

STU

STAR TREK UNIVERSE

VOLUME I
EDGE OF EXISTANCE

Asteroid Base: Alpha. The last of the four Asteroid Bases following the return of the trans-dimensional beings. For seven years, it was Starfleet's beacon of hope and diplomacy, all the while defending the front line. A port of call for humans and aliens on the edge of Federation space, drifting majestically in the Accobar-Tyrella Asteroid Field.

But now, the station is dark and cold, drifting in uncharted space. Lost.

When a distinct burning smell flew up his nose, Ben's brain put itself off stand by and woke up as a shower of sparks landed not far from his face, horizontal against the hard, cold floor. He flipped his hand out from underneath him and pressed it down on his left ear. All that he could hear were muffled voices and a crackling sound from behind.

Ben rolled over to see a distorted fire raging within the conference room opposite. His view of the event was soon blocked by a pair of legs in dark trousers. As he hearing slowly returned, he recognised his own name calling out from above.

"Ben? Ben! Are you okay?"

"Yeah... at least I think so... what the hell happened?!"

Ben lifted his arm in the air and his hand was grabbed by the man who was responsible for him being aboard Asteroid Base: Alpha in the first place,

"What happened, Ben is... it worked."

Despite the smoke, the sparks, the tremors and the panic around Operations, this man, Doctor Nicolas Rush was smiling. Smiling.

ONE YEAR EARLIER

The quarters of Commander James Robertson were basking in an orange glow, amplified by the thick gaseous substance surrounding AB: Alpha following the arrival of the trans-dimensional beings. If it wasn't for him, it could all be gone by now. It had been a week of surprising revelations for everyone. Not only had they learnt that the original station had been constructed by these beings hundreds of years ago, but they had saved the majority of those who were killed in service to the station as they believed them to be its "caretakers."

One of these people was sitting opposite James, at the elegant dining table. It was his former Commanding Officer, Amber Munro, who respectfully removed herself from Starfleet's service after her return to the land of the living.

"So... what was it like? Being dead." He asked, finishing pouring her glass of champagne and passing it over, avoiding the candlelight at the centre of the tabletop.

"Thank you." She said, acknowledging the glass, "Well, I suppose I was never really dead. It was quite surreal..."

"I bet..."

"It was as though they were showing me everything that was happening... like they wanted to make sure I didn't miss anything."

James stopped reaching for his own drink half way,

"So you... could see everything? I mean everything. Actually... everything?" He asked nervously, an evident tone of concern in his voice. Amber laughed it off.

"Don't worry; I turned my head at all appropriate moments... most of the time" She said with a smirk as she sipped the champagne; James hesitated for a few moments, shook his head and took the drink. When he carefully placed it back down onto the glossy surface, he sighed and took a deep breath.

"Amber I...I've been waiting for two years to say this... I'm sorry."

"What for?" She asked, removing herself of her glass and placing both hands in her lap.

"Letting you go into that room alone... I should have forced you to wait or called for backup closer that you were... something." He directed his vision out of the window, relieving the guilt he suffered for not reaching Sheppard in time aboard the Relativity.

"James... I told you that I would be fine... I didn't wait... I ran into that room so confident that there was only one person responsible for what happened. I am. Not even Sheppard meant to kill me; he was as surprised to see me as I was to see him... that's what made him pull the trigger."

She considered ended it there, but James was still staring at the drifting rocks in front of Pioneer Station.

"You know... Asteroid Base: Alpha is the only functioning asteroid base left...and Starfleet is still on the verge of closing this place down. With Jack and Bree gone... the crew needs a strong leader, right now. Someone who always does the right thing, even if it contradicts his orders. Someone who... someone who cares for everything he does and everyone he works with... preferably someone who has been here since the beginning... someone who..."

"I get where you're going with this." James said, breaking his silence, "I've already turned down the position."

"Then contact Wright and tell him you've changed your mind."

"Why?"

"Because I don't want Nate Janeway to take it from right under your feet. Nate is a good man, a very good man... but he does what Starfleet tells him to as opposed to doing the right thing and trust me, there is a very big difference."

"If they want to close this place down for good... how am I meant to stop them?"

"We know there are secrets hidden in this station's systems now... there might be things that could accelerate the Federation's progress three times over... and even then that might just be touching the surface. I want you to be the one to find everything this station has to offer and then I want you to be the one to show those beaurocratic bastards exactly what they would be missing by decommissioning this amazing place... because you're an amazing man and after seven years of hardship you damn well deserve to take the glory."

James was stunned into silence at Amber's reasons for him needing to take the job of CO. He had forgotten how persuasive she could be. But it wasn't her little speech which changed his mind; it was the reassuring smile she gave him when she had finished it.

"So..." he started, smugly, "An amazing guy, huh?"

"You have your moments... and especially if you say yes."

"Is a candlelit dinner with real champagne in the glow of the Asteroid Field one of those moments?"

"Of course... if you say yes."

"And was the time I leapt to your defence at your trial one of those moments?"

"Most definitely... now just say yes."

"Then yes, I'll show those 'beaurocratic bastards' *exactly* what they would be missing... under one condition."

"What might that be, future Captain James Robertson?"

"You stay on the station this time." He said sternly, laying his hand out on the table.

Amber blinked a few times in quick succession before reaching out and taking his hand.

"Alright... I stay."

"Good... now maybe one day you'll get to see how amazing I can actually be." He flashed his eyebrows, sniggering as he got to his feet to clear the table.

"You wish..." She laughed.

"I do, actually."

PRESENT DAY

Rush carelessly strode across the darkened Ops centre and past Councillor Armstrong, who was being helped onto his feet by his daughter, clutching at his chest.

"Ben... Ben! Come and see this." He shouted over the heads of the injured, signalling the rather large man in his red shirt and blue tracksuit, in his distinctly Scottish accent, "The jump was greater than I ever could have imagined."

"Well correct me if I'm wrong, but we don't have time for the whole exploring the final frontier thing... we need to get back, the Dauntless was in trouble."

"The Dauntless is more than likely to be destroyed, look, Ben... we had to make that jump, right there and right then. But obviously, the overload gave us a bit of a boost... it will take time to charge the station's systems again."

"But what about..."

"*Doctor!*" Shouted another, female voice, "Where the *hell* are we?!" She barked, pointing outside of the large window towards the vibrant blue nebula in the distance, within a void without stars, "That is not Earth, Doctor."

"Yes I am well aware that is not Earth, Miss Wray, however... please remain calm... the situation is well under control. In the meantime you should see to the injured and return to your guest quarters if you..."

"Just who do you think you *are*? I am the only member of the Asteroid Base Project committee in this room, if anyone is going to be telling these people how to react to this situation; it's going to be me."

"Sorry to stop what you've got going here..." Ben interjected, "But if I'm not mistaken, this is still Captain Austin's station... shouldn't he be giving the orders?"

Rush, Wray and Ben all turned to peer around the room, finishing up on Austin, who was slumped under the badly damaged circular display screen.

FIVE MONTHS EARLIER

When Bree awoke facing the large window looking over Sydney Harbour, she felt something was missing. Or more to the point, someone was missing, but there he was, in the reflection of the glass. It was still dark outside and very still, but he was just sitting there, not moving, not talking.

"Jack?" She said, stilling looking at him through the reflection, not turning around, "What are you doing?"

He sighed and swivelled in the chair, looking worse for wear after being disturbed in the night.

"I'm sorry... I didn't mean to wake you."

Bree turned and sat up in the bed at the concern in his voice.

"You didn't... what is it, what's happened?"

"I was still outside... speaking to Camille Wray and James Wright."

"Wray... Wright... here? At this time?"

"That was more or less my first thought as well."

"But... what did they want?"

"They... found something, in the AB: Alpha database."

"Found... what?"

"The real purpose of the station..."

PRESENT DAY

When Jasmine finally opened her eyes, a bright light obscured her vision. If it wasn't for the blurred alert lights around this yellow blob, she would have thought that it was the light at the end of a very long tunnel.

"Am I dead?" She mumbled, while ten Klingons roared inside her head, "If I'm not... my head will kill me. What the hell happened?"

"Well..." Said acting Chief Medical Officer Tamara Johnson, "You blacked out on the top of a flight of stairs, rolled down into a metal railing and hit your head against the floor... you weren't the only one."

'TJ' helped Jasmine lift her head up to see the mass of patients taking up the other biobeds and occupying makeshift mattresses on the ground, being attended to by the skeleton medical staff.

"They activated the drive... didn't they?"

"You tell me, all I saw was a purple flash and the room kind of... wrapped itself around me for a few seconds... that's when these started to arrive and when Lieutenant Commander Lahanas brought you in."

"Mike brought me in?" She scoffed, "I'm surprised he didn't just leave me there... ouch!" She winced as Tamara applied pressure to the back of her skull.

"Sorry... try to stay still. I take it you and the Lieutenant still aren't on the best of terms? Jasmine...?"

Jasmine was staring down the corridor outside of the medical bay as the doors remained open due to another crewman limping his way inside. At the end, reflected in the transparent glass wall panels, was the growing nebula the station was drifting towards.

"TJ... we didn't come out at Earth, did we?" She rhetorically asked as Tamara sighed

"No... that's not what I've been told."

THREE WEEKS EARLIER

Almost four years since the Hobus incident which almost tore it apart, Pioneer Station had become the relaxed hub it once was. Humans and aliens from species across the galaxy living and working together in harmony... even Starfleet had managed to stay out of their way for a while. Well, apart from David O'Neill, who had accepted the offer to remain on board. Accompanying him were Ruby Pallett as head of security and Jasmine Thomas, running the science division of the station – and as such, keeping a relative amount of Starfleet presence on board.

During a small drunken brawl in the Klingon sector, Ruby was inadvertently struck quite violently in her chest, bruising two of her ribs and forced to recover in her shared quarters before returning to duty.

"Urhm, Ruby... why is the replicator offline?" Jasmine asked, frowning at the darkened screens on the wall mounted device.

"Oh... my bad."

"Why? What happened?"

"Well I tried to tweak the..."

"You know I could have guessed you would have started the answer with that." Jasmine laughed, putting the small tray she was holding to one side and joining the out of action officer on the sofa. "Got bored again, huh?"

"Sorta..."

"There is a reason for you being here you know... *recovering*..."

"I know, I know..." Ruby said vaguely, slowly wrapping her arm around Jasmine and moving her closer, despite the slight discomfort it was causing, "We met like this... well, the other way around."

"That damned power manifold. I was a scientist, not an engineer."

"You burnt your arm and knocked out the power to deck six..." Ruby smirked

"...and you were sent along to deal with me because Mike was off the grid..."

