximately one million four hundred and ninety thousand to one.”

“…practically nonexistent,” McCoy finished with a glare at both Vulcans. “God help me, now there’s two of them.”

“What’d I say about not quoting me the odds Mr. Lorian?” Erin said.

“Yes, Captain,” he said without the least bit of chagrin.

“If you fail in this mission there is no way we can stop that monster,” the Admiral said. “We’ll all be dead.”

“Which is why I’m asking for special dispensation,” Erin said.

“What sort of special dispensation?” the Admiral asked shrewdly.

“Unusual breadth of discretion as described in Starfleet Regulations Volume 12444 Section 39.0 FF for the duration of this mission for both myself and Captain Kirk.”

Kirk gawked at her openly. That was one hell of a request and Erin knew it. ‘Unusual breadth of discretion’ didn’t mean anything exactly. It was a catch all regulation for use in unstable situations that meant that if they needed to break one or more Prime Directives and if by doing so they managed to save the galaxy and Starfleet liked how it was handled, Starfleet was likely to pin a medal on them. If Starfleet didn’t like how it was handled, they would probably all be court-martialed whether they solved the problem or not. It also gave them the power to make decisions in the field normally reserved for Starfleet Command alone with all the same terms applying.

“You don’t ask for much do you Captain Winchester?” the Admiral said stunned by the audacity of the request.

“I ask only for what is necessary. If we don’t succeed it won’t matter. We’ll all be dead anyway,” Erin said. The Admiral frowned deeply and sighed with a shake of his head.

“When you put it like that,” he admitted. “Alright. Your request for unusual breadth of discretion is granted. And Captain Winchester if you haven’t already you might think about joining the Diplomatic Corp someday. You make one hell of an argument.”

“If only,” Erin said too soft for anyone else to hear. Then to the Admiral she said. “You have my sincerest thanks Admiral Barnett.”

The Admiral studied her again for a moment and his expression softened. “Yes. I believe I do.” He grew grave. “I will have every starbase along the Neutral Zone put on standby alert and the planetary defense fleet ready to be scrambled. Just in case you need them. Please send all reports directly to
me.” He paused. “Good luck out there Captains. All our hopes go with you.” With that the communication was terminated.

“I don’t believe it,” Kirk muttered.

“At the risk of inflating your already healthy ego Captain, believe it,” Spock said mildly. “She learned it from studying you.” Kirk’s jaw fell open and he simply sat there as the rest of them rose from their chairs, staring at his First Officer.

***

“Lieutenant Hendorff gather your best twelve men and meet me in the transporter room,” Kirk said speaking into the pick up on the computer panel in the briefing table.

“Aye, sir,” came the reply from Hendorff, his Chief of Security and who Kirk had not so kindly nicknamed ‘Cupcake’ upon their first meeting in a bar in Iowa, where Hendorff had beat the hell out of him back before Jim had enlisted in Starfleet.

Kirk released the button that kept the intra-ship communication line open and ran his hand through his hair. Captain Winchester and her Officers were already on their way back to their ship after they had all sketched out a preliminary plan—courtesy of Commander Singer—to stealthily congregate in the Devil’s Trap’s shuttle bay to launch an all out boarding party raid to capture the saboteur before even attempting to head for Starbase 24.

Kirk was still trying to wrap his head around Winchester’s handling of Admiral Barnett. “Damn,” he said the word drawn out. He grinned to himself and turned away from the briefing table to face Spock and McCoy. “Did you see how she handled Admiral Barnett?” Kirk said.

“It would hardly be possible not to Captain,” Spock said mildly. “We were present at the time.”

“She’s a real...she's...damn it! I know she's something, but I can't think of it,” McCoy said trying to find a word that defined Captain Winchester. Kirk sympathized he couldn’t think of one either but it was funny to see the Doctor stumped for a metaphor for once.

“She's a captain, Doctor. Who cares very deeply for her crew,” Spock said in a put upon way. It seemed like a chastising comment on the surface of things but Kirk got the distinct feeling there was a great deal more behind it.

“Extraordinary Bones. The word you’re looking for is extraordinary,” Kirk supplied for his friend.

“Oh God, he’s twitterpated,” McCoy complained. “Didn’t Spock tell you ‘don’t’ with that one?”

“I am not ‘twitter-whatever’,” Kirk insisted. “Besides Spock said she learned it from studying other-me therefore if I’m twitterpatted—“

“—pated.”

“--with anyone its future me.”

Spock’s eyebrow went up sharply and McCoy furrowed his forehead and crossed his arms. “That didn’t come out right,” Kirk insisted.

“Oh no I think it came out perfectly,” McCoy said grinning mischievously. Kirk eyed him and Spock
carefully said nothing. Kirk grumbled under his breath at them.

“Can we just go? We have a raiding party to get to.” He started for the door.

“Captain, I was not aware you intended to accompany security to the Devil’s Trap,” Spock said in that tone Kirk knew meant he was about to protest. “In spite your seemingly endless need to ‘stretch your legs’. I must remind you that you are still a Starfleet Captain. This is clearly a job better suited for security.”

“But then I’d miss all the fun,” Kirk said without breaking stride.

“Sir, the more prudent choice would be to stay aboard the Enterprise and wait,” Spock insisted catching up with him. McCoy was quick on their heels.

“Much as it pains me to say this…he’s right Jim. These Undine sound pretty nasty and you haven’t the first idea how to handle them.”

“Oh no,” Kirk said shaking his head as he passed through the briefing room door and veered toward the transporter room. “I wouldn’t miss this for all the tea in China. Besides I want to know what Captain Winchester does next. She’s full of unexpected surprises.”

Spock gave what amounted to a sigh. “I see as usual it is useless to attempt to persuade you to follow regulations. I will go with you.”

“That’s the spirit, Spock!” Kirk proclaimed. Spock merely looked at him blankly.

McCoy broke away from them and began stalking off down the corridor in the other direction. “Bones, you aren’t coming?”

“No thank you. I think I’ll stay here and keep all my parts. Besides someone has to stick around to make sure sickbay is ready to sew you together again when you come back in pieces,” the Doctor complained and disappeared in the direction of the medical bay. Kirk merely laughed.

Beside him Spock said to no one in particular. “I wonder if Commander Lorian has as difficult a time with the humans on his crew as I do on the Enterprise.” Kirk laughed again.

***

Captain Winchester and her two officers appeared in the shuttle bay of the Devil’s Trap in a tornado of swirling subatomic particles. It was the only space large enough to hold an entire raid party at beam in without drawing attention immediately and it was already on lockdown by security. No one would know they were there unless they wanted them to.

Except security. The instant the three of them rematerialize among the few shuttles and workbees the bay contained the shuttle bay doors whisked open and two security officers careened inside, phasers pointed in their general direction.

“Hold it!” one of them, Lieutenant Northman, an exceedingly tall blonde man of Nordic Earth origin, barked sharply.

The three senior officers turned toward the sound as one and Northman blinked in surprise. He
snapped the hand holding his phaser down by his side swiftly and pawed at his partner, a Bajoran fellow by the name of Lieutenant Brin Gale to lower his own.

Erin raised her finger to her lips in a gesture for silence then said in a stage whisper. “We aren’t here.”

Both men nodded curtly and slipped back out the door without a word. Dean stepped away from Erin and Lorian. “I’ll get Nilsa and the others,” he said leaving them at a trot. “I’ll signal when it’s all clear.” Erin nodded her assent and Dean disappeared to begin executing his plan.

As soon as he was out the door, Erin gave a long sigh. “That was exhausting.” she admitted of the briefing and the meld and the whole day really.

“That is not surprising. Much has happened over the last few hours. Melding can be a trying experience. You have not rested or eaten for a lengthy period of time. Nor have you meditated today,” Lorian pointed out. “You will need to rest soon or your control will begin to slip again. The assistance Commander Spock offered will only extend so far.”

“Has it only been a few hours?” Erin said in an almost disbelieving voice. She knew it had been but it felt longer. “It feels like it’s been days. I’ll sleep when I’m dead. This day isn’t finished yet,” Erin muttered. Lorian arched a brow at her disapprovingly. She could only sigh again in response.

The Vulcan looked as though he were contemplating saying more, then thought better of it. Instead, he said with perfect professionalism. “I will report to Doctor Novak for the required supplies and then meet you at the appointed place.”

Erin nodded in response and he went. When he was gone she had a brief flash of regret that he hadn’t said whatever it had seemed he wanted to say. The knot growing tighter in her stomach and her building anger were enough to make her disregard why she’d wanted to know what Lorian had left unsaid. Despite the meld with Spock it refused to be ignored. It had been easier to discount it when she was focusing on one problem at a time.

She was conducting a raid on her own damn ship. It made her nauseous. The Undine, insidious, vicious beings. One had manipulated her into murdering five thousand innocent Romulans, the one loose on her ship had caused the deaths of fifty-two of her crew, injuries to countless others and rendered her ship helpless against a foe that meant to destroy the galaxy. Who knew how many more were undermining every major galactic power in a bid for mutually assured destruction? She fought not to think of the entire species with utter hatred, to hold on to the values and the philosophies of her life and her Starfleet training, but it was tremendously difficult.

Erin drew in a long, slow breath and shut her eyes to listen to the sound of her heartbeat in her ears the way Lorian had showed her as she sought out that tiny point of stability that would give her the focus she needed right now. She could fall apart later, on her own time, alone and unseen.

It came easier than it had before, that clarity she’d had since the meld with Spock seemed to make it so. She was the Captain. This was her ship, her crew, her people. It made something recoil violently inside her to think that Undine was free on her ship.

But there was no time for that. No time to consider how she felt about the fact she was currently embroiled in a mission with the man (albeit much younger) who had been the standard she’d measured herself by for decades. No time to consider the ramifications or effects of the mind meld with Spock. No time to wonder what Lorian might have said or why she kept getting captured by his eyes. No time for that inevitable conversation with Dean. No time to grieve the dead or lament their circumstances. No time to do anything but the task at hand.
Erin reached to her side and pulled a communicator from beneath her uniform shirt as it chimed at her. It was not 25th Century Starfleet issue. It wasn’t even her universe’s 23rd century issue. It was this one’s. Loaned to her by Kirk, it provided Erin with a direct unmonitored line of communication with the Enterprise. All part of the plan, just as what Dean and Lorian were now doing was part of the plan.

With a flick of her wrist Erin opened it. “Winchester here.”

“All clear,” Dean relayed. “Meet you in the armory.”

“Understood,” Erin answered. The line closed and Erin immediately opened another one to the Enterprise. “Winchester to Kirk.”

“Kirk here.”

“Whenever your men are ready,” Erin said.

“Acknowledged,” came the reply.

Almost before she could get the communicator shut the distinctive sound of a transporter beam sounded a few feet away, the coordinates of the Devil’s Trap’s shuttle bay already given to Captain Kirk. With the Devil’s Trap’s shield inoperable it was simple to beam to any part of the ship they desired to. A fact that they were using to their advantage currently.

Erin turned and waited for the swirling pillars of light to coalesce into people. When they did she found herself mildly surprised though she supposed she shouldn’t have been.

“Captain Kirk,” she said to the man who was standing not four foot away from her and grinning with anticipation. Beside him was Spock as implacable as always along with four security officers. “I wasn’t aware you were going to come along,” Erin said as they cleared out of the way for the next batch to beam over. This could potentially be a problem. 25th century social dynamics were just a tad different than they had been a hundred and fifty years ago.

“And miss the chance to run amok on a 25th century starship?” Kirk said teasingly. Without willing herself to she shot a look at Spock to see what his reaction to this was. He didn’t have a reaction but there was a glint in his dark eyes that said he understood very well why Erin suddenly seemed to be struggling for words.

“She’s not exactly at her best right now,” Erin said weakly. Kirk seemed to take delight at having caught her off guard.

“I promise not to hold it against you,” Kirk said as the second wave of security officers beamed in and scurried out of the way for the last group. Erin resisted the urge to mutter that wasn’t what she was worried about him holding against her.

“I’ll hold you to that,” Erin said refusing to let herself flounder in front of Kirk of all people. “Just… try to remember that the 25th century is a lot different in some respects from the 23rd. Even in this universe.”

“I hope so,” Kirk enthused. Erin refrained from scoffing and remarking about wishes and the consequences of making them. The last of the security officers beamed in and Kirk took a moment to really get a look at his surroundings. His eyes, not unexpectedly, flitted with keen interest over the two Type-13 shuttles dubbed the Vervain and the Wolfsbane but they light up like Christmas trees lights when they landed on the sleek black shape of the Flyer-Class shuttle the Silver Bullet.
That did make Erin grin slightly as he broke away from the group to gawk longingly at it. It was larger than either of the Type-13 shuttles meant for a maximum crew of six as opposed to the Type-13’s crew of two and was more of a hybrid between a fighter and shuttle than anything, designed to undertake missions deemed too hazardous or hostile for a regular shuttle and equipped to reflect that purpose. It was a very pretty little ship and Erin was almost as fond of it as she was the Devil’s Trap. Somewhere she found the weather-all to chide him half-heartedly.