Ruby's smirk vanished

"It was quite coincidental, really, wasn't it? How your gear just happened to be in the same storage locker that he was... with *her*."

Jasmine used her left hand to take the one Ruby had placed on her right arm and looked at the now down stricken officer.

"It wasn't all bad, eh, in the end?"

"No, it wasn't. Because... he made me see exactly what I really wanted."

They both smiled warmly at the reminder of their past and replaced those smiles with each other's lips as they engaged in a long kiss. As Jasmine moved closer to her and their bodies began to press together as they breathed, Ruby flinched, causing Jasmine to stop and pull back, remembering her injury.

"Shall I make my second approach at an angle?" She joked, before the doorbell rang out. The pair got to their feet, albeit more cautiously for one than the other and faced the door.

"Come in!" Ruby called, allowing Commander O'Neill to enter.

"Sir!"

"At ease, Lieutenant... ah, good, you're both here."

Ruby and Jasmine looked at each other, loosened up and then looked at David.

"Is... something wrong sir?" Jasmine asked.

"I'm sorry to throw this on you... Chloe would have come down herself but... well... basically; you may need to both pack your bags."

PRESENT DAY

"Help! Somebody, please! Help me, help me!" Called out James Amey from behind the settling rocks, a puff of dust appearing with each of his movements.

"I think you mean, help *us*..." Pointed out his personal security escort, Cameron Holmes, "Now, try not to panic, and help me clear this rubble... it's not too deep."

"Try not to panic? Try not to *panic*? We're in the dark, on an asteroid, we're trapped in this forsaken brig... yes, that's irony for you, and I'm hearing *screaming* in the distance. Yeah, experience tells me that this is a *very* good time to panic!"

"May I point out one of the defining features of this brig... it's sealed. Now we don't know what's happened with the life support and the only exit is blocked... so would you please try not to shout so much?"

"How dare you take that tone with me... do you know who I am."

"Please enlighten me, quietly... while you help me with this."

"*Doctor James Amey*... head... *head* of the Torchwood Institute... ha! Starfleet! Should never have got involved with this... putting *civilians* on the job... look what a good job they did!"

"Doctor..."

"What do you even know about the systems embedded deep in this station?"

"Not much, now..."

"Exactly! Not much... I'd be surprised if you know anything at all."

"Urh... excuse me."

"Now if Torchwood had been called aboard then we would be at Earth's doorstep in one piece, as planned! But oh now, we're in trouble, as usual with Starfleet's intervention on this station and we could be God knows where... if we were at Earth, we would have been rescued by now. No, I take that back, not even God will know where we are with you people involved."

"DOCTOR!" Cam barked, picking up her phaser rifle.

James shut his mouth tight and took a few steps back, towards the rocky wall at the other side of the brig.

".....yes?" He sniffed

"We could be losing air quite fast if the station has lost power... so I would really, really appreciate it if you could just shut up."

"I beg your..."

"If you spend one more minute wasting time because of your ego, as soon as we get out of here I will drag you to the nearest escape pod and point it in the direction of a very lonely moon where the 'Torchwood Institute' can be as self important and as Godlike as they wanna be. Now... *help me move these rocks!*"

James helped her move those rocks.... Without hesitation.

24 HOURS AGO

The man at Ben's door was curiously dressed down for some claiming to be a Starfleet officer, but he decided to overlook this due to the reason that he was at his door.

"Yeah..? Can I help you?"

"Benjamin Emerson?"

"Woah, dude. Only my mom calls me that... Ben is fine."

"Okay, *Ben*. My name is James Robertson."

"So?"

"So... do you recall submitting your solution to the Charlie Code."

"Urh... yeah, of course I do... five months ago. Three months of my life wasted on that thing, you know."

"Not quite."

"What?"

"Well you see... you got it right, and as a result, you've won something of a belated prize."

"Well whatever it is, I'll take the all inclusive long-term stay on Risa instead... as compensation for the wait."

James smiled.

"It's not that sort of a prize... I'll need to ask you to come with me."

"And if I don't want to..?"

"I'll beam you up to my Asteroid Base."

Ben laughed and began to close the door when James tapped his commbadge. Suddenly, Ben was dematerialised out of his apartment in Toronto and after a few moments, rematerialised in the transporter room of Asteroid Base: Alpha, with James Robertson alongside.

Standing next to the woman at the controls was a much larger man than James with a rather humorous name tag claiming that he was Admiral Chet Livingston.

"You were supposed to ask him, Captain, not kidnap the boy." He said sternly with a hint of annoyance.

"Sorry, sir." James replied, "But I didn't have all day and I could see he was going to be stubborn about it... no offence Ben."

"Plenty taken... I see you weren't kidding about the Asteroid Base." Ben said, looking around at the darkened room.

"Nope... Crewman Riley, please run back to Operations and get us underway back to the Accobar system."

"Aye aye, Mr. Robertson, sir"

"Oh and Riley..."

"Yes sir?!"

"Don't call me Mr. Robertson."

"...right."

As the short, blonde haired provisional officer scurried out of the circular transporter room, Ben stepped off of the transporter pad to see what was on the other side of the doors to the sight of sprawling corridors in each direction, layered with rock, reinforced bulkheads and dull blue carpets lining the pathways. Ben almost jumped out of his skin as the admiral slapped a hand on his shoulder.

"Come on then, son, somebody wants to meet you."

"Someone... wants to meet me?"

"Actually, quite a few people."

"Wow that never happens."

PRESENT DAY

Jasmine relinquished her biobed when Jack was brought in, drifting in and out of consciousness. Tamara had told her she could leave, so the logical thing to do was to find out what the hell was going on. But before she could, a loud cry of "Doctor!" erupted from the rear doors into sickbay. Jasmine turned, just out of curiosity, to see who was being brought in and why they demanded more attention than anyone else in the room – including Captain Austin.

She saw why this person required more attention than anyone in the room – including Captain Austin. It felt as though she had been punched in the stomach, twice, when a lifeless Ruby was carried in, her face half smeared with her own blood.

"Doctor... TJ!" Shouted the officer holding her, "I shouldn't have moved her, I know.. but the comms were out and... and there was no-one around.. I had to..." She was clearly distressed and Tamara

quickly positioned another patient on the floor to make room for Ruby. Instead of rushing over to check how she was in a flustered panic, Jasmine took a deep breath and did the best she could to stay out of the medic's way.

Instead, she grabbed the arm of the officer who brought her in as she passed.

"Tell me... what happened?"

Jasmine's grip was shaky at best.

"We detected an overload in the propulsion system... on the second level in Engineering... there was an explosion and... she was thrown into the core casing and down to the first level..."

11 HOURS AGO

"Hello, I'm James Robertson and I'll be telling you everything you need to know about Project Charlie. Four months ago, as of this recording, we learnt that Asteroid Base: Alpha was constructed by a race of trans-dimensional beings capable of manipulating Time in very small ways to make a significant difference. For example, we believe that they began a series of events on Romulus and Remus which after many years led to the Scimitar incident – the mission which would in time lead to the creation of the Cult of Romulus.

Over time, this led to the discovery of Asteroid Base: Alpha and Starfleet's eventual presence here. This drove the Cult of Romulus off their station and made us it's "caretakers." We believe that this was their plan from the beginning. But what we also learnt on the day the three other Asteroid Bases were destroyed was that the original systems embedded in the station by these beings still exist. This is when Project Charlie came to life.

Some of the greatest minds in the Federation, such as Doctor Nicolas Rush, were brought to AB: Alpha to try to access these systems. With the trans-dimensional beings, or "The TDB," now out of our universe for good, we didn't think they would mind... and things we could discovery could be extremely beneficial for all of us. We have already, albeit accidentally, come across some of their systems, such as the propulsion system, so this was a logical place to start.

Doctor Rush unlocked the specifications for a new method of Faster Than Light travel which the station is capable of... which would mean that we could travel to Earth in potentially, at full power, sixty four seconds. So we intend to make that test, but first, we had to unlock this system by cracking a code in place to keep unwanted visitors out. The equation required to crack this encryption was hidden within the Charlie Code. If you are watching this, then you cracked that code and the final preparations are underway to make the jump to FTL. On behalf of me, Starfleet and the research team on the station, thank you."

Ben watched the same recording at least three times, ignoring the several other recordings designed to familiarise him with the station. By then, he was sick of James' beaming smile at the end of each paragraph and had an urge to punch him in the face when he came in to collect him from the conference room adjacent to Operations.

"Ben... you've already met Doctor Rush."

Ben nodded in acknowledgement of the Scottish scientist before being directed towards a Chinese American woman in smart, dark clothes.

"This is Camille Wray... if the station was a city; she would be its administrator."

"...hello." Ben said as she shook his hand,

"So you're the genius who should have been here from the beginning?" She joked, maintaining a professional expression and whirring a pen around in her left hand.

"That's me," Ben laughed nervously, "Just call me math boy."

Nobody replied to his comment and continued to stare at him until James broke the quickly hardening ice.

"Anyway, math boy, this is a very important man... Christopher Armstrong, head of the Asteroid Base Project committee who is here on behalf of the Federation Council."

Ben diverted his gaze from the young woman besides Christopher towards the councillor himself.

"It's good to meet you... sir... Councillor Armstrong." Ben stuttered, waiting for him to introduce the person he was with.

"Likewise," Councillor Armstrong's voice seemed somewhat familiar and comfortable, despite Ben never meeting him before, "and I'd like you to meet my personal assistant, Chloe."

Ben beamed and reached out his hand, which Chloe took with a light grip and shook.

"Pleasure to meet you, Chloe, I'm Ben Emerson."

"Yes I... know who you are." She said, freeing his hand."

"Chloe is also my daughter." The Councillor announced, wiping the smile off Ben's face and making Chloe appear uncomfortable until Livingston broke the silence.

"Well, it's getting late and there's a lot more preparation to do before you intrepid souls make the trip. So Mr. Emerson, Councillor Armstrong, Miss Armstrong... I'd like to invite you to retire to your quarters or grab something to eat. I and Captain Robertson will be aboard the Dauntless. I'm sure you will all get a chance to meet Captain Austin before the trip... he will be overlooking the experiment on Starfleet's behalf. So, thank you all... carry on."

Ben did take up the opportunity to visit his new room, and try his new yet rather uncomfortable bed for a few moments before he was disturbed by the computer alerting him of someone wanting to enter. He didn't know what the protocol was for a Starfleet outpost when someone was at the door, so he proceeded to follow the same protocol he used at his home.

"Come in!" He shouted, still led back on the bed, not caring whether it was a Ferengi salesman or the President of the Federation. But it was neither of those; it was Chloe Armstrong who stepped in, prompting Ben to struggle lifting himself up.