“You’re gaping Captain.”

Kirk snapped his mouth shut for he had indeed been gapping. “That’s a shuttle?”

“It’s more than a shuttle, less than a fighter,” Erin supplied as the security officers got themselves organized. “And if you’re good I might even let you take her for a spin sometime.”

Kirk gave her an impish grin that spoke of things that were decidedly not to be filed in the ‘good’ category and would have been more at home in the region of incorrigible but he never got to respond. Erin didn’t give him time. She’d spared a second for a light joke but she was still steadfastly focused on the task.

Spock was oddly quiet, saying nothing as Captain Winchester motioned toward the door with a jerk of her chin. Erin led the accumulated fifteen men and women toward the inner shuttle bay doors. As they passed through them, the groups falling neatly into two columns with Erin in the lead and Spock and Kirk at the head of a column, the two security guards didn’t bat an eyelash.

Kirk muttered cordially, “Gentleman,” as he passed. To which Lieutenant Brin and Lieutenant Northman made no response to Kirk’s obvious puzzlement. If Kirk noticed that Brin wasn’t precisely human—in her universe it would be decades yet before the Federation made contact with the Bajorans—he said nothing about it.

This area of the ship hadn’t taken any visible damage. The corridors were still neat charcoal gray and silver as they curved away toward the security office, the brig and the armory. Lighted holopanels—now dim to conserve power—were affixed periodically to the walls and strip lights set at fifty percent provided their faint illumination. The familiar hum of the warp core that had permeated every day and night of Erin’s life for three years and thus become something she no longer heard consciously, was noticeably, disturbingly absent. To his credit, Kirk took in everything with an avid fascination but he never stopped to gawk at the advanced technology surrounding him. As they walked he seemed to feel the need to fill the quiet that was growing tense with anticipation of the raid.

“That was something else back there. The way you handled Admiral Barnett,” he said. “Very interesting ‘diplomacy’.”

“Yeah well,” Erin said self-deprecatingly. “I’ve had a lot of practice.”

“Why is it so many humans refuse to take credit where credit is due?” Spock interjected. “There are times when modesty and humility are quite illogical.”

“Mr. Spock, someone once said, ‘The entire key to diplomacy is sincerity. Once that can be faked, the rest is simple.’”

“That is a most peculiar way in which to respond, Captain,” Spock said clearly perplexed. “To whom may that quote be attributed?”

Erin almost laughed sardonically. “You. Twenty six years from now.”

There was a lengthy pause as they continued down the corridor, passing the dark doors for the Beta
Computer Core and its attendant facilities before either Kirk or Spock responded. To their credit, none of Kirk’s men breathed a single word. They followed efficiently behind as though they did this every day. Erin felt her anger and adrenaline building in anticipation of the raid with every step.

“Well, I was impressed,” Kirk said simply.

Spock was a bit more introspective about it than his Captain. “Be that as it may Captain Winchester you succeeded in not only securing what amounts to ‘carte blanche’ for the duration of this mission you also put both yourself and Captain Kirk in the unique position of being able to dictate terms of war, and more particularly peace, without Starfleet Command interference through whatever means deemed necessary at the time. An admirable accomplishment from any perspective.”

“Ah but don’t forget if Starfleet doesn’t like it they’ll hang everyone involved,” Erin pointed out. “Even if it does solve our problem. I haven’t put any of us in an enviable position.”

She wanted to be proud of the fact that Kirk was impressed with her. That someone as famously logical as Spock found her gall admirable. But she just didn’t have the energy or the ego to. She was attempting to fix a mess she’d created not make a name for herself or impress anyone. And what she’d done with Admiral Barnett may have bought them the leeway they needed but it hadn’t done anyone any favors.

Whatever reply either man might have had was cut short by their arrival at the armory. Erin paused briefly just out of sensing range of the doors and looked at everyone imploringly. “Don’t freak out.” Then she turned on her heel and strode through the door into the armory’s ‘lobby’, steadfastly ignoring the view down the corridor just beyond the security office, the turbolift and the brig that turned abruptly from untouched wholeness to a twisted charred ruin held in tact by force fields that gave an unimpeded view of space where the hull had breached.

The very small lobby area compromised only a few sparse streamlined accommodations. A small replicator, a couple of computer consoles and a desk with its attendant chair with another set of doors on the far wall beside which was a small security console requiring access codes to enter. Behind the desk sat, the very blue Petty Officer First Class Tane Zar, a Bolian wearing the gold and black fatigues and the rectangular lozenge depicting the silver bars of his rank on his chest. He looked wan, tired and more than a few patches of his skin looked new, freshly regenerated. His name had been on the causality list, one of the walking wounded.

The room filled to capacity quickly with sixteen people attempting to find a place to stand without upsetting anything around them. Now Kirk’s men did take the opportunity to gawk at the technology around them though they were discreet about it as Crewman Zar looked up from his console. “You’re expected Captain,” he said to Erin and in true optimistic Bolian fashion managed to thinly smile despite the circumstances. He did not gape at Kirk or Spock even if he was secretly awe struck by their presence. “The others are waiting for you.”

Erin walked past him, stopping long enough to place a gloved hand on his shoulder to give it a reassuring squeeze and a significant look reserved only for the Bolian. “Thank you Thane.” The simple phrase carried far more meaning than it implied. The Bolian smiled again wanly and gave a short nod. Erin returned it then led the group toward the doors at the back of the room pausing to face the security panel ensconced beside it. She touched the controls and then stood perfectly still, careful not to blink as a beam of cyan light shot out of the emitter at the top of the small panel to scan her eye. The beam dissipated and the doors to the armory proper slid open with a decompressing whoosh.
Beyond them bustled sixteen people in a riot of Starfleet gold interspersed with a few beacons of red, ranging in species from Human, to Vulcan, Andorian, Trill, Caitan and Tellarite with a lone Romulan thrown into the mix all which were being ordered about in the terse gruff tones of a white-haired Klingon. None of which, to Erin’s relief, were telepathic enough to pick up on Erin with her mental shield intact. Thankfully both the Romulan and the Klingon had their backs turned as Erin and the Enterprise contingent entered the room.

One of them noticed Erin and snapped to attention while barking. “Captain on deck!” Everyone immediately stopped and whirled around to stand at attention still holding anything they were carrying including Lieutenants Nilsa and Law. The armory doors whooshed shut as the last of the Enterprise crew crowded into the room.

“Well,” Kirk said in a surprisingly calm tone. “Of all the things I might have expected…this wasn’t it.”

Chapter End Notes

Please read and review!
Chapter Notes

There was tense silence for all of approximately five seconds as both crews sized each other up and attempted to discern if anyone should be freaking out about anything, except for Spock who was as implacable as ever. But then he had already known what he would see here from his mind meld with Erin. Dean, Sam and Law stood by apprehensively, the only other spots of red in the sea of 25th century operations/security gold. Nilsa favored Kirk with a crooked tooth Klingon smile that resembled a snarl and stepped forward, towering over him.

Quickly, before anyone could take it the wrong way Erin said, “Captain Kirk, Lieutenant Nilsa, my Assistant Chief of Security.” She deliberately left everyone else at attention.

Nilsa dipped her head in acknowledgment and grinned wider, striking her chest in a Klingon gesture of respect. “Captain James Tiberius Kirk,” she said appreciatively—for a Klingon. “It would be an honor to kill you in battle.”

Kirk looked up then up some more at the Klingon and said without missing a beat, “Right. Well, in the interest of inter-dimensional peace in Starfleet, please, forgo that honor.”

Nilsa laughed enthusiastically, it was a harsh growling sound. “Perhaps someday, sir.”

From behind Nilsa Dean spoke up with a humor laced voice grinning wickedly. “Nilsa, stop scaring the locals.” She scowled at him.

“Aye, sir,” she said with a put upon grunt and stepped back.

“I’m not scared. I just don’t think the attempt would do either of us a lot of good,” Kirk said almost petulantly to Dean. It was the first time he’d exhibited anything approaching disapproval. He looked at Erin. “I thought you were at war with the Klingons.” He said it without suspicion but there was an understandable confusion there.

It immediately spurred a muttered string of curses in Klingon from Nilsa that the universal translator in her combadge refused to translate, mostly to do with honorless p’tahk and taHqeq—the Klingon equivalent of a liar with much more animosity than Federation Standard could imply. Nilsa had very strong opinions about the actions of her people and most of them did not bear repeating in polite company.

“We are at war with the Klingon Empire. That doesn’t mean we’re at war with all Klingons. Some but not many sided with the Federation. We were long standing allies before the Khitomer Accords went to hell in 2399,” Erin explained.

“Ah,” Kirk said then glanced in Law’s direction. “And the reason there is a Romulan in a Starfleet uniform when you obviously are not allied with them and there is currently a ship full of them intent on killing you is?”

“If I may speak?” Law said before Erin could answer. She considered it a moment and decided there was no one better to explain than the man himself so she motioned for him to proceed saying, “Lieutenant Law, my Assistant Chief Tactical Officer. The first and only Romulan in Starfleet.” She also nodded to those still at attention. “At ease.” They relaxed but did not move from their positions.
nor break into the hushed, babbled conversations she was certain they would have liked to indulge in.

“Jolan’tru, Captain Kirk,” the elder Romulan said politely then with terrible seriousness, “I do not represent the Romulan Star Empire. I stand apart. I am a relic of a time long past, one who remembers what my kind used to be. Not the tragic shadow choked by the Tal Shiar that it has become. I will not stand with those who abide by such dishonor.”

“The last Romulan I was this close to tried to kill me, Mr. Law. I hope you aren’t also seeking that honor,” Kirk said and stuck out his hand.

Law smiled brightly, making his age lines crinkle merrily. He took the Captain’s hand in both of his and shook it firmly. “Indeed not Captain. It is an honor to meet you.”

“Erin collects misfits like cat ladies collect cats,” Dean put in. Erin suppressed an involuntary flinch at the comment. She did not ‘collect misfits’. As far as she was concerned they weren’t misfits, they were merely different. Some of them by choice, some of them by birth, who had chosen to walk the path less traveled. What she was certain Dean had meant in a joking light bothered her now. Maybe because now she was among the so-called misfits.

“You have a very diversified crew Captain Winchester,” Spock interjected looking around at the plethora of different species present as Law stepped back from Kirk and eyed the Vulcan with something approaching reverence. “A living example of Infinite Diversity in Infinite Combinations. I commend you.” He regarded Dean with blatant admonishment in his dark eyes. Dean blinked and looked away from the penetrating gaze.

“How about we make it a little less diverse and flush out this Undine?” Kirk said seeing the potential for an argument brewing and nipping it in the bud before it could start.

Nilsa grunted in agreement just as the armory doors whooshed open to admit Lorian, who was carrying a medical specimen case in one hand. He stopped and looked at the gathering with a raised brow. “I assume that I have not intruded?” he said picking up on the abating tension in the air.

To Erin’s surprise Spock said with utter mildness in that soft-spoken voice of his, “Not at all Commander. I was just commenting on the refreshing diversity of your crew. An advantage which I believe has eluded Commander Singer’s understanding.” It was the closest Erin had ever heard a Vulcan come to venomous sarcasm. Even Kirk looked at his First Officer sharply. Dean started to fume assuming he’d been slighted.

Lorian’s head tilted to the side in a perplexed fashion and he looked as though he were attempting to formulate a response. Whether in Dean’s defense or not Erin didn’t know but she took the opportunity away from him, wondering where Spock’s sudden vehemence had come from. “Are those the modified nanoprobes?”

“Yes, Captain,” Lorian replied.

“Then let’s get this show on the road.”

To Erin’s great amusement and relief, Lorian responded with either deliberate obfuscating incomprehension or genuine confusion. “There are no roads in space, Captain.”

After a brief chuckle at Lorian’s deadpan observation the group quickly set to work. Erin handed over the proceedings to Nilsa and Dean, this being their purview and not hers without any sense of wounded ego. Erin had never been one to demand command of a situation simply because there
were four rank pips on her chest. She preferred to delegate based on ability rather than rank.

Nilsa stood tall and authoritatively, not difficult for a Klingon of her stature. She reached out, taking the limp bit of red and black body armor Dean had been holding and held it up for the Enterprise crew to see. “You will each put on body armor. Undine are formidable enemies. A single scratch from their claws in their real form and you will die in agony….”

From there Nilsa outlined their plan of action and in gruesome detail, the abilities and dangers of confronting an Undine in true Klingon fashion. In other words by the time she was done there wasn’t a member of the Enterprise crew (save Spock of course) who was not looking back at Nilsa with expressions of fright.

When Nilsa was done, Dean stepped to the fore to address the group. He held up a specimen tube that looked as though it contained a constantly moving potion of dull metallic fluid. The modified Borg nanoprobes.