"Ch-ch-Chloe, please... please come in! What, what can I do you for?" He stuttered, as she paced straight through the open archway and into the small bedroom, her long, light auburn locks bouncing against her shoulders.

But she didn't reply, telling Ben what she wanted. Instead, she pushed him onto his back and climbed onto the bed and over the self proclaimed math boy. Ben was stunned, but didn't voice any complaints when she leaned down, arching around his stomach and kissed him, over and over again. It took a few moments, but the realisation of what was happening soon dawned upon Benjamin Emerson.

"This is a dream, isn't it?" He muttered when she pulled back and undid the buttons of her lilac shirt.

"What else would it be?" She replied.

As it turned out, Ben spent a little longer than a few moments testing his new, rather uncomfortable bed. Unfortunately, it didn't feel much longer when Ben's eyes almost burst out of their sockets as his face collided with the floor in conjunction with a loud booming noise all around him.

PRESENT DAY

When external lighting returned, the extent of the damage to the station was evident in front of a completely black backdrop. Each of the external corridors had a missing wall panel or two, which would require an EVA to repair. The rest of the station structure seemed to be mostly in one piece looking out from Operations, but the asteroid itself was another matter. The once perfect circular crater which held the upper structure was now a deformed, steaming mess, tore to shreds by enemy weapons fire.

"Repairs should not take too long, but the external damage won't affect our FTL capability, our shields are still active so we should be good to go once the drive is back to full power." Noted Rush to a worn out Armstrong.

"How long will that take Rush... we have to get home as soon as possible." The councillor asked
"It may not be that simple... the jump pushed us much further that we should have... far passed The Solar System, out of the Alpha Quadrant and... into the abyss."

"So? You said the overload caused that so what does it matter?"

"Actually councillor... there was no overload... not in the FTL Drive at least.

"I don't believe this... first, you make an unauthorised jump."

"Which saved our lives...?"

"...an authorised jump which sends us to God knows where and then you try to cover up the reason why? Please... please enlighten us as to why we're here! Argh!"

Armstrong keeled over for a few seconds, before being supported by his daughter.

"Dad? Dad!"

"I'm okay... I'm okay, Chloe." He said, prompting Doctor Rush to step around from his curved science console and stand in front of the councillor.

"Councillor Armstrong, perhaps if you would just return to your quarters while we try to..."

"No! I want to know... right now! Why are we here?!"

"I honestly don't know... but there is a plausible theory."

"Well?"

"It is very possible that this was the original destination set for the FTL Drive... so when we unlocked it, the station travelled to the last inputted coordinates. By that reasoning, once the drive is recharged, we will simply jump back to Earth. It may take a few hours instead of seconds but..."

"Then how long do you propose it will take?"

"Once more... I do not know."

"Then find out! I want this station back to where it should be! Chloe, come on!"

The Armstrongs quickstepped out of Operations, with Chloe giving Ben a quick glance before she left. Camille had been standing silently with her head in her hands facing the wall, when Armstrong had left; she looked up, turned and placed her hands on her hips letting out a large sigh.

"This is why we need leadership." She said, gesturing towards the doors which the Armstrongs left through, "Without it, everything falls apart."

"Yeah well our "leader" just got carried out on a stretcher." Ben pointed out

"If Captain Austin survives, then that would be wonderful... but that wouldn't solve our problem if we get *stuck* out here."

"That won't happen..." Rush berated, his tone becoming increasingly on edge

"if we do... Captain Austin will have complete jurisdiction over the Starfleet officers on this station... but we're not Starfleet. Yes, we can appoint Councillor Armstrong as our de facto leader but... the civilians... even you Doctor... aren't used to taking orders from a Federation Council member. Lets not forget that he has only just got here...we need someone familiar with the territory who can relate to everyone here."

"...and that would be you?" Ben interjected, taking a few steps back when Wray threw him a sharp look.

"If need me, yes, it would be."

"Well it won't come to that Miss Wray!" Rush hit his console, "Because as soon as we are back in operation... we are going.... home!"

ONE HOUR AGO – ASTEROID BASE: ALPHA

Security Chief Mike Lahanas dragged Ben to his feet as the station continued to suffer from violent quakes.

"Wutsgoinon?" Ben muttered, still suffering from sleep withdrawal after his rude awakening

"We're under attack and I'm under instructions from Doctor Rush to take you to Operations immediately."

"Unerattackfromooh?"

"What?!"

"Under... attack from who?"

"Romulan ships!" Mike shouted above the noise as they crossed the threshold out of Ben's quarters and into one of the stations many close quarters hallways. As they did so, another booming noise emerged from much closer.

"Aww hell." Mike grumbled before he pushed Ben backwards as an officer in front of him was slammed against the rocky wall by an explosion which tore through the side of the wall and covered Ben and Mike in debris, seemingly killing the third officer on impact with the wall.

"Doesn't this station have shields or something?!" Ben shouted, clearly awake now.

"We did... apparently not anymore, come on!" Mike once more shrugged off the small chunks of rubble and pulled a very dusty Emerson up.

The situation in Operations upon their arrival was not much better. The conference room had been sealed off by a forcefield while a cracking sound was audible behind the doors. Small pieces of rock had fallen down onto the now digital circular display screen in front of the new, recently installed semi-circular screen following its destruction at the hands of the station's creators over a year ago, in a chain reaction of explosions which almost took hold of Captain Austin.

But in the here and now, Austin was barking orders in the defence of the station while the Dauntless was holding off the larger ships, visible from the Ops observation window. In the corner, manning the science station, Rush was working away by himself, but called Ben over upon seeing him. Mike let him go to assist the tactical station.

"Ben... I need your help."

"What? Now? Shouldn't we be retreating to some civilian bunker area or something?"

"There's no time, those are Cult of Romulus ships out there."

"Those are the bad guys, right?"

"Yes, Ben, they are the bad guys... and they want this station."

"But why?"

"Because they obviously know what we've discovered! Which means someone told them what we've discovered. Which means there a traitor aboard this station and the only way we can save ourselves against that force out there... is to leave the asteroid field."

"Won't they just follow us...? I mean we can't leave the Dauntless to fend them off while we slowly float away."

Rush sighed and pulled Ben across to view the drop down console while was brought down from a small opening in the ceiling.

"The FTL drive?" Ben asked, recognising the specifications from earlier, "You want to use it to get away."

"This is our only chance... one good shot at our engines and we're back to square one."

Ben was unable to reply as Councillor Armstrong and Chloe marched into Ops behind them, being spotted by a concerned looking Jack.

"Councillor... Miss Armstrong... please, I'd suggest you return to your quarters until the situation is under control."

"Captain Austin... where is our backup?"

"Starfleet is sending a task force, sir... but they won't be in range for some time."

"Then from what I'm seeing, Captain, it's time to board the Dauntless and leave."

"It's too late for that!" Rush interjected.

Armstrong turned and stared down Rush,

"And why would that be?"

"By the time we're all aboard the Dauntless, the ship will already have been destroyed."

"What would you suggest? Because their ships just keep on coming, Doctor."

"The FTL Drive. We're not fully prepped but it can still be activated. We come out at Earth, the Dauntless goes to warp."

At that moment, a green pulse struck the asteroid just under Operations, Armstrong fell to the floor and Jack stumbled forward, reaching out to grab the display screen. Rush maintained his balance and returned to the science console, knowing that Austin wouldn't agree to take the risk. He was right.

"The FTL drive is using too much of our power, Rush!" Austin declared, letting go of the screen, "We need to increase the efficiency of the tactical grid and recharge our shields or there won't be a station left to go to FTL!"

While Austin and Rush continued to argue over fight or flight, Ben cautiously stepped towards the window and looked at the space battle roaring around them. But the Dauntless was no longer performing fly bys to block enemy weapons fire, instead, it seemed to be aiming towards the station and not moving.

"We've got power surges across the station!" Lahanas called out, "Explosions in Engineering, Astrometrics, Sections 8 through 15... major rupture in junction 42!"

"Mike!" Jack shouted, take a team down to all damaged civilian sections, evacuate them and prep the non combat personnel for transport to the Dauntless! We're evacuating the station... more Romulan ships have decloaked and will be here in minuets."

"I don't think that's possible!" Ben called out, realising that the Dauntless wasn't standing still at all,

"Because I think the Dauntless is about to crash right into us!"

The Ops crew turned to look outside, Ben was right. The dauntless was being following by a misty blue trail, one of the nacelles had been damaged and the large galaxy class ship was now on a collision course with the station.

"Confirmed!" The replacement ensign at tactical barked, "Impact in twenty-four seconds!"
"Captain!" Rush shouted aggressively as Camille Wray stumbled into Ops to check on the situation, "It's now or never. We jump, or we all die... along with everybody on that ship."

Jack and Rush were locked in a staring competition for several moments while the captain quickly pondered over the potential outcomes. Right now, they were set to come out at Earth, but anything could have happened during the attack which could cause the station go dramatically off course. But that said, it was better than dying.

"Doctor... do it now!"

Rush's face transformed into a wry smile as he got to work spooling up the FTL drive while Ben watched the Dauntless soar closer and closer to the station, it was almost on top of Operations now. What Ben hadn't seen, was the large chunk of hull plating which was approaching the asteroid at a different angle.

As it hit, the lights across the station flickered, but coincidentally, at that moment, Rush's palm made contact with his console at the Universe seemed to wrap itself around the station and everybody aboard for a few seconds. In a flash, they were gone.

FOURTY MINUTES LATER – STARFLEET OPERATIONS – EARTH

"Amber...?" James asked the distorted transmission on the wall, as busy officers bustled around him in the Starfleet Operations command centre in San Francisco, "What's going on out there, Amber?"
"The Romulan attack has crippled the ship... I took command after the CO and XO were incapacitated in the opening barrage. They came out of nowhere. We were almost sure to be destroyed when we were thrown into a collision course with Asteroid Base: Alpha. How are they?"
"You should know more about their wellbeing that we should...? I take it you repelled the attack."
"No... no we didn't. We've lost the Asteroid Field... James... the only reason we weren't destroyed was because the station made the FTL jump, we all saw it over here."

James looked around at blank faces staring back at him.

"Amber... Asteroid Base: Alpha never made the jump..."
"We weren't seeing things James, they vanished right in front of us, and the drive was active before the jump for a full 20 seconds... enough time to charge it. They didn't come out at Earth?"
"No... and we've had no contact with them via any outpost or ship... how long ago did they jump?"
"Around forty five minutes ago..."
"Well... they certainly went off course, because they didn't come out anywhere near Earth."
"Then where the hell did they go?"