“These are modified nanoprobes programmed to attack Undine cells. As you can see we don’t have very much,” Dean said motioning to the open medical case which contained far too few of the specimen tubes. “Due to our replicators being off line and the amount of time it would take to replicate more, one nanoprobe at a time, this is all we’ve got. Each leader and sub-leader of a five man group will be equipped with loads to be fired from a modified compression phaser rifle. You will have approximately three shots a piece.”

“A setting of level five should be sufficient to stun the Undine, once you’ve found it,” Erin interjected and Dean looked at her askance.

“Stun it?” he gaped. “You want to capture it?”

“If possible,” Erin said.


Erin shook her head. “This Undine infiltrated my ship, sabotaged it and got fifty two of my people killed. I want to kill it as much as you do,” she bit through clenched teeth that anger begging to make itself known. She hated them. All of them. The entire species. Erin trounced on that hatred hard.

“But this is bigger than one Undine. There’s a reason it picked this ship. I want to know why. Did you forget that our entire civilization and the civilizations of at least two other species are infested with them and we have no idea who they might be? We don’t even know what they want. You can’t ask questions of a corpse. You can’t solve everything in life with a phaser blast.”

“What? You think you can reason with it? You tried that with Admiral Zelle and look how that turned out. Erin—Captain, I appreciate that you’re thinking of the big picture here but even if you capture it, it’ll just kill itself before it will talk,” Dean said in a reasonable enough tone. Erin guiltily flinched at the mention of the disaster at Vendor Station. She was all too aware of how it had turned out. She didn’t need Dean to remind her.

“Commander Singer does raise a valid point, Captain,” Lorian said. “There is a…large chance…that the Undine will attempt to commit suicide rather than be captured.” Erin noted he hadn’t given her an exact figure this time just as she’d asked.

“We have to try,” Erin said simply. She could have gone into an in depth explanation for her reasoning, about how the fact the Undine infiltrating their realm of space and turning them all against each other in a paranoia inducing bid to conquer the galaxy made no sense what so ever but now was not the time.
“Yes, Captain,” Lorian acceded.

Dean’s shoulders sagged. “Because we don’t have enough problems.” He shook his head at her disbelievingly and then sighed. “Alright.”

Erin blinked in surprise. She’d expected him to argue the point further. It had been his wont lately to second-guess every decision she made. He took a deep breath and returned to his briefing without another word of dissent. And Erin had to look away because she found her eyes a bit moist.

“So, level five should be enough to stun it,” Dean went on. “However, it might take more than one shot to get the job done. All of you will be carrying a hypospray of nanoprobes just in case you somehow get disarmed. But be aware that the hypospray can’t be moderated like the phaser in this instance. It’s a last resort weapon. You hit it with the hypo and it’s dead. And if you’re close enough to tag it with a hypo, it’s close enough to kill you. Don’t get scratched. These are all the nanoprobes we have and they’re not just a weapon against the Undine, they’re also the only cure if it gets its claws into you. Any questions?”

No one spoke up. Dean nodded and passed the briefing back to Nilsa who began reading team assignments off a padd without preamble. Of each of the seven teams, each would be headed by a senior officer from either the Devil’s Trap or the Enterprise. A member of the Devil’s Trap’s hazard team—those elite security officers specifically trained for tackling extreme situations such as this one—would act as their second. The remainder of the five man teams would be rounded out by standard security personnel from both ships, those from the Enterprise were quickly divide up to balance those from the Devil’s Trap. When she was done she growled, “Suit up. Your team leader will get you provisioned. For those of you from the Enterprise leading a team, look to your sub-leaders for provisioning.”

Without further ado the organized chaos of a Starfleet unit in the midst of gearing up over took the armory. Dean tossed Erin a suit of body armor, which she caught out of the air from long habit. “This time don’t let it get its hands on you,” he remarked before he disappeared into one of the tiny but private changing stalls that lined one wall of the armory.

“This time?” said Kirk his brows lifted curiously, holding a set of gold and black body armor given to him by his team second, a short sprightly red head named Ensign Kaitlyn McMillian that didn’t look the least bit imposing though the others assured him looks could be deceiving. But Erin didn’t hear him, she was already on her way to change into her own body armor.

It was Spock who answered him. He too had been given a set of body armor in science blue and black. Kirk found it mildly amusing that they’d been color coordinated to their uniforms but then so had everyone else it seemed. “Captain Winchester has fought an Undine in close combat before.” Kirk almost asked him how he knew that but then reminded himself that Spock had mind melded with her and knew as much about her as she knew herself.

“Is there anything she can’t do?” Kirk asked.

“I did not say she won,” Spock pointed out. Then his first officer left him with that thought as he too went to change. Kirk frowned. What did Spock mean by that? If she hadn’t won, she should be dead. The Klingon security officer had made it clear that an Undine would kill you as soon as look at you.

***
By the time everyone was outfitted they were all growing anxious, the tension of potential battle making them all restless. Kirk observed his body armor fit like a second skin as well as moving like one, causing him no more impediment of movement than an orbital jumpsuit would have, while still, somehow, being hard enough to rap your knuckles on. The fact it self-sealed without any hint of a closing seam had surprised him but he couldn’t see how it was supposed to keep anything from ripping through him like a hot knife through butter to be honest. The utility belt he now wore was an absurdly small silver toned thing that held a tricorder so slim his hand was thicker and a phaser that he delighted in realizing looked much like their own only to discover aesthetics were as far as the similarity went. The compression phaser rifle he’d been given—which he was bemused to realize adhered to the thin strap that ran vertically across his body without the aid of a holster--little Ensign McMillian had had to show him how to sight and set. He felt like he was a plebe back at the Academy.

Across the room Captain Winchester had one leg hiked up on the edge of a table, her rifle propped on her upraised knee as she fixed the holographic sights to her liking. Her expression was grim and she seemed to barely be listening to her first officer who was rattling on animatedly and looked positively thrilled with the prospect of what they were about to do. Of course, Kirk couldn’t help but…admire…the image that Captain Winchester painted in that suit of body armor. It hugged every curve she had with aplomb. Kirk wasn’t sure if he liked Commander Singer or not. Spock certainly didn’t seem to. Jim had known someone for about fifteen minutes who’d had Singer’s kind of enthusiasm for engaging the enemy. The man had acted like an air brained idiot trying to prove his brawn and summarily gotten incinerated by Nero’s plasma drill when he’d refused to pull his chute in time.

Spock said Captain Winchester reminded him of Kirk, but Kirk couldn’t see it. Sure she was as disdainful of authority and regulations as he was but she seemed terribly serious underneath all that competence and ingenuity of hers. Then again, maybe that was more a matter of circumstance. Jim could be deadly serious when he chose to be. Maybe she’d just forgotten how to loosen up. It was understandable from what Spock had told him about the universe she’d come from.

Someone should remind her, Jim thought.

Nearby, Spock, outfitted in the same manner as Kirk was busily speaking with the people on his raid team with the same efficiency and thoroughness he gave every task. The Vulcan’s head tilted as he listened to the shaved headed woman from the Devil’s Trap’s Hazard Team who had been assigned as his second but Kirk noticed he spared a glance over her shoulder at Captain Winchester. It was unreadable but it was without a doubt deeply contemplative.

Of the teams who ended up with mixed crew members other than the sub-leaders, one was under the command of a human fellow with a mop of chestnut hair, who was nearly as tall as the Klingon at his side but looked about as dangerous as Bones with much the same aura about him. Ensign McMillian informed him was named Lieutenant Commander Samuel Campbell, the Devil’s Trap’s Chief of Operations and the ship’s Fourth Officer.

The other team with mixed crew was under the command of Commander Lorian, who was only just emerging from the changing stalls already completely kitted out. He had waited until last to facilitate coordinating the Enterprise crew with their respective teams and to answer any on the spot questions while the others got ready. Frankly, Kirk kept finding it odd to see the Vulcan as just the Chief Science and Second Officer. He behaved like a First Officer and Captain Winchester seemed to refer to him more often than she did the man who was. Or, Kirk thought, maybe you’re projecting because he reminds you so much of Spock.

As if to demonstrate the point when Kirk finally got a good look at Lorian in full gear, he had to do a double take to prove his eyes were not seeing things. If not for Commander Lorian’s blue eyes and
shorter height, anyone would have been forgiven for mistaking him from a distance for Spock. Dressed as everyone was in the same configuration of body armor in their division colors, Spock and Lorian were dressed exactly alike and it only made the resemblance more pronounced. It was uncanny and Kirk was not the only one who noticed it.

Captain Winchester turned away from Commander Singer and blinked looking from one to the other several times with the same expression Kirk was sure he’d just been wearing. Neither Vulcan seemed to notice it or chose to ignore it altogether. The resemblance got worse when Lorian opened his mouth to speak.

“Captain,” he said. “While I am fully aware that this is most likely futile, I am compelled to remind you of Starfleet Regulations Section 12 Paragraph 4.” He said it as though he knew very well what the answer to it would be but had to say it anyway.

“I am duly reminded,” Captain Winchester said.

“Yes, Captain,” Lorian replied mildly and moved over to his team without another word. Kirk snickered to himself. He knew that regulation and never paid it any attention either even though Spock felt the need to remind him of it frequently.

Captain Winchester, satisfied with her rifle’s calibration, flipped it over her shoulder, where it instantly stuck and let her foot slide off the edge of the table with a dull thumb on the carpeted deck plating. She took a long deep breath and ran a hand through her blonde hair. For the briefest moment, she didn’t look like a starship Captain who it seemed could do anything. She looked terribly human and vulnerable and—what struck Kirk most—she looked dead tired. Not physically tired though that was there, everyone was tired after the events of today. It was something in the way her eyes seemed to flicker as though the fire behind them was struggling to keep burning.

Commander Singer nudged her almost playfully with his shoulder wearing an anticipatory grin, either heedless of the momentary break in his Captain’s tough exterior or fully aware and trying to bolster her. Her expression fled, not soothed away by Singer’s cajoling but immediately suppressed as though it had never happened. She favored her First Officer with a half-hearted smile and gave a humorless laugh.

“We were supposed to get shore leave. Instead we got…this.”

Singer made an exaggerated scoffing sound. “It’s been six months. What’s another few weeks, right?” he joked. It was a very weak joke and the look she leveled at him made him snap his mouth shut immediately.

Kirk frowned. Spock had said the Devil’s Trap had been on the front line before getting sucked into their universe. Six months with no relief? During a war? It was a miracle someone hadn’t gone stark raving mad yet. Were they really so desperate for officers in Erin’s universe that they couldn’t be rotated off the front line properly? He might have said something to lighten the mood, made an offer to buy the one who caught the Undine a drink once they got to Starbase 24 but Captain Winchester was right back into command mode without so much as a flutter of her long eyelashes.

“What are we ready?” she said pitching her voice over the low din of hushed team conversation. There was a chorus of affirmatives from all around. Erin nodded. “Move out.”

With that, the hunt was on and no one dared let their focus deviate to contemplate anything but their goal. Whatever Kirk might have contemplated on, would have to wait. The only person who seemed to be in high spirits about it was Commander Singer; even the Klingon looked sober and resigned. Kirk made a decision about Commander Singer in that moment. Jim didn’t like him, he was an idiot
and someone needed to give him a swift kick in the ass.

***

Commander Lorian had much on his mind. Had he been human he might have found himself unable to cope with the multitude of conflicting thoughts that tumbled over each other for attention. But he was not human and though he felt more conflicted than he had since he was a child none among those that followed in his wake would notice.

He had regained some measure of *a'rie'mnu* after the guided meditation with the Captain. A fact he found most intriguing. It had been easier to attain it after the meditation than it had been beforehand and yet….whatever it was that he sought to control, some understood and some not, was still there.

Now he found that emotional control threatened again from many directions and for many reasons, none of which he had the leisure to contemplate at the moment. One of the newest and most paramount of those emotions was worry. For their situation, for his Captain, and concerning the particular personages that had so fortuitously shown up to save the *Devil's Trap* from certain destruction—a factor that Lorian could not accept as the ‘luck’ it appeared to be. *A’tha* at work? Q’s machinations? Or some combination thereof? Could Q be an agent of *a’tha* in this circumstance? Worry, however, was not logical and so he refused to acknowledge it. It was nevertheless there. It would not in any way aid him in his current situation so he did not allow himself to think on it or the million other concerns vying for consideration at the moment.

He could have of course. Vulcans had the particular ability to think many things at once without difficulty, their brains not being divided into the hemispheres common to many humanoid species. But he did not wish to and so he did not.

Instead, he focused on the tedious task of making it from the armory on deck 13 to the junior officer’s quarters on deck 5 which had not been destroyed in the battle with the *Scythe* where is quarry waited.