PRESENT – ASTEROID BASE: ALPHA – GALACTIC CROSSING

When Jack was brought around in Sickbay, he was advised not to move. He did. He walked around the medical bay, twice, checking up on all the patients and comforted Jasmine, who was still waiting to hear about a gravely injured Ruby on the other side of the now closed off surgical bay. With no TJ to stop him, Jack left sickbay, feeling quite nauseous, and headed to one of the many open plan

promenades, just down the way from sickbay. The promenades were generally multi-level rectangular areas of the station, adjoining many of the different sections. They were usually bright and warm, thanks to the skylights (or “spacelights” as the crew called them) which let through the light reflected off the Asteroid Field. But this one wasn’t bright anymore. It was dark, and cold, with nothing through the spacelight. No asteroid field, no asteroids, no stars... not even the nearby nebula was in sight anymore. It was just black, empty and pointless, going on forever.

Austin had no intention to return to Sickbay. Instead, he fought his through panicking non-combat personnel towards Operations.

In Sickbay, TJ and two medics work behind Ruby, performing unknown actions on the back of her skull. A tired and tearful Jasmine rests her head against the wall, sat on a backless stool. A bruised and burnt Mike Lahanas walks in, dragging across another seat and sitting with her while another body is covered by a sheet behind them.

In Engineering, the officer who accompanied Ruby has taken the place of Acting Chief Engineer and is directing the repairs to a destroyed set of consoles and damaged core casing. Smoke bellows up from one of the small elevator platforms.

In the Armstrong’s quarters, Chloe sits by her sleeping father, removing her boots and angrily throwing them to one side, waking him. She puts her head in her hands and refuses to allow him to put his arm around her as he sits up.

Meanwhile in Operations, Ben, Wray and Rush all try to get Jack’s attention as the Starfleet captain manually forces open the ready room doors and steps inside, pushing them closed behind him and placing one of the maglocks in the centre, sealing both doors together. He rests his head on the door, besides the maglocks and closes his eyes for a few seconds, not needing to ask Rush about the situation, without any orders to give other than to himself – to return to his wife and child.

Jack opened his eyes when one of the glass panels shattered over the ready room sofa, scattering glass shards across the coffee table. He turned, blinked a few times and focused on something on the rock face behind the now non-existent panel. There appeared to be engravings in the rock, inscriptions... he could tell because they were paler than the rest of the rock face.

Instead of calling for Ben and Rush, Jack tread over the glass, crunching under his boots and leaned forward to get a better view of the writing on the wall. They were names, lots and lots of names. But they were more than that, they were names Jack recognised... some he recognised extremely well, and there was a reason for it.

There were names such as ‘Nicholas Rush, Benjamin Emerson, Chloe Armstrong, Jasmine Thomas, Tamara Johansen, Camille Wray, Hunter Riley’ and right there, in the upper left hand corner, ‘Jack Austin.’ But what was more disturbing, were the names that were crossed out such as ‘Harriet Stoke, Michael Reedley and Jessica Fishwick.’ All of whom Jack passed in Sickbay on his travels. All of whom, were in body bags. One more name was crossed out on that list, but it wasn’t possible: Ruby Pallett.

2

Jack continued to stare at his name inscribed on the wall, questions racing through his mind. How did they get there? Who wrote them? Why was Lieutenant Pallett's name crossed out? How the hell did they get the writing on the wall without removing the glass panel in the first place?

He wasn't alone this time. Similar questions were running through the minds of Nicholas and Ben as they stood besides Jack in awe.

"Well... isn't anyone going to say anything?" Ben asked, "Our names are right here and... you're both being very quiet about it."

"What would you like us to say?" Rush said.

"That it's some kind of joke or... you know who put it here or... one of you decided to play caveman for a day."

"All I want to know is why my name is written down on this thing!" Jack snapped, "I want to know who has had access to this room in the last twenty-four hours because this is just sick and..."

"I'm sure it's nothing to worry about." Rush calmly acknowledged

"Nothing to worry about, Doctor? Your name is inscribed in stone amongst the dead and... it's nothing to worry about?"

"Well more importantly guys..." Ben interrupted, "Why is Ruby Pallett's name crossed out? I thought she was okay?"

Jack sighed,

"Well, she *was*."

She wasn't.

ONE YEAR EARLIER

Jack was catapulted across Ops as the fireball soared from beneath the floor, the force of it shattering the main display screen and disabling all remaining power in the section. Sparks flew upwards from the destroyed components' that it had brought up with it. When Jack hit the wall, his hearing left him and his vision was pulsing. One moment he could see the devastation which was closing in on him, the next, darkness.

But as the ready room doors burst out of their sockets, preceding yet another implosion, something strange happened. The darkness which took over his vision manifested itself in Operations. Jack was hardly in a state to know anything for sure, but this entity of nothingness seemed to be flying in circles around the flames, before seeping back into the rock no sooner than he could blink it away.

Lying there, Jack allowed the smoke to travel up his nose and through his mouth, knowing that the two exits were now nothing more than one way trips. He was set to be the last to be transported out and he would rather die quicker now than slowly later. But as the command centre continued to crumble, Jack remembered that sooner or later, or perhaps even already, his wife would be watching and waiting on the Dauntless for him to be beamed out alive. That was enough to hang on for and make every second count.

Jack rolled over and cleared his lungs before proceeding to crawl towards the windows, the furthest point from the toxic hazards. Either he would be beamed out, or the station would be destroyed first. Fortunately, the former happened first and the latter never got a chance.

PRESENT DAY

When the trio stepped out of the ready room, Camille was quick to jump on them.

"Was there a meeting I don't know about, Captain? I believe I should be included in all discussions regarding our situation."

"There was no meeting, Miss Wray, and right now our only situation is slowing drifting towards that nebula, like a leaf on the wind. After that, full forward into the abyss. There, I hope you've all enjoyed this *discussion* on our *situation*."

"Well that's all well and good, Captain... have you even thought about who will be taking leadership over the non-combat personnel?"

"You know, Camille, I haven't, and I won't be. Because *this* is a Starfleet situation, so all I know for sure right now is that I'm still in charge of this station. If you want to go play follow the leader in your corner of this asteroid, please do so... but go argue about who will be sitting in the not-so-big chair amongst yourselves, huh?"

Jack strode past Camille, leaving her silent, and fuming. Ben threw her a weak smile and Rush just blanked her as the pair set back to work.

"Jasmine Thomas' personal log, day one in the abyss.... Okay Ben, just... just leave the flashlight there. You can go now. Thanks. Okay, *ahem*, still no change with Ruby... I don't think anyone knows if she's going to make it. But we have to hope so... I have to hope so. She's the strong one, not me. I need her, out here, because I don't have anyone else and... I don't want to be alone. She needs to survive."

Rush lifted his hands up off of his console and looked around Operations, it was happening everywhere. Officers stood down from their posts as the familiar LCARS interfaces they were used to begin morphing into strange languages and unrecognisable symbols. The drop down propulsion console shut off and retracted into the ceiling.

"Erm, Doctor... you might wanna see this?"

"Do you speak this language, now... math boy?"

"No... but fortunately this one has **pictures**."

So it did, the rotating image on Ben's workstation appeared to be showing a three-dimensional image of the nebula they were about to enter.

"Interesting." Rush said, "I've seen a few of these symbols before... in the alien database. It would appear that the original systems of this station are coming to the surface... overriding our own computer interface.

"Why now?" Ben asked

"I'm not sure... maybe it has something to do with our proximity to the nebula."

"What? It recognised it?"

"It would appear so."

"How? If the station hasn't been here before... how does it know what a nebula in between galaxies looks like."

"I don't *know* Ben." Rush said, as control over the station was dragged away from his fingertips, "Now go and get Captain Austin. I think it's time for a discussion of the situation."

ONE YEAR EARLIER

"I think we need to talk about the situation." James Robertson said, sitting next to Jack's biobed on Pioneer Station, "We've done a full head count."

"Oh really? Well, can't it wait until I can at least breathe properly?" Jack wheezed.

"I'm afraid not... in the senior staff, we now have the Sharposki brothers and Brian May all still ranking as Chief Medical Officer for AB: Alpha. Ridavi turned up in the cargo hold..."

"Who...?"

"Long story. The original John Sheppard was found on Deck 2 of the Relentless, Amber, as you know, appeared with Quince and as for Roxanne... I can only assume she was sent back to her own universe. So the question of the hour, Captain... is where that leaves you?"

"Don't worry, Commander, I have no intention of..." He paused, coughing a few times, "I have *no* intention... of getting in the way of what you all had going on here. I came to help your search into the history of the station and I've done that. So I'm done."

James didn't know how to respond. On the one hand, he wouldn't mind if Jack was able to stay in command, he was his friend; he respected him after everything they had been through in the last two years. But then, Amber was his friend too, he cared for her, and the last thing he wanted was for her to come back to find that she would be moved across to some other new place after the hectic life she had lived before settling down.

"Are you sure you're done... I mean, once repairs are complete..."

"...James we don't even know if Starfleet will keep the station."

"Oh come on... we might have only touched the surface of hidden secrets... we've already found the engines and now that we've uncovered the alien database..."

"James let's get real here. Starfleet has lost three of four asteroid bases... the death count is through the roof... what are the chances of them spending resources repairing the fourth, crippled one?"

"Because the other three were built by the Federation... *Alpha* wasn't. Come on Jack, sure you don't want to be a part of it? Even if you're not in command... you, Bree and Jenna... we could all discover some amazing things together, huh?"

"Yeah we could... but we won't. James... fight it. Starfleet *will* try to shut the station down, Just as they have done before at the first sign of trouble. But if you want to stay and unlock the secrets of life, the Universe and everything... do it."

PRESENT DAY

"I'm glad you agree." Jack said, stepping out of the conference room after inspecting the damage. His shirt had received a light covering of dust and ash. "Now what's going on, Rush?"

"Ah, captain, you're already here."

"In the flesh, now, *what's going on, Rush?*" Jack repeated with force.

"AB: Alpha's original programming is coming to the foreground... as you can see; we are already losing the interface displays. If it continues, we will lose control of main systems without the hour."

"Can you stop it?"

"I can try... but it's unlikely. But there is one approach we can try."

Ben's head shot upwards

"Urhmm, we've talked about this." He said.

"Not now, Ben." Rush replied, "Captain... if we restart the main systems while we still can, our own computer protocols should take precedence."

"If they don't..." Ben noted to Jack, "Then the alien system will take over entirely, effective immediately."

"Yes thank you Ben." Rush sighed, "Captain... it's our only viable option."

Jack folded his arms, his right hand tapping against the underside of his left arm.

"Like... turning it on and off again?" He spoke in jest, "I don't think that resolution generally applies to asteroid bases."

"That's why you're the captain and I'm the scientist." Rush placed his palms on either side of the science console, "We need to make a choice, right now."

After a few seconds of silence, "Okay, do it. Any ramifications will be on my head. "

Ben groaned as Rush smiled, setting to work on rebooting the main systems of the station while Jack broadcast a message to the rest of the station.

"This is Captain Austin, in a few moments we will be attempting to restart the main computer, please do not be alarmed. Lieutenant Lahanas and his team will be patrolling the non-combat areas of the station throughout the process... you are advised to remain in your quarters for the time being, but should an emergency arise, go and find him... carefully."

Upon finishing his message, Jack looked around Operations at the officers and scientists that now populated it. The only confident face in the room belonged to Rush. Ben and Riley were assisting him, but he could tell that they didn't want to. But it was too late, he had covered Rush's back for him by assigning the blame for any repercussions to himself, knowing that Wray and Armstrong were watching over his every move. Of course, Jack had trusted a mad scientist before... which led to half of the quadrant being sent unconscious for two minutes.

Without any prior warning from Rush, a high pitched whirling sound shut off somewhere far away and the station went dark.

ONE YEAR EARLIER

"Somewhere warm, with a vibrant blue sky and a view of the sea. Friendly locals, interesting wildlife...maybe a jungle nearby for Jenna to explore." Jack made a distinct *mmm* sound as he finished describing his next ideal assignment, "Of course failing that a starship would be nice... no asteroid belt patrols, though... and not the Dauntless."

Wright smiled and shook his head, tapping away at his computer tablet. For a moment, Jack thought the admiral was actually considering it – especially after all he had been through in two short years.

"You know, Jack... people usually want to return to Asteroid Base: Alpha after some time aboard. It usually shocks them that they feel that way, but they always long to return."

"Well allow me to break tradition by saying, 'Oh, not me.' *Not me, indeed... I never want to step foot on that rock again.*

"May I ask why?"

"Well... I've traversed up mountains through blizzards, had metal pipes thrown at my head, I've dangled off bridges over rupturing magma chambers, witnessed the quadrant almost fall to pieces after failing to stop everybody's favourite scientist... I've been shot, stabbed, thrown across Operations by three separate explosions minutes apart and fought off and reasoned with beings that make Vulcans look almost cooperative and outgoing." He paused for air, "Besides, Captain Munro is fine and well and she and James did fine without me the first time."

"I see your point..." Wright mumbled, just loud enough for Jack to catch, "Well, there is one assignment that you may want to consider... although you won't like the name of the class that has been assigned to it." The admiral extended his arm and held out the PADD for Jack to take, which he did.

"The USS Troy..." Jack read off the display, "**Dauntless** class?! Typical." He laughed.

"Not quite a replica of the fictitious Dauntless class encountered by the *Voyager* in the Delta Quadrant... but it's getting there."

Jack made a noise which could only be described as an excitable grunt as he watched a 3D image of the sleek ship on the screen.

"Please tell me it has a slipstream drive."

"Almost... the system is in place but it isn't ready for use, yet. But, it does speeds exceeding warp 9.9 as smoothly as our Intrepid classes run at warp 7. It may be lacking the sea view, the jungle and the friendly locals but..."

"...I'll take it."

"I thought you might. But Jack, there's one thing you should know. The Troy already has its crew... Bree wouldn't be able to join you."

"Man... she would love this. But, but I don't know I mean... we've been on the assignment ever since we got married. Not always ideal but... it's been good like that, you know."

"I wish I could help you, Jack, but I can only offer you the place, not interfere with the crew compliment."

Jack bit his lower lip, looking at the marvellous ship before him. But the image in his mind of pushing through the unknown morphed into his wife and child. But, there was always going to come a time when they would be apart.

"I'll talk to her about this first... if she needs me nearby for anything, then you offer this to someone else. But someone decent... not just some Captain Kirk wannabe, racing around, sexing up the whole galaxy."

"You got it."

PRESENT DAY

Jasmine was still sat waiting in the only place on the station with an isolated computer and power management system, Sickbay. Still waiting to hear news from behind the curtain, still waiting to see if Ruby was alright. She had been called to her post not so long ago, but refused to move. Even Tamara had stepped out for some air at one point, advising her to get some rest or simply move to another environment. But no, she had to be stubborn, regardless of what was happening outside of these walls.

But she was alone now, with only the other silent patients with her. Mike had gone, called off to one of the civilian sections of the station, minutes before the lights started dropping out in the corridors outside. Even the sickbay systems had flickered for a moment or two, before the secondary systems kicked in.

Twice her chain of thought had been interrupted by a young medic, offering her a drink of water. Both times declined. But the third time was different, because this time her chain of thought was interrupted by the station shaking. But those in Operations knew just about as much as she did.

"Report!" Jack called out through the dark.

"The computer is down, remember!" Ben didn't hesitate to should back, "I mean... if we had just waited then we might know what it was!"

"Yes, thank you for reminding me... Rush... did you expect that to happen?"

Even without seeing him properly, Jack knew that Rush would have his disgruntled face on, the one he uses when talking to incompetent fools who aren't on the same plane of knowledge as himself.

"No Captain, I did not. Turning off the main computer should not shake the station. However... that may have something to do with it... outside." He added, realising that his pointing action was going unnoticed.

Jack looked out through what he believed to be the observation windows. Out there, the blue nebula was creeping up over the crater. The underside the asteroid had drifted into it, and now the rest of the station was also dropping into it.

"Rush we don't know what this nebula could do to the station! Get the computer back online, now."

"I'd rather wait a few more minutes before we attempt to..."

"Damn it Rush! Now!"

"Very well. Seeing as you're responsible for the consequences."

But it was already too late. As they were talking, the station had been overcome by the gaseous anomaly and a flash of silver above them indicated that it was indeed the nebula which had affected the station moments ago.

"We must have been struck by some kind of electrical discharge." Riley said, "I can't get you any damage reports until the data link is restored."

"Understood... progress?"

Another sigh emerged from the dark. Rush, again.

"Ready to spool up the core."

"Do it."

"Finally." Ben added.

It took a few moments of silence, but that distant whirling sound eventually took back its place in the airwaves.

TEN MONTHS EARLIER

It was like a dream. Fresh, eager and happy faces everywhere. Being in command of the *Troy* was like taking the starring role in an Old Earth sitcom. But everything seemed so perfect, the rooms, the beds, the food, even the air seemed cleaner than any other ship. More importantly, it was bright. Large, white light panels were everywhere on this ship, lighting up every inch of the vessel and keeping the crew active and very much awake.

It was sleek and wonderful and even the crew seemed perfect. Jack almost felt like he didn't fit in just because he wasn't smiling constantly. But it was true. The men were all ready for action with their shiny, neatly groomed hair and heroic complexions, while the women were all cheerful and refreshing but they were also a damned intelligent bunch. Starfleet Academy training had apparently moved on quite a lot since Jack was sat behind a desk.

Even just sitting or eating in the messhall felt like a magnificent event. It was a large triangular room in the centre of the deck. It seemed like an odd design at first but somehow it just seemed to fit the ship perfectly... something *else* on the perfect list.

He had been aboard now for six weeks, and things were going smoothly. Too smoothly. Of course, there was a rather big reason for that... the ship hadn't left space dock yet. When Admiral Wright mentioned that the Slipstream drive wasn't running yet, Jack hadn't known he meant that the ship wouldn't be going anywhere until it is. But it was still *perfect*. He could still see his family regularly and it gave it a great opportunity to bond with his new crew, and bonded he had. Ensign Bryan was now his sparring partner on the holodeck, while Lieutenant Valen was in the process of teaching him to meditate with a completely clear mind.

Jack had also developed a great working relationship with his second in command, Ashleigh Hayes, who in his mind had more right to command the ship than he did. She had the experience, her decision making skills were sharp and quick and she had been aboard much longer than Jack had, making her more familiar with the ship and its systems. He felt intrusive at first, but she didn't seem to mind in the slightest, which really helped. She was also a comfort for his personal problem and Ashleigh was in the same boat he was – except she had *two* children waiting for her back home.

"You okay?" She asked, looking up from her plate, cutting up a cross section of a stack of syrup covered pancakes, "You seem distracted."

Jack's brain took a few moments to process what was being said to him. He shifted his gaze from the immense space dock out of the large, wall filling window, to his own plate of food and then to Commander Hayes.

"Sorry! I was on the other side of the galaxy for a second, there."

"Yeah I noticed... so what's up?"

"Why would something be up?" Jack smirked

"Because you're always the first one to finish in record time... but this morning, you haven't touched a single thing."

"Good point well made." He replied, looking down at his own delicious looking stack, "I just... think I'm bored."

"Bored?" Ashleigh's eyebrows flashed upwards, "Aren't you the one who would talk to me at length about how hectic your previous assignment was? Now you're bored after a few weeks?" She started to laugh, taking a bite with the newly cut pieces.

"Just got used to it all I guess... the fighting, the malfunctions... ancient secrets." *James was right... I should have stayed.* "I do wonder just where I would have ended up if I had stayed on board."

PRESENT DAY

The Ops staff were able to see each other again as the station flickered back into life, but no-one liked what they saw. Including Rush. As the station was struck by another electrical discharge, the alien displays which now surrounded the crew faded slightly but soon returned to full strength.

"I told you." Ben quipped. Jack looked over to Rush for confirmation of his fears and got a small nod in reply.

"That's it." Rush spoke, "We have access to some of the most basic systems... lighting... restricted life support control, shuttlebay doors... we haven't even got the replicators, so I hoped you all packed as much as possible in your cases."

"Riley..." Jack said, "Send out a message, and gather all the research teams and Starfleet personnel in the messhall. Time to put the cat out of the bag."

While the crew began to pour into the new design messhall, approximately six times larger than the original, Jasmine was finally about to receive some news on Ruby's wellbeing as TJ emerged from behind the curtain, looking worse for wear.

"How is she... tell me she isn't..."

"She isn't. It's okay... she's stable, for now, but we almost lost her."

"What does that mean?"

"It means her injuries were major and may have lasting damage."

"W-w-what kind of 'lasting damage?'"

"I'm fairly confident that she will wake up... but when she does, she might not be the Ruby Pallett that you know."

Tamara tried to give Jasmine a reassuring look as she walked past, but couldn't. She watched for a few moments as the medics cleared out, allowing Jasmine to sit by Ruby's side, before receiving an update on the other patients and then heading out to the mess, where it was becoming quite a squeeze, even for the new larger accommodation.