Because the *Devil’s Trap* was on minimal power and the turbolifts had taken damage, forcing them to be rerouted and in some instances completely inoperative, he and his group of four officers were forced to often make their way by diverting through service tunnels and Jefferies tubes. The frequent obstacles in their path further curtailed their progress as they went, sections of the ship cut off from being traversed by force fields that kept the vacuum of space outside and them inside or blocked by debris. Occasionally they could climb through or over it but that did not occur as often as Lorian would have liked.

As he picked his way over yet another twisted piece of bulk head in the dimness he considered the suspect his team had been selected to apprehend. Most did not give Klingons the credit they deserved, believing they were not capable of clever subversion preferring brute force. Lieutenant Nilsa was a standing example of that error in thinking. Lorian noted with something approaching amused approval that he had been assigned Lieutenant Jonathan Ford, the officer who had been put on report for breach of protocol by Captain Winchester for reporting the *Devil’s Trap’s* repairs at Earth Spacedock to Admiral Quinn before he had reported it to the Chief Engineer or the Captain herself.

It was a sly act on Nilsa’s part. Lorian was physically far more capable of dealing with an Undine and it prevented the Captain from being sent after someone she already suspected of duplicity and might do something she would later regret in a moment of fury.
Commander Singer’s team was assigned to hold the four injured suspects in sickbay for possible capture, while Lieutenant Law’s team searched their quarters for evidence to prove or disprove their identities. They had the largest number to keep under guard or investigate but it was somewhat mitigated by the suspect’s incapacity.

All other teams, the Captain’s included, were singular assignments of one suspect who was quite hale and hearty. Another astute ploy by the Klingon, all teams were divide by their greatest likely hood of success. Lieutenant Commander Talia had trained her well.

Up ahead of his team, Lorian could make out the faint shapes of another team in the dimness. He could tell by the outline of their leader that it was Captain Kirk’s team, cutting across the same way Lorian’s team. But they were not long on the same path as Ensign McMillian indicated they should divert through Jefferies Tube forty seven, which Lorian knew would take them across to the opposite side for the ship. They were pursuing someone on deck 13, in the junior officer’s quarters on the port side. Forced to take a circuitous route that went up and over then down again to get there. Lorian’s heightened hearing caught a muttered complaint from Captain Kirk about rats in mazes before his team disappeared into the tube one by one with him in the lead.

Lorian led his team past where Kirk’s had disappeared and broke through into a clear corridor. With some hopefulness, he tried the nearby turbolift and did not give any indication at his relief when the doors opened without complication. Perhaps the last leg of their trip would be easier. His team however felt no need to disguise their relief as they piled into the lift with loud sighs.

“Deck 5,” Lorian ordered the computer as Crewman Penhall, a very big human male leaned against the turbolift wall muttering, “Thank God. I thought my spine was going to be stuck that way forever.”

As the turbolift started slowly upward Lorian regarded the human with a beleaguered eye. “Extended periods of time in an unnatural position would not result in ‘being stuck that way’ Crewman. A fact I am certain you are aware of considering even human children are required to take basic anatomy classes during their educational years.”

“That’s not what my Mama told me,” Crewman Penhall replied. Lorian’s brow wrinkled.

“I find the fact your mother would disseminate such illogical information as truth most disturbing.”

The other members of the team seemed to find Lorian’s remark amusing for it was obvious they, even the three from the Enterprise crew one of which was an Orion male, were all stifling snickers.

“It was a joke Commander,” Penhall pointed out. Lorian frowned and shook his head.

He understood perfectly well the point of humor, he even understood the humor itself most of the time, nor was he above making a joke on occasion though he would never admit it. He was also well aware from his studies in psychology that humor was useful in humans as a way to relieve stress but how this particular statement was funny, he could not comprehend. There was nothing humorous in telling young minds illogical things.

“I fail to understand how a parent misleading her offspring to believe something that is patently untrue is humorous,” Lorian said frowning further.

That caused all of them to bite their tongues harder in another attempt not to laugh.

“If you keep doing that your face is going to stick that way,” Penhall said. Lorian looked at him incredulously. Had he not just indicated that any such presumption was false? But for whatever
reason that sent the entirety of the team into a sudden burst of laughter. Lorian could only shake his head.

“The complexities of the human sense of humor escapes me,” he admitted as the turbolift, lazily came to a halt and the doors slid open. With approval he noted that Penhall and the others immediately ceased their incomprehensible snickering and became serious again. Disregarding the supposed joke, Lorian led them out into the corridor, which was undamaged but very empty. That came as no surprise. There was not an able-bodied person onboard who was not assigned to some task, whether it was actively helping to repair the ship or to take rest. No one had the time or leisure to do anything else.

With quick efficiency, Lorian and his team unslung their phaser rifles and readied themselves, moving silently down the empty corridor for cabin 5-5-W. It was particularly close to one of the damaged sections on the same deck but had managed to be spared any significant damage. As they reached the door to the cabin, Lorian raised his hand to indicate a halt and pointed Penhall to take up position on one side of the door and the big Orion, Lieutenant Kai from the Enterprise to take the other. The other two members of Lorian’s team Lieutenants Dalager and Chapin took up position behind Lorian in the event that the suspect decided to escape by sheer brute force. It was a distinctive possibility for an Undine.

Then with a few quick taps, Lorian entered a security override into the control panel for the cabin’s door. The door whooshed open to reveal their quarry reclined in a standard issue chair sinking steadily into slumber. Their sudden entrance and the phase rifles subsequently leveled at the man jerked him instantly from his impending somnolence.

“What?” the man, a benign looking fellow of African-Region Earth stock yelped making to jump out of his chair in shock. “Hey!”

Quite calmly and politely Lorian said, “This will be much easier if you do not attempt to resist Lieutenant Ford. Please remain where you are.” He did not comment on the man’s lack of decorum under the circumstances.

Lieutenant Ford, lowered himself back down into the chair and swallowed once very hard. “Commander,” he said his voice unsteady with nervousness. “What’s going on?”

Lorian did not presume either for or against the Lieutenant being their Undine infiltrator. He could not be swayed by neither fear nor the appearance of innocent nervousness. The only thing that would sway Lorian were facts or the lack thereof. “A security sweep is in progress,” he said simply. Then without taking his eyes off the Lieutenant, he called for those behind him. “Lieutenant Kai, please take over my position.”

The Orion moved to do so and Lorian relayed instructions to the others. “Mr. Dalager and Mr. Chapin, watch the door. Mr. Penhall begin searching the sleeping area. I will take this area.”

No one verbally acknowledge Lorian’s orders, they merely followed them. Once the Orion had Lieutenant Ford under his scrutiny, Lorian lowered his rifle but kept it ready as he moved to search the room. The members of the team native to the Devil’s Trap would have to be the ones to conduct the search, only they knew their own technology well enough to know if something were amiss with anything they found. They were looking for whatever device, most likely a modified tricorder or a portable computer unit, that had been used to implement the prefix codes. The Undine would not have been able to use them directly from one of the ship’s consoles. There had to be an exterior source for the prefix commands to come from, any entry done directly would have been detected immediately.
“You're, you’re doing a contraband check now?” Lieutenant Ford squeaked incredulously as Lorian set to work. Lorian could hear Penhall proceeding with his own search in a most indecorous manner, which undoubtedly meant he was not taking care with the occupants’ belongings, lacking any respect for the Lieutenant’s roommate or the Lieutenant himself should he prove to be innocent.

“Mr. Penhall do try to be neat and respectful of other’s property,” Commander Lorian instructed.

“Yes, sir,” came the distance muffled and slightly disgruntled reply but Lorian ceased hearing the ruckus associated with careless pilfering. As Lorian began to go through the room’s desk, shared by both occupants, he answered Lieutenant Ford, who now sat gripping the arms of the chair he was held captive in with tightly curled fingers. “It is not a contraband sweep,” Lorian said without elucidating further.

If Ford was the Undine he would not reveal himself unless pressed, he could not afford to be exposed without a method of escape unless he desired to fight his way out. In which case he would still have no means to escape the ship undetected. The Undine would play it’s assumed part until it stopped being useful to it.

“Then what…” the Lieutenant began to ask. His eyes had become very wide, his nostrils flared with unease, sweat beaded on his forehead. Either Lieutenant Ford was the Undine or he had something to hide. Lorian made a thorough search of the desk and proceeded to the shelving unit where a number of data chips and other forms of media were being kept, none in an organized fashion.

“That is not your concern, Lieutenant,” Lorian intoned without inflection.

“Yes, sir,” the Lieutenant muttered and then piped up again. “Maybe I could help?” he said notes of desperation creeping into his voice. “If I knew what you were looking for… I swear I don’t have anything I’m not supposed to.”

“That has yet to be determined. Please be quiet,” Lorian said. He found nothing of note on the shelving unit so he moved from there to the room’s décor, searching through it for things hidden within.

“But sir!” Lieutenant Ford begged, he had risen half way out of the chair only to freeze in motion as the Orion inched forward minutely with his rifle warningly.

“Do remember that phaser rifle is set on level 5. That is the ‘kill’ setting for most humanoids,” Lorian reminded the Orion, concerned Lieutenant Kai would become over eager and forget that what would stun the Undine would kill anything else. The Orion grunted in response but Lorian’s comment had the unintended side effect of making Lieutenant Ford gawk and then huddle down into his chair as though he could disappear into it to safety. He did not speak again, instead eyeing the Orion fearfully. The man was definitely hiding something Lorian decided. That did not mean he was hiding what they were looking for however.

Lorian flipped a cushion over in the unoccupied chair and checked beneath it. He was about to replace it neatly when Penhall suddenly peered around the frame of the rectangular arch that led to the sleeping area. “Commander, I found something,” he said with a note of acidic disdain in his voice.

Lorian left off and set the cushion down without replacing it, putting priority on what Crewman Penhall had found. Penhall met him half way, a padd clutched in his hand. Perplexed Lorian arched a brow.

“Crewman, a padd would not be sufficiently powerful to be utilized as the prescribed device.”
“I know, sir. It’s not the padd. It’s what’s on it,” Penhall said confusing Lorian further as he handed it over with a dark look at Lieutenant Ford, he gritted his teeth so hard Lorian saw the man’s jaw flex in an attempt to bite his tongue.

Lorian took the padd and glanced it over. His other brow rose to join the first. “I see,” he said, his tone flat and utterly without emotion. Despite that, Lorian was deeply disturbed and not at all happy with what he had been presented with. “Excellent work Mr. Penhall,” he managed to offer in praise to the Crewman then he turned and his blue eyes were hard. He held up the padd.

“This is yours Lieutenant Ford,” he said. It was not a question. The padd was clearly the Lieutenant’s, the entries very obviously signed with his identification codes. The Lieutenant looked stricken and the Orion inched the rifle higher on his shoulder in preparation for any sudden movements.

“I can explain!” the Lieutenant shrilled.

Toneless Lorian replied, “The Captain will be most displeased.”

***

Jim Kirk felt like a stranger in a strange land. It wasn’t that he wasn’t used to the sensation. He spent most of his time being one. But he’d never thought to feel like one on a Starfleet vessel. It wasn’t an unwelcome feeling. The Devil’s Trap was a marvel of design to say the least and it hurt some tiny part of his soul every time he saw the charred and torn bits.

He understood the look Captain Winchester had exhibited when they’d set out from the armory. The pained expression as she ran her gloved finger tips over a bit of twisted bulkhead before disappearing into a Jefferies tube with her team. He sympathized, intimately. To hurt a Captain’s ship was to hurt the Captain. To hurt the Captain’s crew was worse. Captain Winchester had suffered both on a large scale.

Despite the damage, the Devil’s Trap still managed to have a dignified air about it. She wasn’t a lady to let a few gashes and bruises detract from her elegance. If things had been different, he’d have been beside himself with anticipation at exploring every nook and cranny of the Devil’s Trap. As it stood, he just wanted some headroom.

His voice echoed in the confines of the Jefferies tube he was currently crawling through and he had to be quite careful not to bow his back or lift his head or he’d either whack himself in the head or scrape his phaser rifle. The fact that the tube was very dark due to the lack of power available to illuminate them didn’t help.

“How much further?” he asked of Ensign McMillian whose small stature gave her something of an advantage in the narrow space.

“We’re almost there Captain,” she said. “Another fifty meters at the most.”

Somewhere behind him Kirk heard Lieutenant Braxim, the stout Xannon from his own crew and who was having difficulty with the width of the Jefferies tube grunt, “About time.”

Lieutenant Hendorff had the same trouble as big as he was. “Amen.”

“If I ever wondered what a pretzel felt like, now I know,” Crewman Herz complained as well.
They crawled on, and finally Ensign McMillian stopped at an access door, twisting so she was in a curled sitting position that Jim found himself envying not for any reason more than there was no way he could have accomplished it without breaking something. Sometimes being small had its advantages. This access door, unlike the last ten, was in the floor of the tube and not the end, which meant they were going down again. Kirk sighed, at least this would be the last ladder they’d have to use for a while.