Tamara whispered into her commbadge at one end of the room while Jack responded at the other.

"Captain... I need to speak to you about Ruby once you're done here."

"Understood, ready room... this won't take long." Once the channel was closed, he clambered onto the small line up of sturdy tables, his back facing the windows. Rush joined him at his side, "Can I have your attention please!?"

The loud muttering which had filled the room fell silent and all heads turned to face Jack. It was the first time he had seen so many people gathered together since the incident – and they all looked like hell.

"As of 1700 hours today, we have lost control of Asteroid Base: Alpha's systems." This caused a bit of a stir, causing Mike to pipe up in the centre of the room with a loud "Stay calm!"

"Thank you Lieutenant. Doctor Rush is attempting to regain control of vital systems but in the meantime we are enforcing rationing procedures of current food and water supplies as we have no quick way of making more of either with the replicators locked out. As it stands, we can stay alive out here... for a time. But I promise you all, we *are* going to survive, we *are* going to make it home."

"How?" A voice from Jack's audience called out, resulting in vocal agreements to the question from others.

"We have broken the code to accessing the FTL drive before... all we need to do is do it again. With Ben's help, we're already most of the way there... then we simply set a course and go home. We have a lot of work to do so... let's get to it."

It could have turned to uproar, but instead, the crowd dispersed into small groups, discussing their situation. Rush and Jack remained together, and Rush seemed quite disconcerted about something.

"Captain... I believe you just lied to these people."

"Oh really?"

"You know as well as I do that cracking the master code for the main systems could takes five times as long as simply accessing the FTL drive... it could take years."

"I know... but I didn't say it wouldn't take years. I said we are going survive and we are going to make it home. No matter how long it takes, that *will* happen. But surviving isn't all about food and water... these people need hope because they are the wrong people for this. Sure my officers are prepared to see this through, ready for any eventuality, but we have a majority civilian population on board... including V.I.P.s who were only here to see us off... not join us for the trip."

"Well then, I suppose I better get back to it."

Jack watched curiously, his eyes following Rush from the moment he jumped off the table to his jacket disappearing through the doors.

"TJ..." he mumbled, remembering to meet her in the ready room.

"Okay? Ready to go, Ben? Alright. Hunter Riley, 34 years of age. I just wanted to say... I shouldn't even be here; I only came as a favour to Commander O'Neill and Chloe... Harper, not Armstrong. This kind of mission of discovery wasn't exactly what I had in mind. If it can be helped... I'd rather not die out here."

"I would offer you something to drink," Jack said, offering TJ a chair in the ready room and keeping her attention away from the sheet over part of the wall, "But, you know..."

"It's fine." She spoke quietly and softly, "Sir, its Ruby."

"Is she okay?" Jack closed the lid on his broken computer and sat up sternly in his chair on the other side of the desk.

"That's just the thing. I don't actually know." She shifted in her seat and took a deep breath, still looking worse for wear from the long procedure, "I lost her sir... she was dead. Gone. Past the point of no return for at least two minutes." She bit her lower lip and looked towards the floor, shaking her head.

"But you said..."

"I know... I said she's okay, and she is... she's alive and stable. She could very much make a recovery but on the other hand she could have suffered extensive brain damage, but that isn't the point. I couldn't do anything, none of us could. People have died and come back to life on this station before but we don't have our trans-dimensional friends to save us this time. Dead is dead, you don't get to come back from that."

"...what are you saying, Lieutenant."

"I'm saying that the fact that Ruby Pallett is alive and could one day be walking around this station again... it scares the hell out of me."

Jack swallowed hard and slowly turned his head towards the beige sheet resting over the rock inscriptions. Maybe, just maybe, he had found out the reason why Ruby's name had been crossed out. She *was* dead.

The few hours which followed Jack's speech saw the asteroid drift deeper into the nebula as Rush continued to work on cracking the master systems code, fighting off offers of assistance from Ben, Riley and pretty much most of the research team. Jack had tried to force him to accept help, but he

was simply too stubborn. But whether or not Rush broke the master code with or without the help of others was not Jack's primary concern.

Squabbles amongst the non-combat team over distribution of rations had already led to violence on more than one occasion and Starfleet security's attempts at defusing heated situations had led to more pressure on Jack to allow the creation of a civilian authority. To lead the authority, there were only two potential leaders and Jack didn't know which one was the better side. Wray or Armstrong.

Armstrong's council backing meant nothing out here. There was no council, no federation and Armstrong lacked something Wray had. Experience. Wray had been on the station for months as the go-to person for the research team and all remaining civilian families before they departed the station for the last time – collecting what belongings remained intact after the incident. But then, Wray would challenge his every move whereas Armstrong had supported Starfleet's operations.

It was not an easy decision to make as it would affect the majority of the station's population. So against his better judgement, Jack chose to let the people decide. It would be put to a poll.

SIX MONTHS EARLIER

Now, now we're getting somewhere. Jack squeezed the arms of the command chair as the quantum drive could be heard spooling up across the ship. *Three months of sitting and waiting... it's about time.* The circular bridge rocked slightly as the slipstream engines powered up for the first time. Ready lights were flickering on across the consoles which lined the edges of the room.

In contrast, Ashleigh was being as fiddly as she could in her seat, fingers tapping the end of the arms and feet shuffling on the deck, but all while wearing an excited and contagious grin. The whole crew were elated at the prospect of finally putting the ship to good use.

"Here we go Cap'n... time to make the history books!"

"Let's not celebrate yet." Jack laughed, "anything could still..."

The rest was blurred into a muffled cry as the ship lurched forward. As Jack and Ashleigh were catapulted out of the command chairs, officers behind them were pushed onto their backs into the railings while the helmsman was slammed headfirst into his console. The engine sounds became incredibly distorted in conjunction with the multitude of alarms now sounding across the ship. It sounded as though the ship was tearing in two.

"Commander! Are you okay!?" Jack shouted, ignoring the thumping pain in the side of his head, lifting himself off the ground.

"What the hell happened?!"

"I don't know.." Jack turned to face the viewscreen calling out "Report!" But nobody responded. He was about to ask again but the spacedock was brought into view at an alarming angle."

"Oh my God..." Ashleigh muttered, "Bridge to Engineering... shut down the drive, *now...* Engineering?!"

Further clunking sounds erupted from the bowels of the ship and it was clear that the *Troy* was not slowing as it soared toward spacedock. Jack called out to the helm but the officer in question was slumped over the console, a trickle of blood sliding down the side of his face. With no way to call for a medic with the comms seemingly cut, Jack gently pulled the officer aside and attempted to take control of the ship.

The second he tried to enter the command to alter the ship's course, the bridge crew were thrown off their feet and blinded. The next few moments could be heard, felt, but not seen as the ship continued to roar and shake.

PRESENT DAY

"Tamara Johansen... acting Chief Medical Officer... three days ago I could have left this place and have been home by now. But... I didn't, because the Captain convinced me to stay for a while longer. To think that I could have missed *all* of this."

"To think..."

"Ben."

"Sorry."

"I can't believe you're being serious... stop coming to me with problems Rush, I want answers." Jack poured a small container of water and took a small sip of it before Rush started again.

"We have to think about long term survival on this station."

"It's been hours, Doctor... hours. Don't tell me you're giving up already."

"Of course not! But you know as well as I do that cracking this code is going to be tough and a very, very long process."

"Especially when you try to do it yourself." Jack sniped.

"That's not the point... we have to assume that this station knows where it's going."

"What do you mean... you said that once the drive recharges, we only have to gain access to navigation and turn around... where else would it be going?"

"The creators of this outpost must have set these coordinates for a reason, but maybe this is only the first leg of the journey."

"Why don't I like the sound of this?"

"What if... what if! What if the TDB were planning to leave the Accobar system before being stumbled upon by the Romulans? What if they were planning to leave for a new world somewhere... somewhere that could support life for millennia to come."

"What if they did, Rush? Why would we care if that is where this station is going? I don't intend to spend the rest of my life hoping that this heap of rock will take me to a new, brilliant home. Because I've already got one waiting for me back at *my* home. *Our* home..."

"This could be a once in a lifetime opportunity, Captain."

"Yes... and one that would most likely take an entire lifetime to accomplish. You are going to crack that code, you are going to access the main systems and you are going to turn this station around and get these people home. Maybe one day... one day... Starfleet will send a qualified long term, extremely deep space assignment out to wherever the TDB programmed the station to go. Then, you may get a chance to see your new world out there. Until then, get us home Rush."

The pair prolonged their stares at each other before Rush hesitantly turned on himself and stepped out of the ready room as Jack slowly shook his head.

"That man is going to be a lot of work." The captain mumbled to himself.

PRESENT DAY

EARTH – STARFLEET OPERATIONS MEETING ROOM 2

James intentionally sat next to Bree, putting a comforting hand on her right shoulder as Livingston informed them that Asteroid Base: Alpha had still failed to turn up in Federation space.

“As bad as it may sound.” James started, quietly, “Are we sure the Romulans aren’t boasting about the capture of a former outpost?”

“The Romulans don’t have anything to boast about these days, Captain.” The Admiral spoke gruffly, “Our asteroid is hardly a victory to them now that they had their planet taken from them. Besides, *only* the Cult of the Romulus would have enough fully functioning ships left to take on AB: Alpha and that’s only because they hid away after Sel’tar’s defeat.”

“On that note... we know there’s a man on the inside... a Cult infiltrator.”

“It’s the only explanation for their almost perfect timing and breach of the defence grid in the asteroid field.”

Bree groaned and rested a finger and thumb from her hand on the side of her head.

“Then we have to warn them...” she said,

“How?” Livingston asked,

“Somehow...”

“They could be half way across the universe...”

“Speaking realistically..

“We have no idea where the drive took them!”

James took the moment to clear his throat. Chet and Bree turned to him.

“That’s a matter of opinion that’s currently open to debate amongst the survi.. remaining research team members.”

“Captain? Do you know something we don’t?” Livingston asked, followed by Bree,

“James, do you know where they went?”

Captain Robertson sighed and got out of his chair in order to access the computer display at the front of the perfectly rectangular meeting room.

“Doctor Rush found something in the database... quite prominent... easy to find... that sort of thing.”

“What was it?” Bree inquired eagerly.

“A set of coordinates. Well, multiple set of coordinates that seem to indicate a clear route across space.”

The admiral joined him at the display.

“Do you think that *this* is where the station went?”

“It’s possible... but we set the destination. It’s possible that these coordinates were set first, meaning that they took priority.”

“Then what are we waiting for?!” Bree also got to her feet, “If we know where they could have gone, then let’s follow them!”