The Ensign hit the button to release the doors and popped down the hole like a rabbit to its burrow. Jim considered childishly calling her a showoff but he knew that wasn’t fair. So he followed after her managing to fold himself around into human origami to get onto the top rung of the ladder. His muscles thanked him fervently for allowing them upright movement again and Kirk braced both feet on the outside of the ladder and slid the rest of the way down to land with a soft thud next to Ensign McMillian. She lifted one delicate brow at him in silent observance of his antics and he shrugged grinning. If you couldn’t have a tiny bit of fun doing your job, the job wasn’t worth doing. She grinned in return and he knew she understood him perfectly.

Instead of turning it to his advantage, Jim found himself wondering if Captain Winchester ever grinned like that. Somehow he had the feeling she could but that it was not something she had done in some time. He wondered what she’d look like if she did.

Hendorff and Braxim followed more sedately, unable to thrust their bulks down the tube the way Kirk and McMillian had. Herz had a slightly easier time of it but he still looked as though he never wanted to crawl through another Jefferies tube as long as he lived. When they finally managed to join Kirk and McMillian, the little redhead jerked her head in the direction they would be going saying, “This way.”

Out of habit, Kirk checked the padd he’d been given by the Klingon Nilsa (Now there’s something he wasn’t going to get used to easily. Klingons and Romulans in Starfleet!) Just to be sure and then cross checked the information to the markers on the corridor bulkhead. They were going in the right direction to locate cabin 5-17-C.

“Lock and load,” Kirk instructed, all hint of the more relaxed attitude he’d had on the way up here gone as they moved off down the corridor. There was a time to inject fun into any mission but others required exacting seriousness. This was one. He swung his own phaser rifle off his back and settled it comfortably between arm and thigh ready to lever it up at a moment’s notice. The other’s followed suit and they proceeded down the empty corridor.

That gave Kirk a slightly ominous feeling; an active starship with no one in the halls was just a little creepy. The hairs on the back of his neck bristled and he felt a familiar jolt of adrenaline flow through him in preparation for what might come. There was every possibility that the member of the Devil’s Trap crew they were assigned to apprehend and investigate would prove to perfectly normal or it might turn out to be a huge three-legged monster that could kill you agonizingly with a scratch and then assume your identity. Kirk repressed a shiver. How were these people not completely paranoid at this point?

As they approached their destination, Kirk said in a stage whisper that would not carry beyond the group. “Standard raid formation.” He got a hushed chorus of ‘Aye, sirs’ and then there was nothing to do but do it.

Ensign McMillian flattened herself to the right side of the bulkhead beside the door and Kirk took the left. Braxim being the hardier of the five, took position directly in front of the door, his usually jovial expression stony as he peered down the sight of his phaser rifle. Hendorff and Herz watched the Xannon’s back.
McMillian keyed in the proper security overrides to the door and paused, waiting for Kirk’s go ahead. Kirk took a breath, stilled himself and then nodded. McMillian tapped the holobutton and the door whisked open. Kirk was around and into the room like a shot, rifle on his shoulder and his finger over the trigger, giving the room’s occupant no time to react to their sudden intrusion. Kirk was taking no chances. If it was just a poor hapless Lieutenant, he’d get over the shock. The others were right behind him.

To Kirk’s surprise and immediate wariness, the person in the room was sitting on the short couch facing the door with a book in his hands, completely nonplussed by the invasion. Every fiber of Kirk’s being went on instant red alert.

The man looked up. He was the same phenotype as Kirk was. The quintessential pretty boy with just enough of the ‘rogue’ about him to make him an instant hit with women, right down to the backswept head of dark blonde hair and grey-blue eyes. He idly tossed the book he had been reading aside and held his hands up in the air palms facing forward in the universal display of surrender.

“Don’t shoot. I surrender,” he said and smiled broadly, flashing perfect white teeth.

“Lieutenant James Brody?” Kirk asked slightly disturbed that he shared a given name with this guy as well a ‘look’.

“At the moment,” the man said his smile twisted into a wicked grin.

***

“Let me explain,” Lieutenant Ford implored clutching his chair and his eyes darting around frantically at the security force surrounding him. As soon as Penhall had handed over the padd to Lorian, he’d resumed his former duty. Pointing his phaser threateningly at the Lieutenant.

“I assure you, you will have every opportunity to explain yourself in great detail. To the Captain. Formally,” Commander Lorian said.

“Now wait a minute. I’m under orders from…” the Lieutenant said hastily a bit of confidence coming back into his voice.

“It does not matter to me what orders you allege to be under. The fact of the matter is readily apparent. Whether you are legally justified remains to be seen,” Lorian said. “Lieutenant Jonathan Ford, I am placing you under arrest pursuant to Starfleet Codes and Regulations for suspicion of espionage and probable violation of the chain of command.” He motioned for the dark skinned man to rise. “Please stand and place your hands in front of you to be restrained.” He flicked one hand toward Crewman Penhall to proceed with cuffing their suspect. “The probability that he is human is ninety five point four three,” he assured Penhall who cast him a questioning and wary look before complying. Penhall placed his phaser rifle on his back and retrieved a pair of wrist restraints hooked to his utility belt.

“You can’t tell the Captain. You don’t understand…” the Lieutenant pleaded again.

Lorian did not deign to engage the man in further conversation since it would only give him the opportunity to attempt to manipulate them. However, being Vulcan he did not account for the unpredictable and highly illogical behavior humans under duress were capable of. There was nowhere the man could go to escape, resistance would be useless. But resist he did.

Lieutenant Ford gave Lorian a last desperate look, flicked to the others and suddenly shot out of his chair and made a mad dash for the door. Lieutenant Kai rounded about to shoot them man.
“Hold your fire. You will kill him!” Lorian barked. No one had had time to reduce the level to standard stun. Kai immediately lowered his weapon and Ford used the chance to his advantage, diving past the big Orion and seizing a footstool. He hauled it up into the air and swung it like a chair in an ancient Terran Bull Fight.

Penhall grabbed the legs and wrenched it from the smaller man’s grasp then tossed it aside, while Dalager and Kai got hold of the man’s flailing arms. Chapin dashed to block the door. Lorian simply watched rather placidly. This was a completely pointless endeavor on the part of the Lieutenant. There were moments he could not phantom human behavior.

Ford lashed out with his foot, slamming it down at an angle into Dalager’s knee and pushing him off. Kai grabbed for his now freed arm only to have the man turn into his grip on his other arm and strike him hard across the bridge of the nose with his elbow in an attempt to free himself from his captors. Kai roared angrily but had instinctively let go to clutch his nose, which was most likely broken.

Ford ran, getting two steps before Penhall took Kai’s place, seizing the front of the man’s uniform to wrest him under control but Ford wedged one arm over Penhall’s trying to break his grasp and wrapped his fingers around Penhall’s other wrist, preventing him from succeeding.

Lorian, tired of the ruckus, stepped forward and slipped his hand up over Lieutenant Ford’s shoulder as though to turn the man to face him and bore down. Ford went stiff and then his eyes rolled back and he collapsed without a sound.

“He should be easier to restrain now,” Lorian observed nonchalantly.

***

They’d found the Undine. Of that, Kirk had no doubt and the arrogant, calm way in which it responded to their presence reminded Jim forebodingly of Khan. He deliberated shooting the man, no not man, the Undine where it sat. The Klingon had explained they were less dangerous in whatever form they had chosen to take, bound by many of the same limitations. As long as the thing didn’t shift, it wasn’t that much stronger than they were. It had no claws to kill them with. If it shifted all bets were off and it could shift in an instant.

Apparently, little Ensign McMillian and Kirk’s men had the same instinct. He heard rifles shift as they adjusted their grips. “Hold position,” Kirk reminded them.

“I wondered what was taking her so long to send out a search party. But I suppose all that crawling through Jefferies tubes and skulking around in the dark so you wouldn’t be noticed caused some delay,” the Undine said as though ‘Lieutenant Brody’ had taken no notice of the fact. “But I never thought she’d send the infamous James T. Kirk just for little old me.” “Brody” smiled as though they were having a friendly conversation. “I’m flattered.”

Jim gritted his teeth. This...thing... because he had no idea what it’s actual gender was, had blithely sabotaged this ship and killed fifty two people on board, had probably intended to kill all four hundred and twelve and it made light of it like it was nothing. It was all Kirk could do not to forget what the thing was and proceed to beat the hell out of it with his bare hands.

“You knew we were coming,” Kirk observed bitterly.

‘Brody’ very slowly moved one hand and tapped his temple with his index finger twice before returning it to its placating position. “Surely the lovely Captain told you my species is telepathic. It’s
not like her to leave out details. I knew you were coming for me before you’d even gotten out of the
armory.”

Kirk hid the shock of that revelation. The thing could sense what they were doing that far off? How
in the hell were you supposed to catch one if it didn’t want to be caught?

‘Brody’ again paid him little serious attention, like an adult humoring a child who hadn’t realized it’s
limits yet. He motioned with his chin toward the desk nearby, keeping his hands very still. “What
else you’ll be looking for is over there.”

“And what’s that?” Hendorff spat from somewhere behind Kirk’s left shoulder. ‘Brody’s’ eyes
shifted to peer at the burly security officer.

“The modified tricorder I used to utilize the Devil’s Trap’s prefix code, obviously.”

“Braxim,” Kirk said not taking his eyes off ‘Brody’. He didn’t need to elaborate. The sturdy Xannon
edged over to the desk to check for the device.

“Right drawer,” ‘Brody’ offered helpfully. Braxim cast his Captain a questioning glance before
looking in the indicated place. Sure enough he withdrew a slim, flat tricorder like the one strapped to
Kirk’s utility belt.

“Ensign, that it?” Kirk asked still staring down the unflappable ‘Brody’. It was unnerving to have
someone under your gun who could not have cared less. People were supposed to at least flinch and
look disconcerted. Kirk tried to figure out why ‘Brody’ had so promptly surrendered, why he was
handing them everything they wanted on a silver platter. This was not how anyone had thought it
would go. Kirk had expected fighting or a suicide attempt if he found the Undine… not this. Jim had
a feeling there was some motive other than self-preservation involved.

Ensign McMillian inched over to Braxim, eyes always on ‘Brody’ as well as her phaser. She took
the offered tricorder from the Xannon and examined it, powering it on with a simple tap on the
screen, never lowering the rifle. It made a familiar whirring sound. Apparently, even a hundred and
fifty years in the future and in an alternate universe tricorders still sounded the same. She looked over
the contents briefly, eyes spitting fire the whole time. “This is it,” she confirmed tightly.

Kirk readjusted his grip on his phaser a bit. “I suppose shooting you now would be bad form since
you surrendered and all,” he noted. ‘Brody’ shrugged very lightly in response and smiled. Jim
wanted to knock it off his face.

‘We’re all civilized people here, aren’t we?”

Jim snarled at him, then very formally said through clenched teeth, “On behalf of the fifty two people
you murdered I accept your surrender.” Then he shot the son of a bitch.

Chapter End Notes

Please read and review!
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Captain Winchester had two of her own crewmembers in her phaser rifle’s sights, Ensign Lonnie Henderson—their possible suspect—and her roommate the pale, painted and ridged Rigelian botanist Crewman Bygriia. Ensign Henderson stood very still by her bedside from which she’d been rousted and looked nervous enough to shake herself into individual atoms. Bygriia was equally still but far more collected, quietly swearing by the Infinite Prime Numbers that whatever Henderson had done, she wasn’t a part of it. Then she’d resume muttering the numbers like a holy litany. For her species it was. She was on 1429.

Erin hated this. It made her nauseous and grated on her nerves to harass her own crew like this but she had no choice. This wasn’t like a contraband raid, which Erin had a habit of turning a blind eye to unless it was so blatant she had to do something. She hadn’t expected Bygriia to be in the room when they raided it and that just made it worse. The botanist was under no suspicion, she’d been a member of the crew for over a year and it rankled Erin that she had to treat her crew like hostiles. Erin was angry, tense, sick to her stomach and feeling incredibly disconcerted by this whole thing. Never would she have thought that she’d be in this position.

Behind her, the rest of her team bustled around searching the cabin for anything that might give Henderson away as the Undine who had sabotaged the ship. Ensign Zhytan, a male Andorian, was dutifully picking apart the sleeping quarters while Crewmen Teece and Yunlud-an unjoined Trillmeticulously went over the living area. Lieutenant Hollister watched the door and Erin’s back.

A hiccupping chirp sounded. With a sickening jolt, she realized it was the Enterprise communicator on her belt. Every team leader was carrying one so communication could be conducted without possible monitoring. Some part of her did not want to answer it, didn’t want to know if they’d caught the Undine or not. Didn’t want to know for certain that her ship had been compromised. But starship Captains did not have the luxury of refuge in denial.

Cautiously without taking her eyes off the two women, Erin eased one hand off her rifle and to her utility belt where she plucked free the communicator. She allowed herself one harsh swallow of dreadful anticipation and flicked it open.

“Winchester here,” she said.

“Got him,” resounded Kirk’s voice triumphantly.