James looked towards the ground and then into Bree’s eyes as Livingston sighed deeply, apparently realising what James already knew.

"These coordinates, Bree... extend outside of the milky way... millions of light-years... possibly further."

SIX MONTHS EARLIER

EARTH – STARFLEET OPERATIONS MEETING ROOM 2

Fifteen. How do fifteen people die as a result of a computer malfunction on my ship? Jack was slow and shaky during the debrief in front of admirals Wright and Jenkins while Fleet Admiral Quay continued to describe the aftermath of the *Troy* incident.

"The dock was in a hell of a state after the ship jumped into slipstream through the middle of it. They're lucky that you didn't jump into it! Where was it you came out? Oh yes, the Accobar system... gave the scuttle ships a hell of a scare when the *Troy* threw them away from Pioneer Station... not to mention the work pod which was thrown *into* Pioneer Station. Not to mention Commander Hayes!"

"I am well aware of her condition, Admiral..."

"She won't walk again, Captain."

"I know... I was the one who told her children that."

"Then please, tell us.. what the hell went wrong?"

"Nothing! Nothing went wrong!" Jack shuddered in his chair, letting out his breath, "All the computer logs indicate that we were still on the right course, at the right speed... everything was apparently fine."

"This list of incidents as a result of the jump is not *fine*, Captain!"

"I know that! But there was no reported or logged malfunction, no user error... nothing that could have thrown us off course as violently as we were... the ship simply decided that it wanted to go the way it did and didn't see it as a problem afterwards."

"Well it was a problem... and I hope you can see that because I've lost some good men on that ship."

"They were my men and *women* aswell!"

"Gentlemen..." Claire Jenkins spoke up, seeing that the discussion was becoming ever more heated, "I think we can push the rest of this debriefing back for now? Admiral?"

"Very well." Quay was obviously disgruntled but knew that he too needed to take a break,

"Captain Austin, your wife is staying at the *Plaza* in Sydney and has requested that you join her there... go and spend some time with your family... clear your head... and we will finish this in your time. Having such a disaster happen on your watch is no easy thing for any Starfleet officer to deal with."

Like you wouldn't believe....

PRESENT DAY

The station was quiet that night. Jack continued to study the inscriptions on the ready room wall while the votes were totalled up for the civilian leadership. He could tell that the next few days were going to be tough. He had a scientist whose primary goal was to stay on the edge of existence for as long as possible, a chief medic who was only there because he convinced her to, an elusive federation council member and his daughter, an unprofessional genius who most definitely wasn't prepared for this, a woman who questioned his every move, a chief of security who had been struck by domestic objects several times over the past few hours and a weapons specialist who had come back from the dead.

All in all, for Jack Austin at least, just another day aboard Asteroid Base: Alpha – the place he tried to run from, but the place that always caught up with him.

“Captain Jack Austin... Starfleet CO of Asteroid Base: Alpha... it's not going to be easy getting these people home. But they **are** the wrong people in the wrong place and I'm not going to let anybody down out here. As of this moment... nobody else dies under my command. Nobody. I won't let Rush convince me to stay aboard this station any longer than I have to. Bree... Jenna... I'm coming home. I promise....”

3

"We all have a purpose in life. Each of us walks through our lives on a grey road, the decisions we make, however, decide whether we leave that grey road and instead walk on the light path for a while... or the dark path."

The oracle, in her tangerine coloured robes, spoke quietly as she held his hands.

"Then if you can see it, what path am I walking on?" He asked her, unenthusiastically.

"Your path is unclear; Nicholas... but you are nearing the end of your journey." She let go of his hands and placed them in her lap as they knelt on the ground.

"Are you now telling me, that I am going to die soon?"

"Of course not, Nicholas, what it means is that you will soon find your destiny."

"Oh, marvellous... and I suppose it will have a sign saying "destiny" on it?"

"It will be more obvious than you think. There is one thing I can tell you. When Charlie knocks at your door, do not ignore the call."

PRESENT DAY

Chloe sprinkled the sand in between herself and Tamara onto the golden, shimmering ground.

"Oh I don't know what I'd do without the holodeck still working." She said relieved, looking out at the ocean.

"When it works at least." Tamara replied, trying to enjoy her 30 minute break before the next hellish 12 hour shift begins, "Crewman Bellamy tried to run the San Francisco programme... but he got the Vulcan wasteland instead." She smiled at the thought of the young crewman being chased by the wasteland predators while the computer refused to end the programme until the allotted time was up. It was a cruel thought, but an amusing one.

"I wouldn't mind putting Doctor Amey in the Vulcan wastelands..." Chloe laughed

"Oh... so say we all."

Following his horrendous ordeal being trapped in the brig behind a wall of rubble with only a security officer for company. Doctor James Amey had turned up in Sickbay every few hours asking for a check up. At one point he believed that the security officer had drugged him in an attempt to keep him quiet. Tamara wouldn't have blamed her. In fact, she would have gone one step further and knocked him out herself

"You know that there's a rumour that Doctor Rush can't access the FTL drive the same way that he did the first time."

"Rumours... are usually just that."

"Then shouldn't we be home by now?"

"Is this you asking, or your father?"

Chloe smiled and began playing with the warm sand around her.

"Both of us." She replied, to which Tamara smiled back.

"Well... the station lost a lot of power in the first jump so... she probably just needs to recharge her batteries before Rush can get in and then... off we go."

"I don't trust Doctor Rush."

"I don't think anybody trusts Doctor Rush."

It was true; everyone was on edge around the man who could get them to safety. A select few would rather spend their days in the nebula as opposed to putting their lives in his hands. Most didn't really know *why* they didn't trust him, only that they didn't and that was that.

A familiar booming around them disturbed the unstable, holographic ground around the pair. Chloe looked at TJ after a few moments and grimaced to which the blonde doctor replied,

"Its happened again..."

FOUR YEARS EARLIER

HAZARD TEAM 1 – ULIEM 3 – UNKNOWN AGGRESSORS

Tamara was the last one to dive into the ditch moments before a barrage of weapons fire shot over their heads and struck the charred ground behind the team. Her heart was racing, and not just because of the extraordinary amount of running. She was there to assist her friend and mentor in the medical field... who just happened to have been assigned to tag along with HT-1.

Apparently negotiations with the "supposedly small-time" raiders hadn't gone so well as no sooner as she had been settling into one of the Malosian's guest quarters had she been running for her life over a former and now current battlefield.

"Alright! We're gonna move forward to the bunker up ahead! There are a few trenches circling around to the beam out site so if we can get there, we should be okay!" Barked the current Hazard Team leader, William Quy, "Commander Warren!"

"Aye!" Shouted back Lieutenant Commander Evangeline Warren, Chief Medical Officer of the Guardian, currently with her back against the dirt next to her "apprentice" Crewman Johansen.

"Sorry that you got involved in this, ma'am! But while we're providing front line suppressing fire, I need you to get your girl across the tree line and circle around into the bunker. I don't want to put either of you in the direct line of fire for any longer than necessary. We'll draw their fire and try to keep them busy for as long as we can."

"Are you up for that, TJ?"

Tamara ducked her head as a shower of dirt and small rocks was blasted over the team. She quickly wiped her eyes and mouth.

"If it means getting out of here... I'm all for it, sir!"

"Okay we're good!" Warren shouted over the choir of rough voices and disrupter shots overhead.

William assembled his team, ready to go over the top and make a run for the bunker while returning the barrage of fire to the opposing force.

"Alright... get ready!" William tossed over a second phaser to Tamara, who caught it and checked that it was on maximum stun. "Once we go over, give it a 3 second count, then get over and head for the trees. Go, go, go!"

First, each member of the hazard team took a deep breath before lunging themselves out of the deteriorating ditch and ran out of view, each of them lifting their weapons as they vanished out of sight. Warren took three long counts and then tapped Tamara's arm for support before she herself jumped out of the ditch. Tamara followed, but the next few seconds were a blur. A stray weapons blast had shot through the hazard team formation and struck Commander Warren square in the chest. She was blasted back onto Tamara and both landed in the ditch. Hard.

As the hazard team fought through to the bunker and eventually reached the shuttle, TJ stayed slumped in the shallow hole which had become her friend and mentor's shallow grave.

PRESENT DAY

"Report! What is it this time?" Jack left the ready room behind him and quick stepped straight to Doctor Rush.

"An overload in the Astrometrics systems caused a minor explosion. Four casualties, none fatal..." He said with such calm.

"Do we have a cause, yet?"

"Not yet." Rush turned his back on Jack and worked on the console directly behind him, with Ben looking over his shoulder trying to keep up and Riley keeping out of their way nearby.

"Riley..."

"Yes, sir?"

"Are communications up or down today?"

"The station's being kind... they're up."

"Good... patch me through the Sickbay in the ready room."

"Chloe Armstrong... third day, out here. I think he's getting worse, I can see it in his eyes but he wouldn't admit it. Not to me anyway. He thinks keeping to himself will make everything fine but... there's going to come a time when he won't be able to hide what he's going through. I don't want him to leave me out here...."

"TJ, what's it like up there?" Jack asked, as the doors closed behind him, the once more covered up wall to his side.

"I'm running out of space... running out of supplies, and I don't have the staff, sir. Even the more minor injuries are going to start becoming life threatening if this keeps up."

"I'll see what I can do about expansion and we'll see if we missed any medical supplies in the cargobay. As for workforce, we have a lot of civilians scattered around."

"Any Doctors, sir?"

"Who knows... but we'll find out."

"Thanks... I could use the help."

"You got it, Austin out."

Jack tapped his flickering computer before taking a familiar position in front of the bare rock wall. He grabbed the grey sheet and threw it to the ground, revealing the names written there once more. For the first time, Jack noticed that Tamara's name was next to his. Did it have any significance? Maybe, maybe not. But something was still eerily wrong in the corner. The crossed out name of Ruby Pallet.

As it happened, she had still been undergoing her impossibly quick recovery over the past few days. Tamara reported that she had regained consciousness for a few minutes overnight and as ecstatic as it made Jasmine Thomas, Jack was becoming increasingly paranoid about her survival. Yes, she had

survived and that was great. Perhaps there was an innocent explanation about why her name was crossed out and why she recovered. Maybe the nebula that they knew nothing about had bizarre healing properties that can help some and not others. But then, why was the writing on the wall in the first place and, more importantly, who put it there and how?

But the welfare of the patients currently in sickbay who aren't recovering at great speed, were Jack's priority. There had to be some out there with medical expertise, somewhere amongst the obnoxious scientists. But he wouldn't be the one to convince them to volunteer, Jack needed Camille Wray.