The knot in the pit of Erin’s stomach got intensely worse and the anger built like a rapidly oncoming storm but she controlled herself and lowered her weapon. She fought the desire to fire off a laundry list of questions at Kirk.

“Understood,” Erin said.

“Meet you in the brig,” was Kirk’s only reply.

“On my way,” Erin said, repressing the urge to say ‘sir’ as she flipped the device shut, then barked to her team. “That’s enough. They’re clear.”

They promptly complied and gathered around her looking expectant. They’d heard Kirk clearly. Erin let them be expectant and started to address the two poor innocent members of her crew only to be
interrupted by the communicator going off again. Erin flipped it open assuming Kirk had forgotten to say something important.

“Go ahead.”

“Captain.” It was Lorian not Kirk. Erin’s eyebrows wobbled in confusion. “We have also taken into custody one of the other suspects on an unrelated matter. I will explain when you reach the brig. We are carrying the suspect there now.”

“Carrying?”

“Yes, Captain. He resisted. He is unconscious but unharmed and will remain so for at least half an hour.”

“Acknowledged,” Erin said developing a second knot in her stomach. A second person taken into custody? For what? Erin didn’t like this at all. “Winchester out.” Instead of closing the communicator she keyed it for group wide reception. “All teams regroup in the brig. The suspect has been apprehended. Dean bring Cass with you.”

“Aye, sir,” came Dean’s reply. He sounded sullen and slightly disappointed. If the situation were different, she might have found his obvious disgruntlement at having not been the one to catch the Undine amusing but right now all she felt was annoyance at him for not taking the situation seriously. Which was unfair. Dean had always enjoyed a good fight for a proper cause but he’d never taken a situation too lightly. She didn’t wait for the other teams to respond. She shut the communicator and tucked it away.

Then she addressed Ensign Henderson and Crewman Byrgiia finally. Rifle by her side and with a regretful expression she said, “I apologize for the intrusion and I’m sorry for frightening you both. As you heard we had a security breech that had to be contained and were uncertain who had caused it.”

Henderson nodded quickly and Byrgiia did a little half bow in acknowledgment. “Yes, sir,” squeaked Henderson obviously still keyed up. God, an Ensign and her first two missions were something straight from hell. Byrgiia had seen enough to have adjusted to the constant racket of danger the Devil's Trap found itself in but an Ensign fresh out of the Academy, Erin knew all too well how the poor girl felt. She must think Erin a monster.

“Of course, Captain,” Byrgiia far more serene than Henderson, she moved to wrap a comforting arm around the Ensign’s shoulders and draw her closer in a comforting manner.

“Yunlud,” Erin called to the Trill. He stepped around to present himself.

“Sir?”

“Stay and help Ensign Henderson and Crewman Byrgiia to get resettled.” Of those with her Yunlud was the kindest and the most polite. Outside of his position in security, it would have been impossible to tell by his manner that he was quite capable of killing someone in defense of the ship and its crew.

“Aye, sir,” he said and immediately switched from stern security officer to congenial fellow with enough charm to put even a child at ease. He set his phaser rifle aside in a gesture of peace and threw both women a chagrinned smile. Erin motioned with her chin for the others to depart and moved for the door. It was taking a great deal of effort to seem calm when the anger she felt toward the Undine who had sabotaged her ship and caused the deaths of fifty two of her crew was rapidly invading every fiber of her being.
“Captain?” Henderson chirped nervously. Erin turned to look back. The Ensign was wringing her hands and her youthful face was fraught with fear. Erin’s expression softened.

“Yes, Ensign?”

“What are we going to do? The ship, the crew…How are we going to get home?” the Ensign asked. And there it was, the end problem for them all. Even if they repaired the ship, defeated the Scythe and saved the galaxy…how were they supposed to get home?

“With our shield or on it,” Erin said with conviction. “But we will get there. Only Starfleet’s best and brightest get assigned to this ship, Ensign.” She let that sink in for a second. “We’ll find a way.”

Henderson drew in a long breath and nodded with a wan smile of hope. It seemed to be what she needed to hear. Abruptly she stood at attention and saluted, holding the pose. Her voice still quavered but there was a shade of renewed confidence in it. “Yes, sir!” Bygriia hastily followed suit as though she didn’t want to be outshone.

Erin returned the salute and vowed to herself on the spot she would find a way, if she had to walk through Hell to find it. Damn Q. Damn him. Then she nodded smartly, turned on her heel and left, the rest of her team on her heels and her anger building to fever pitch. Lieutenant Henderson was left to gawk after her Captain in surprise while Yunlud and Bygriia could only smile at each other tiredly. They were used to it.

***

When Captain Winchester reached the brig, grim faced, she had worked up a substantial fury. The fact she’d had to return the same way she had left, crawling over shredded bits of her ship and through Jefferies tubes, did nothing to dampen it. If anything, it made it worse. She passed between the two guards—Crewmen Penhall and Redman--pulled from the teams they had been on, without a word, her team minus Yunlud quick on her heels

She met a crowd, packed into the brig were the leaders of all the security teams they had just used, the entirety of the Hazard Team that had been their seconds, as well as four more guards culled from said teams and stationed in front of two of the ten cells, another positioned as the brig officer and Cass. Nilsa had assigned guards who were the strongest of the available pool and needed the least amount of rest. The two Vulcan men, Staanik and Selaak. The Andorian female, Shanel. And a Felinoid Caitan male named M’Reo. Lieutenant Hanson was serving as the brig officer. All of them were still dutifully armed.

The press of bodies prevented Erin from seeing past them to the cells to find out whom the Undine was or whom Lorian had apprehended.

“Senior officers and guards only. Everybody else out,” Erin barked. It was a harsh, sharp order and several people jumped, startled. Erin stopped herself. These people didn’t deserve the brunt of her anger, she amended herself with an effort. “It’s been a long day. Excellent job, all of you. Now go get some rest and something to eat. You’ve more than earned it.” That set them at ease and they filtered out taking the remnants of Erin’s team with them, but Kirk’s crew remained.

He gave them a nod of assent. “Wait outside.” They complied neatly, leaving Erin alone with her senior staff, Kirk, Spock and...Nilsa.

“That means you too Nilsa,” Erin said firmly though she did not bother to see if the Klingon
complied. Cass wasted no time popping out his tricorder and began hovering. Erin ignored him for the moment and addressed the others. “Which one of them is the son of a bitch who sabotaged my ship and killed fifty two of my crew?”

She could clearly see the prisoners now. One—the Lieutenant she’d put on report upon their departure from Space Dock was still unconscious, lain neatly on the cell cot. The other—the Lieutenant who had been so nervous when he came up to the bridge for Erin to sign a supply requisition was not. He sat on the cell’s cot, rubbing at his neck as though recovering from being stunned.

“That one,” Dean indicated his voice as bitter as hers, pointing toward Lieutenant Brody. Erin snarled and Lorian looked vaguely alarmed. Spock, unsurprisingly, did not.

“He surrendered,” Kirk said voice dripping with suspicion. “Didn’t argue. He even confessed...sort of”

“And you still stunned him?” Dean said. Kirk half shrugged in answer.

“Why the hell would he surrender?” Sam put in.

“It is decidedly odd that it chose to do so,” Lorian agreed. “All previous encounters suggest it should have fought or killed itself.”

“The Undine should also have been unconscious for longer than this,” Law added with a worried note.

“Perhaps they have found a way to adapt to a known weapon,” Spock suggested.

“Fifty-seven not fifty-two. We’ve lost five more on the critically injured list,” Cass pointed out solemnly as he waved the hand scanner in the general vicinity of Erin’s head. “There’s not enough room in the morgue, we had to convert one of the store rooms into a stasis chamber. It’s bad.”

“Counselor Vagjrt is going to have his hands full,” Sam said morosely. Kirk regarded them all sympathetically but didn’t intrude.

“Counselor Vagjrt was one of them,” Cass corrected. Erin winced visibly, and then clenched her teeth and her fists, her fingernails biting into her palms painfully.

The tricorder’s rhythmic beeping started to go faster in accordance with its readings of Erin. “Calm down, Erin. Your vitals are going all over the place,” Cass insisted firmly.

“You’re hovering,” Erin snapped which he promptly ignored.

“Oh. I’m sorry,” he said sarcastically. “I was under the impression you were recently the subject of a push-me-pull-you with a pair of transporters. Pardon me while I consider my duties in such an instance.”

Kirk fought a slight grin at the Doctor. Obviously reminded of his own Chief Medical Officer.

“Captain,” Lorian started to intercede in support of the Doctor. Erin silenced him with a glance.

“I’ve already been examined by Doctor McCoy,” she snipped.

“Just the same,” Cass began.

“Not now, Cass!” Erin snapped vehemently. She drew in a breath and forced herself to modulate her
voice. “I’m fine.”

Cass gritted his teeth and frowned deeply. “The hell you are.”

“Have you checked Lieutenant Ford?” Erin asked.

“Yes,” Cass admitted. “He’s fine.”

“Then return to sickbay, Doctor,” Erin said sternly. “I’m sure you’re more needed there.”

“I should examine the Undine. If Law and Spock are right about it adapting…” Cass began to argue with his usual disregard for titles. It got a glance out of Kirk but Spock remained placid as ever. Erin glared at Cass hotly.

“Later.”

Cass hesitated but he reluctantly put away the tricorder. “Yes, sir,” he said tightly and marched out obviously unhappy with her. As a result of watching Cass stalk out of the brig in a doctoral tiff Erin saw that Nilsa hadn’t left either.

“Nilsa, you’re dismissed,” Erin reiterated. She knew damn well the Klingon had heard her.

“Captain with all due respect, I’m the acting Head of Security until Commander Talia is fit for duty. I will not…”

“Dismissed,” Erin seethed enunciating the word by its individual syllables. The Klingon growled her displeasure but she turned to follow Cass.

“Wait,” Erin said having a second thought. Nilsa turned back. She pulled the phaser rifle off her back and the hand phaser off her belt then tossed them both to the Klingon. “Take those with you.” Erin wasn’t sure she trusted herself with them just now. Nilsa caught them deftly out of the air and retreated with a knowing look.

Erin turned back to the gathering. “What about the other one?” she asked of Lorian, jerking her chin in the direction of the unconscious Lieutenant Ford’s cell. Lorian looked hesitant to tell her, then he moved to the brig officers console. Lieutenant Hanson promptly handed over the confiscated materials he had been keeping possession of. Lorian returned with the padd and the tricorder. He gave the padd to her with an almost nervous air.

“It would seem Captain,” he said as Erin tapped on the screen to turn the padd on and review whatever it contained, “that your original suspicions were correct despite all attempts to disprove them. Lieutenant Ford has been compiling a number of reports regarding his observations of the crew to relay to Admiral Quinn. Most notably, you.”

Erin’s grip on the padd increased until her fingertips went white. She could see very well what Ford had been doing. “He’s a spy.”

Dean glared in the direction of Ford’s cell uselessly. Ford was still unconscious. He could not productively extract information from him at the moment.

Sam tensed and snorted in disdain. “SI?” he asked referencing Starfleet Intelligence which was nearly as bad as Section 31 but was officially sanctioned.

“Unknown,” Lorian said. “From the reports it is obvious that Mr. Ford has been reporting directly to Admiral Quinn. If he were Starfleet Intelligence all protocols indicate that he should be reporting to
Admiral Chakotay as his direct superior.”

“Wait, who’s Admiral Quinn?” Kirk interjected.

“The Head of Starfleet in our universe,” Law supplied.

“And the other guy?”

“Head of Starfleet Intelligence.”

“A rogue?” Spock asked speculatively.

“Or a plant,” Sam groused. “There’s no other reason for a Starfleet officer to be operating as a spy on a Starfleet vessel and not be under direct supervision of SI. Looks like Admiral Quinn is recruiting his own personal spies. Because SI and Section 31 aren’t enough. But why?”

“Who the hell knows,” Dean complained shaking his head again and crossing his arms over his chest. “He’s not Section 31. Drake’s a smug bastard but he’s too clever by half. He would never put someone on the ship that sloppy.”

“You people come from a very paranoid universe,” Kirk said looking rather disturbed.

Erin couldn’t have agreed more and that was dangerous. There was no way to know who to trust, who was an Undine in disguise, who had good intentions but was operating under false information or who was the unwitting paw of an infiltrator. She didn’t know if she was angrier at the Undine or Lieutenant Ford. The Undine was understandable if worthy of loathing. He was the enemy, the enemy was expected to do terrible things. But Ford? He’s was supposed to be one of their own and that struck something a blow to something deeply sacred. She thrust the padd into Lorian’s chest and he took it instinctively.

“None of this is getting us anywhere. I’ll deal with Ford later,” Erin seethed. She was so angry now she was shaking and her breath came in staccato bursts through her nostrils. “Right now I want him.” She jerked her head in the direction of the Undine’s cell. The other officers all exchanged glances as Erin stalked by, waving off Lorian’s silent offer of the tricorder to examine. They followed, lagging behind far enough not to be an irritant but close enough they would miss nothing. Lorain paused only long enough to return the tricorder and the padd to Lieutenant Hanson protective custody.

The two guards on the Undine’s cell, Staanik and M’Reo stepped away to allow her access to the cell with stony expressions taking up position again behind the knotted group of senior officers in rear guard.

“Carrreful, Captain,” M’Reo trilled in a feline like purr, “That is a level ten forrce field.”

Erin didn’t reply but she heard him. She only had eyes for the Undine in the guise of Lieutenant Brody. She wanted very badly to reach through the force field and throttle him. She clenched her fist until she thought her nails would draw blood. He peered back at her smugly.

“Captain,” he acknowledged with a little tip of his head.

“YOU sabotaged my ship and killed fifty seven members of my crew. Why?” Erin asked gruffly.

“Such a small word for such a big question,” the Undine said calmly. He shrugged absently. “Why not?” His voice was full of cold arrogant hatred.

“Monster,” Erin hissed.
He rose to his feet and came as near the force field as he dared without coming into contact with it. “I intended to kill all of you. But you have this annoying propensity for surviving impossible situations. However, let’s be honest here. We both know I’m not the one at fault. You are.”

“Whose brain did you pick for the prefix codes? Whose DNA did you copy to use them? Why is your kind infiltrating every major power in the galaxy? We’ve done nothing to you. You’re not a conquering race. Fluidic space has no value to us and normal space has no use to you so why?” Erin bit, ignoring his attempts to goad her.

The Undine merely laughed at her.

“Why!” Erin yelled furiously, ignoring his attempts to goad her. She wanted to hit the Undine so badly she had swung before she realized what she was doing, pulling it in time to uncurl her hand and slam it into the wall next to the cell as hard as she could, instead of the force field that would have vaporized it. The strike echoed in the expanse of the brig and caused several members of the group behind her to jump in surprise. Erin was surprised she had made it this far, if not for the clarity and control Spock had instilled during the mind meld Erin felt sure she would have come unglued by now. She’d completely ceased to think about her mental shields anymore. Though she felt the extra strain maintaining them required of her faculties she did not have to concentrate on their very existence. They were just there, as if they had always been. At least for now. But her emotional control was another matter entirely. What Spock had done would only go so far.

The Undine canted his head. “You had better think about what you did at Vendor Station, Captain. You made an incursion onto an enemy facility. You got five thousand innocent people killed. For nothing. And you call me a monster? Even if you got away without a trace, which we know you didn’t, war is coming. And who is going to lead your pathetic Federation? You?” He snorted and shook his head in contempt. “You had to have the bad taste not to die on Vendor. Did you really think it was a coincidence your ship was sent back into Romulan space on the heels of the massacre you caused? Without official authorization and in league with the Undine known as Admiral Zelle, you went rogue in enemy territory leaving Starfleet no choice but to destroy you. So you see, I’m not the one responsible for the deaths of your precious crew. You are. I was merely taking advantage of an opportunity.”

It wasn’t anything that hadn’t already been considered or said among the senior staff of the Devil’s Trap. It wasn’t anything Erin didn’t believe herself. But she was just mad enough for it to cut her.

“You know,” Kirk broke in, arms crossed over his chest. “I’ve heard almost exactly that same speech from someone else who was willing to go to any extent to start a war. Doesn’t impress me anymore now than it did then.”

“As have I,” Spock said with controlled perplexity. “It would seem there is a greater weight to the temporal factors of this event than I had anticipated.”

“You’re not going to get anything out of the damn thing, Captain,” Sam spat. Dean wisely did not choose that moment to say ‘I told you so’.

Erin gritted her teeth, snarled, “You’re right. We’re done here,” and then spun on her heel, blowing past the others in a spine stiffened fury. They turned to follow her with Lorian falling into step by her side quicker than the others, slightly ahead.

“Your galaxy will be purged. The weak will perish,” the Undine shot from behind them. “And you won’t even be there to watch it happen much less try to stop it.” Erin came to a screeching halt, clenching and unclenching her hands.
“Captain, I believe he will only attempt to manipulate you. I would not recommend engaging the prisoner further,” Lorian advised quietly in her ear.

“Give me a minute,” Erin said tightly. Lorian looked reluctant but he stepped aside. Erin whirled around and stalked back to the cell in a renewed fury. The Undine stood waiting calmly. “Let me explain what’s happening here,” Erin growled. “You are a criminal. You murdered fifty-seven men and women onboard my ship. I should end you. The only reason you are still alive is because I am allowing it. So. Shut. Up.”

Erin was so intent on the Undine she did not notice the controlled but bewildered looks Kirk and Spock were throwing at each other. She had no way of knowing they found this scene all too familiar in the eeriest possible way. She did not have the time or the patience to recall from his memories that Spock had witnessed a conversation very like this before.

“Oh, Captain,” the Undine cooed mockingly. “What are you going to do? Lower the force field and punch me with your puny little human hands over and over until your arms weaken? You clearly want to. So tell me, why did you ‘allow’ me to live?”

“We all make mistakes,” Erin spat viciously.

The Undine smiled and shook his head as though greatly amused. “No. I surrendered because despite your attempts to convince me otherwise you have that unfortunate thing called a conscious. You can’t kill me in cold blood anymore than you could kill one of them,” he said and nodded to the others still behind her, listening.

“It’s like history is repeating itself,” Kirk muttered unnoticed by anyone but his First Officer. Spock very subtly shook his head once for Kirk not to say anything more.

“That’s why you’re so guilt ridden over the deaths of those five thousand Romulans that you’d do just about anything to atone for it.” The Undine’s body seemed to be deforming slightly. “You see,” he went on as his body continued to distort, swelling, growing taller and misshapen until the Undine was so tall it had to fold its changing shape over in order to fit in the cell. It coalesced into its normal shape and for an instant Kirk and Spock got their first look at an Undine in its natural form.

“Damn he’s big,” Kirk breathed as the guards lifted their weapons. Everyone else still armed swung their phaser rifles to bear. Erin had to admit it was the single largest Undine she’d ever seen. It was huge. Hanson at the brig officer’s console was poised to rip a hole in the force field for them to fire through in an instant.

Spock raised both brows. “Interesting.”

Then just as quickly, the Undine began to shrink again, becoming something smaller than it had been but still distinctly humanoid. One very familiar. It had transformed into Erin.

“I know you better than you know yourself,” it said in a flawless imitation of her voice grinning with a malicious viciousness Erin had never and would never possess.

It hit Erin then that this was how the Undine had gained the use of the Devil’s Trap’s prefix codes. When ‘Lieutenant Brody’ had ‘accidently’ bumped into her on the bridge, he’d gained physical access to her DNA. It did not explain whose mind it had plucked the codes out of. She repressed the instinctual outraged fury at being confronted with her clone.

“So that’s,” Sam began to say.

Erin held out a hand to silence him. “Sam,” she said in warning. Lieutenant Commander Campbell
clamped his mouth shut, eyes shooting daggers at the Undine that now wore her face.

“Fascinating,” Lorian said from off to Erin’s right.

“You may look like me. But you don’t know me,” Erin said refusing to let the thing bait her with her own image.

“Oh but I do,” the Undine said. “You see what you and your precious Federation fail to realize is that when we copy you from live DNA, we don’t just copy your genetic code, we copy all of you. Down to every memory engram. I don’t just look like you. I’m not just your genetic twin. I am you.”

“Oh my God,” Dean breathed somewhere behind her. It sounded rather distant and faint as a cold chill washed over Erin. If it had her memories as well as her form, it knew what she was. It knew everything she knew.

There was a palpable revulsion in the air. To be copied body and mind...did that constitute duplicating your soul? It robbed the copied of any shred of individual identity, made the uniqueness so valued by every being as its own meaningless. It was horrible.

“My mission was simple really,” the Undine said. “Gain your DNA and wait. At first I thought that the most recent sample from your onboard medical files would be enough. You’d die on Vendor and I’d have your form but not your memories. Alas, it wasn’t and you lived. But it was only a matter of time before you went back into the fray of war. Only a matter of time before you’d get engaged in a fire fight. Beloved hero of the Federation and all. But if you couldn’t fight, your ship and your crew would be destroyed and it’s brave Captain, would be it’s tragic sole survivor. All I had to do is get a live DNA sample and then I knew everything.”

“Knew what exactly?” Dean asked. The Undine turned and looked at him. It cocked it’s head and considered him with a vicious grin, it’s eyes flicking to look at Erin for an instant.

“That’s right. I—she--we—haven’t told you. Allow me,” it went on. Erin felt stricken with a moment of utter panic.

“Do not,” Lorian said. It was said calmly, blandly, but there was a definite undertone of deadly warning there.

“Your pretty little Captain is a precognitive telepath,” the Undine supplied anyway.

There was a unified intake of sharp breaths and suddenly no one was looking at the Undine anymore. They were looking at Erin. Expressions ranged from mild fascination from the unknowing Vulcans present, to gob smacked surprise from the others. But Dean’s expression beat them all. It was blatant betrayed fury. Despite Lorian’s warnings, regardless of the knowledge of Spock’s memories of a conflicted childhood of persecution for being ‘different’, Erin could not process the look on Dean’s face. She could not fathom his anger.

Dean shook his head at her and opened his mouth to spew some invective. Spock and Lorian started to speak. Kirk threw a startled glance at his First Officer as it sank in that Spock knew already. Erin began to say Dean’s name in concerned query. But none of them ever got the words off their tongues.

In the instant everyone was looking at Erin, the Undine acted. Everyone in the brig suddenly found themselves attacked. It slammed over them in a violent debilitating tidal wave. They collapsed as though they’d been pole axed but they were still all horribly cognizant of what was going on around them. Mentally assaulted and helpless on the deck plates they were unable to fire their weapons or
even move. Most were moaning in agony. Not even the Vulcans were immune.

The Undine stepped out of the cell and through the level 10 force field like it wasn’t there. It reached down and dragged Erin, whose mind felt as though someone where trying to break through to it like a sledgehammer to a wall, up on her feet by one arm. It retained her form but it was far stronger, too strong. The limitations expected of an Undine in humanoid form weren’t there except for the lack of claws.

It pulled her close, body pressed to body and held Erin’s pained gaze with a cold indifference. “We’ve insinuated ourselves into your Federation for decades. We’ve known what you were since the academy. Can you imagine how easy it would be to get rid of the Federation if we knew how it would play out? An invaluable resource,” it hissed.

Through the haze of trying to regain control of her mind, the realization hit Erin. That’s why the false negative on her psi-exams had been ignored.

“We tried to copy you then but your abilities were latent, repressed and so were the copy’s. So we hid it, waited, hoped that the fortunate result of your assignment to the front lines would traumatize you, shake it loose. A calculated risk to be certain since you could have died, almost did, dozens of times over. We kept trying with every DNA sample recorded for the next three years but nothing happened. I was sent as a last ditch effort but even that wasn’t enough. Then the decision was made to get rid of you, we couldn’t let you remain the possession of the enemy. You see, Captain, I’ve copied all of you. I know it’s active now but I can’t access it.”

Erin struggled to speak, adrenaline poured through her veins until she shook all over. Her heart raced and she panted for breath. She got nowhere. She was a puppet in the Undine’s control. This one was far stronger telepathically than the one that had been Admiral Zelle. Terrifyingly strong. It was controlling twelve people at once, four trained Vulcans, without effort.

It laughed as the others writhed on the ground in attempts to act, to do anything and failed. “But along with your memories came your expertise. Thank you for that. You are a hell of a computer scientist under all that command brass, Captain. Did you think I wouldn’t have a contingence plan to deal with your stubborn refusal to die properly? Do you think I let you capture me for no reason? You really should have taken a closer look at that tricorder. Shall I remind you what happens to a starship when the magnetic containment field on their antimatter tanks fails suddenly?”

Horror washed away any effort to free herself from the grasp of the Undine’s telepathic control. That would blow the ship to atoms and take the Enterprise with it. It was tantamount to a warp core breech without the warp core. When the field failed, the antimatter would be exposed to the matter of everything around it, causing a chain reaction that would destroy everything in a one light year radius.

“My species doesn’t require oxygen or even what passes for atmosphere in your space. Yours does. And when this ship and the Enterprise are nothing but space dust, I’ll still be alive. It might take me years floating in vacuum to find another ship but I will and when I do, I’ll use it to get back to what you call fluidic space. And if that Romulan ship hasn’t destroyed your precious Federation by then? Well it will be much easier to destroy them at this point in time than ours. We’ll be able to neutralize the threat in this universe before it ever becomes one.”

The Vulcans had ceased to fight; they lay still on the deck while the others fought it tooth and nail to no avail. Doubtless they had heard every word, knew as well as Erin did that they were about to die. Or maybe it was their Vulcan logic that told them to stop physically fighting and focus on fighting telepathically. Either way Erin couldn’t tell. She was a bit too preoccupied with the Undine trying to crack her mind like an egg.
She knew without having to think about it that no one on board would be able to stop it. Because she knew if she had done what the Undine was implying it had, she would have disconnected the safe guards and the automatic warning system. Locked out all access. By the time anyone picked up the failure, it would be too late and they would be helpless.

“I’d estimate you have about two minutes left,” the Undine confirmed. “But before I go. Let’s see if I can’t figure out how your mind works.”

Then the Undine set about slicing through Erin’s mental shields like a razor blade. Erin screamed.

***

Sulu sat in the command chair on board the Enterprise and stared out at the odd little ship named the Devil’s Trap. Normally, he delighted in these moment. The ones where he was in the chair and entertaining fantasies of being a Captain of his own ship one day. This was not one of those moments.

Kirk had left him with the conn, on guard with the Devil’s Trap’s prefix code and with orders to seize control of the ship at the slightest indication of trouble, while he and Spock were over there helping round up a saboteur. It had been hours. How long did it take to track down one person on a starship? He passed it off as apprehensive nerves and ignored it. Kirk and Spock were the last people he should be worried about. They could take care of themselves. But Sulu was worried. They should have been back by now.

Sulu contemplated contacting them for an update but if he did, it might give them away if they were trying to sneak up on the culprit. He dismissed the idea and suffered the infernal waiting. He suddenly understood why Captain Kirk refused to stay on the ship during away missions and let someone else handle it. The not knowing was worse than anything that could have been waiting. To say nothing of the way Sulu could almost hear the ominous ticking of an ancient chronometer noting the passing of time while the Scythe ran off beyond their reach with intentions of destroying his homeworld.

“What are dey doing over der?” Chekov muttered half to himself from the navigation station and shook his head, saying aloud what Sulu had only contemplated. “Are dey searching every cabin on de ship personally?”

“They’ll be fine,” Uhura insisted from the communication station. Sulu looked back at the sound of her voice and she wasn’t looking at them. She was looking at Spock’s station, someone else in his chair to cover it while he was away.

“Are you trying to convince us or yourself?” Sulu asked. She had more of a stake than most in the return of their commanding officers. Though it was not flouted or even commented on, there were few on the Enterprise who were not aware that she and Spock were an item.

Uhura smiled at his gentle teasing. “Both I think.”

“It’s just a simple search and capture. They aren’t alone, they’ve got security teams to back them up. What could possibly go wrong?” Sulu offered.

“Right,” Chekov agreed. “I’m sure dey are fine. De Keptin is probably attempting to ask dey other Keptin to dinner.”
“I wouldn’t doubt it,” Sulu chuckled. Captain Kirk wasn’t exactly known for being chaste and Captain Winchester was a lovely woman. Why shouldn’t he if she was willing?

“I’d bet credits on it,” Uhura said dryly, some of the tension in the air abating as they teased their Captain without his knowledge.

Sulu hoped they weren’t inviting trouble by the mere suggestion that there wasn’t any. There was an old saying on Earth, ‘Speak of the Devil and he will appear’. He refused to think about the relation between the name of the ship floating on the view screen and the idiom that had flitted through his mind.

Superstitious non-sense but still Sulu didn’t want to tempt fate. He put his hand a little closer to the command console in the armrest of the chair, fingers hovering over the button set to take control of the *Devil’s Trap* at a moment’s notice…just in case.

***

There is a moment, when you know you are going to die that everything becomes crystal clear. Time itself seems to both stop and race by in the blink of an eye. The universe narrows to a sort of tunnel vision where the only thing that exists is you and the thing about to kill you. Erin was experiencing that now. She’d experienced it before many times. She’d always managed to escape death’s grip and pat herself on the back for her ingenuity. This time she didn’t see a way out.

They were all about to die. Everyone on the ship would die. Everyone on the *Enterprise* would die and it mattered not at all that she’d thought herself clever for having given Kirk the *Devil’s Trap’s* prefix code. It would have been a simple matter to stop the containment field on the antimatter tanks with it but it was useless if they didn’t know they needed to use it right now and couldn’t tell anyone. For want of a nail.

Q’s ominous challenge rang in her ears. ‘If you’re as good as they say you are, it should be a piece of cake. If not…well…let’s just say that you’ll be responsible for the destruction of life as you know it in two universes.’

She had failed. Epically. Again. Even if the Undine only succeeded in destroying both ships and never made it back to Fluidic Space, she’d failed.

The Romulans would destroy Earth and move on to other worlds, decimating the Federation until there was nothing left. Even if they only destroyed Earth or failed altogether this galaxy would be irrevocably damaged on a scale that could never be repaired. Kirk and his crew had been too important to her own universe for it to have survived without their timely interventions. Without a Kirk or a Spock in this one, it would surely fall to the same universe ending dangers the *Enterprise* had thwarted time and again for more than a century. They were temporal anchors on which hinged the fate of their universe on many occasions and Erin had guaranteed their destruction by coming here.

In her own universe, the Undine would proceed on, manipulating circumstances until the warring factions destroyed themselves and left a ruined galaxy in its wake. What did the five thousand innocent lives she’d cost on Vendor matter against that kind of desolation? They were merely the first casualties in the string of death Erin had set in motion.

The increasing pain of the Undine’s assault was nearly unbearable and Erin was vaguely aware that she was screaming at the top of her lungs in a cry of excruciating agony.
“You’ve learned to shield,” the Undine snarled at her with her appearance. “That was awfully fast.” It snorted. “No matter. It will just take a little more effort.” The Undine redoubled its efforts and Erin no longer knew anything but a kind of mental pain that blotted out the Undine’s attack on her mind on Vendor the way a broken limb pales in comparison to a scratch. There weren’t words to describe it.

Somehow, in the cloud of unexplainable pain something struck Erin, deep in the recesses of her mind. The ones the Undine had not yet reached, shielded and held in check by the clarity and the calm Spock had imbued during the mind meld.

The Undine hadn’t known she had learned to shield before now. It had her memories but apparently it only had her memories up to the point it had obtained her DNA. It didn’t know they had the ability to subvert the prefix code and stop it if only someone could give the command.

What they needed was time. A distraction. If the Undine’s control of the others could be disrupted for even a moment, they might be able to save themselves. She’d made ‘Admiral Zelle’ scream in pain when it had attacked her on Vendor. She didn’t know how, it had been an act borne of desperation and instinctual self-preservation that she had no way of repeating. But she had done it.

Spock. Spock had told her during the meld that he’d given her the foundations to never again lose herself in another’s mind or they in hers without wanting to. Had that been it? Did that have something to do with what she’d done to the Undine on Vendor?

The Undine probed deeper seeking someway to figure out how to use the precognitive telepathy Erin didn’t even know how to control and was only kept in check by the regimen of Lexorin she was under. Could Erin even access it with the Lexorin in her system? She had nothing to lose by trying and everything if she didn’t. She would not let this happen. She couldn’t. Defeat was not an option. It was written right there on the Devil’s Trap’s dedication plaque. Captain Erin Winchester had never given up without a fight. Not even when it was death’s omnipotent power that held her.

::<No::>

She was not even aware she’d projected the word telepathically until the Undine’s eyes, her eyes, had widened in surprise. They narrowed again in fierce concentration. Its mind torpedoed through her mental shields determined to win, to find the key to using what it had tried to take. Erin let it and dropped all her mental shields at once.

Distantly she was aware she was screaming again. No, not screaming, roaring in unfettered rage. The Undine’s mind colored with triumph and plunged into the deepest corners of her mind, farther than even Spock had been accidently pulled. It touched the center of her mind and the world exploded in a red-hot super nova of pain. Erin ‘grabbed’ the thread of the Undine’s searching, tearing blade of mental violence and held on for all she was worth.

In a purple flare of disbelieving shock, the Undine tried to pull away and found itself held. It tried harder. Erin held on tighter and ‘pushed’ the way she had on Vendor.

She knew the Undine would kill her for it. Erin gave herself up for lost. She didn’t care. She would gladly trade her life to buy the time the others needed.

A second scream added itself to the air. It was her voice, but it wasn’t her.
Sulu had progressed to bouncing one knee in impatience, staring out at the Devil’s Trap floating dead in space and begun to become so agitated with the lack of communication he was tempted to get up and pace. But if he paced he wouldn’t be in the chair with his hand held over the console so he firmly stayed rooted in place.

“Lieutenant Sulu,” echoed 0718 from the secondary science station, his luminous blue eyes glowing at Sulu with mild confusion. “I am detecting a sudden increase in anti-matter/matter energy production on the Devil’s Trap.”

“Dey got der varp core back online already?” Chekov said in impressed surprise.

“It is not coming from the presumed location of the warp core,” 0718 corrected.

“Confirmed,” piped the brunette crewman at Spock’s station, receiving the information only a second behind 0718 who was able to filter the sensor information far faster than any humanoid due to his direct interface with the Enterprise’s computers. “It’s coming from deck twenty-two.”

“What’s on that deck?” Sulu asked.

“Unknown,” the crewman said.

“Vee antimatter storage tanks!” Chekov speculated horrified by the possibility. Sulu developed an instantaneous rock of lead in his stomach. If it wasn’t the warp core and it couldn’t be that far down, the antimatter storage tanks were all it could be.

“They have approximately thirty seconds before the reaction reaches critical mass,” 0718 said.

Sulu was already in the process of punching the button to take control of the Devil’s Trap when Kirk’s voice cut through the air sounding somewhat frantic and harried.

“Sulu now! The prefix code! The containment field on the antimatter tanks!”

There were sounds in the background. Someone was screaming bloody murder and someone else wailing piteously. It sounded like chaos. The whine of phaser fire could be heard. Sulu made himself ignore the sounds of what his mind told him was someone dying horribly.

“On it!” Sulu promised but as the display for control came up on the arm console Sulu felt his throat close with dread. The controls looked mostly familiar, they were very similar to the Enterprise’s but not enough. Sulu didn’t know how to access the right protocols. The command had left his mouth, his hand had hit the intra-ship communication controls, before his brain even registered that it had considered what to do and done it. “Scotty!”

***

Lieutenant Commander Triven was leaned over Lieutenant Sheppard’s shoulder at the science station as he input another set of calculations into the dimly lit console that enabled him to track the Scythe. According to the read out it was traveling at warp 7, a substantial decrease from its capability of warp 9, unsurprisingly toward Romulan Space.

Elsewhere on the ship, repairs were underway on every deck. Had she checked in with the Chief Engineer, Janira had no doubt she’d have gotten a blast of yelled chatter as Mary rattled off a half dozen commands before deigning to answer the bridge, despite the fact she would have already absently hit her combadge to reply. Lieutenant Commander Campbell and Law had absented
themselves to deal with something or other, she didn’t know what. Sam hadn’t bothered to tell her nor had she felt the need to question his orders to take the conn. She believed it was to track down their Undine saboteur unobtrusively though.

Pril, with nothing to do since they were stalled in space, was helping ‘direct traffic’ on the ship as Commander Singer would have put it. Lieutenant Gilbert was busily trying to keep up with the constant influx of queries coming through the intra-ship communications channel having taken over Janira’s station while the Trill was in command. And Lieutenant Atwater, shy and reserved as he was, was gamely switching the tiny power flow the ship had around with an expertise that would have made Sam glow with pride for his protégé. Presumably, Captain Winchester, Commander Singer and Commander Lorian were still over there on the Enterprise, in conference with Captain Kirk.

Janira brushed back a strand of chocolate hair that had escaped the confines of the intricate knot at the nape of her neck, about to give up pestering Lieutenant Sheppard about the Scythe’s trajectory and sit wearily in the command chair again, when Lieutenant Atwater’s head jerked up from its bent position over the Ops Console as though he’d been struck.

“Commander Triven, the containment field on the antimatter tanks is gone!” he cried not bothering to hide his alarm.

“Get them back up!” Janira barked.

Atwater shook his head, complexion white. “We can’t. The prefix codes were used. We’re locked out. The safe guards are offline. The Captain’s authorization codes have been used to lock out all systems from anywhere but deck twenty two and without the prefix code no one down there can get the field back up.”

Every console on the bridge went dark.

“We’ve lossst control of the ssship!” rattled Pril from somewhere.

Janira felt suddenly very ill. That explained whom the Undine had copied. Captain Winchester. They hadn’t stopped the saboteur in time and now there was nothing they could do. Janira could do it but not from here. And there was no way she could get from the bridge to deck twenty two in the thirty seconds it would take for the antimatter to escape, react with the matter around it and destroy them and the Enterprise.

That wouldn’t stop her from trying. Janira turned and bolted for the turbo lift. The door didn’t open, it didn’t even attempt to. She hit the manual control panel. Still nothing happened. The controls were dead. They were trapped and they were all going to die.

TO BE CONTINUED….

Chapter End Notes

Please read and review! Part 2 of 'Worlds Collide' coming soon!
Please read and review!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!