FLASHBACK

Rush was three quarters of a way through the reprint of War and Peace at the time he had visited the oracle at his sister's request. She was very superstitious that way, and it really wasn't a request at all, more of an insistence. But one evening, while slumped in his armchair, slowly progressing through the never ending book, the oracle's words would echo through his mind. It all started when three knocks on the door drew Rush back to reality. That was unusual for one, as nobody ever knocked on the door, there was a perfectly good bell.

"Nick! Nick can you get that, I'm still in the shower!" A voice called out from down the hall. Rush sighed and threw the book into his lap, before taking off his glasses prior to standing up to see who it was that disturbed his peace. The person knocked again, four times.

"Alright, alright...!"

He tapped the control panel and was surprised to see a Starfleet officer standing in the apartment block hallway as the doors separated.

"Yes?" Rush asked sternly, eying the officer up and down.

"Doctor Nicholas Rush?"

"That's me."

"Captain James Robertson, Asteroid Base: Alpha."

Rush appeared quite taken aback.

"You're James Robertson?"

"In the flesh... well, not just flesh. Clothes, obviously."

"I can see that... is there some reason why a celebrity Starfleet officer is standing at my door?"

"Celebrity... interesting. But yes, I have a, a job proposition for you, Doctor. We've seen your work on decryption algorithms and unidentified systems analysis and we're impressed. So impressed in fact that we want you to come to Asteroid Base: Alpha and assist us with a little... project. Here."

The captain took a PADD from the back of his belt and tossed it up into Rush's hands. He glanced over the tablet, skimming through the details.

"Does your... 'project'... have a name?"

"Oh, nothing fancy. It's the third major Asteroid Base project since the TDB incident so it's just called Project Charlie, for the time being. Are you okay Doctor?"

Rush stared wide-eyed at James from the moment he mentioned Project Charlie. He was quick to accept the offer soon after.

"There is one thing I can tell you. When Charlie knocks at your door, do not ignore the call."

PRESENT DAY

Captain Austin had been speaking to Camille in the ready room for fifteen minutes as Rush continued to work on digging through whatever information he could. He hadn't been making much progress and it wouldn't be long until Jack realised that accessing the FTL drive wasn't his priority. However, when something faded into view on his console, things weren't looking so bad.

"Ben, I need you, follow me." He quickly closed off access to everything he was working on and headed for the left ramp out of Operations.

"You? Need me?" Well, there's a first time for everything."

Rush frowned as Ben followed him down towards the transporter room, passing one of the shuttlebays and coming close to the messhall as they went. When they stepped inside, the room looked significantly different to how Ben remembered it from only days before. Since the jump, nobody had been inside.

The central circular base of the transporter pad was slightly raised and the pad was illuminated by several pale yellow spotlights around the circular, enclosed room. Rush appeared to know exactly what he was doing as he began navigating one of the computer terminals attached to the metallic railings which circled the platform.

"Ben... please stand on the raised platform."

It was Ben's turn to frown.

"You haven't spoken to me *all* day and now you want me to be your guinea pig? I don't think so, Nick." He exaggerated.

"I assure you it's perfectly safe, I know exactly what this device does."

"Urhmm, we all know what this device does... but where can you transport me to? Out into space?" Rush pinched his brow, leaning his right elbow on the railings next to the console.

"It will be worth it... I promise..."

Ben groaned but complied, allowing his curious side to take over and discover what the newly redesigned transporter room was about. Rush smiled to himself when Ben stepped up onto the platform and turned about to face the doors.

"Okay... test away."

Rush had already prepared the test of the system and all it took to activate was one button press. Upon activation, the yellow lights in the room shut off for a few seconds and were replaced by blue spotlights, almost blinding Ben who was now almost on level with the lights in front of him. Little did they both know that lights across the station were now pulsing off and on due to the already low power levels.

With Rush in the corner of his eye, Ben considered stepping off, but he suddenly found that he couldn't move, he had lost all motor skills. But it didn't end there. The lights seemed to shut off again, but it was different this time because the light from the console and backup floor lighting had gone too. He tried to shout for Rush but no sound came out from his own mouth. In fact, there was a woman's voice screaming out from close by, very close by, and she was shouting for Rush.

The lights had returned, vision restored, but the transporter room was gone. Ben was no longer standing up, he was sitting down. He was sitting at the end of a polished wooden desk, the sun beaming in on his face from the large diagonal window besides him. What more, two men were staring right at him from the other side of the table.

"What... the..." he muttered, but clasped his mouth soon after. That wasn't his voice. *That isn't my voice.* It was the same woman he heard screaming on the station.

"Commander?" Said one of the men whom Ben came to recognise. James Robertson had asked the question and Admiral Livingston seemed to be waiting for an answer opposite him, "Are you alright? Why were you shouting 'Rush?'"

Ben's jaw dropped slightly as he turned to look out of the glass window and onto the grounds of Starfleet Headquarters. In his reflection, he saw a blonde haired woman in a Starfleet uniform, mimicking his movements.

"Commander Austin?! Bree?!" Livingston blamelessly shouted towards him as Bree Austin stared open mouthed and wide eyed at her own reflection across the table. Ben looked at the table in front of him and lifted up his arm. Only it wasn't his arm, it was hers.

"Wicked..." he whispered to himself, "Oh this is so cool."

The Captain and Admiral looked at each other and then at Ben. James squinted for a few moments but then got to his feet and walked around the table as Ben continued to inspect his new body.

"You aren't Bree Austin, are you?" James asked, "Who are you and what have you done with her?" Livingston started to call for security but James stopped him.

"Captain?"

"Bear with me on this, Admiral... I've seen something like this before. It could just be an innocent mistake."

"Well actually, more of a test." Ben replied in his new pitch, tone and accent, "Captain Robertson, it's good to see you again!"

"We've met?"

"I'm hard to miss." Ben laughed nervously, remembering that he didn't look the same to them, "I'm Ben... Ben Emerson."

The admiral rose to his feet so fast that he almost flipped over the three PADDs that were lying in front of him by air power alone.

"Mr. Emerson?! Is that really you?" Chet exclaimed, "Prove it!"

Ben thought about it for a few moments.

"Alright... Captain Robertson here didn't lie when he said he would beam me up to his asteroid base, although I sometimes wish he *was* lying."

James gasped.

"Ben... where the hell are you? How did you get in that body? Is everybody okay?!"

"Oh it's all good, Captain... we're *only* stranded in between two galaxies, losing power, with limited control over the station and limited food and water supplies. Thanks for inviting me on the trip."

"Okay Ben... if it really is you..." James said, pulling one of the chairs around and sitting in it, "I need you to explain to us exactly what happened after you made the jump, one step at a time okay?"

Admiral Livingston took a place at the other side of Bree-Ben as he began his story of how the crew of Asteroid Base: Alpha has been since escaping from the Romulan attack in the Accobar system.

Tamara retired to her office within Sickbay between burn treatments of dermaline gel appliance. Well, she didn't yet see it as her office. In fact, she rarely sat in the desk chair, but resorted to standing, reviewing logs on the wall display next to the glass window so that she could keep an eye on her patients while going over and logging recent events.

This is what she would do when Brian was still around. He would talk without end about how many amazing adventures he had been on since joining the station's crew and Tamara would nod her head and make one-word comments while not really paying attention...

FLASHBACK

"Lieutenant, thank you for coming." Jack gestured to the seat on the other side of the bevelled desk. She sat, hands in her lap, trying to think up scenarios why the CO of the station would suddenly want to speak to her after saying no more than two words to her since he replaced James Robertson.

"That's no problem, sir." She replied shakily, unsure of the correct response.

"Relax, L.T." He said, literally abbreviating her rank, "Ease up before you end up treating yourself."

"Sorry sir." She said, to which he smiled, measuring her reactions closely.

"TJ... it's okay if I call you TJ?"

"Of course."

"Alright, TJ, to my understanding, you're set to leave Asteroid Base: Alpha and most likely the profession for pastures new come the end of the year?"

"That's right..."

"Well, that might change... but it depends on you. You see, Commander May is leaving us for a senior medical post back on Earth, which will be leaving us without a Chief Medical Officer for quite some time."

"Sir..."

"Now we have a new batch of specialists arriving in the next few days and weeks and they're going to be tinkering around in all kinds of places and if these reports I've been reading are accurate, there will most likely be some more injuries, some more accidents... something that ends up with a new group of patients in sickbay and I need someone there who has the experience already because this station takes some introducing to.. and we don't have time to go through that process again with some fresh faced officer... not that you're less than fresh faced or anything."

"Captain, I don't understand how it affects..."

"You can leave. Early. When Brian goes, you can go with him. Your deal was to stay on *under* Brian May until the end of the year. But if he goes, you can go."

Tamara didn't know what to say. She still had eight months to go but this was it, a get out clause. But something in her heart had taken note of what Jack had told her. She *was* still a doctor and if she left...

"But TJ, I won't force you to stay... even if I had the ability, I wouldn't want to make you make such a big decision for you. But we *do* still need you and I think we would all be very grateful if you were to fill in for Brian until the end of the year."

He watched as she closed her eyes, weighing up the two possibilities. She could leave, open her mind to new paths. Maybe art, music... something creative. She could still put her medical expertise

to good use, there's always someone nearby who needs help or advice for even the smallest of ailments. Who knows, maybe she could even find somebody to enjoy her new freedom with. Time on Asteroid Base: Alpha can be enough to make anyone depressed when spent alone. Jack wouldn't know what that felt like, he spent two years here with his wife besides him.

But then, she could stay. No matter how hard she fought it, she *was* excited by the constant reminders that they could be making the history books by finding all sorts of wonderful things within the station's obsolete data core. But that would mean putting her personal life on hold for eight more months. Thirty-two long weeks of more dust and rocks. Was there a preferred option here? Of course there was. Was there a right decision here? Unfortunately, yes.

"Captain Austin..."

"If you need some time to think, that's fine and-"

"I'll stay."

"Sorry?"

"I'll *stay*... how hard can it be?"

PRESENT DAY

"TJ!"

Tamara quick stepped out of the office and over to the surgical bay at Jasmine's call.

"What is it?" she asked, already reaching for her tricorder.

"I think Ruby's waking up.."

"Impossible she's not close to... oh my God..."

As 'impossible' as it may have been, Tamara began monitoring Lieutenant Pallet's vital signs closely as her eyelids flickered.

"Ruby, can you hear me?" Tamara asked quietly, towards Ruby's left ear, "If you can, try and move something."

Jasmine gasped as Ruby's knee jerked briefly, but TJ was less than emotive and seemed to be heading back to her office.

"Doctor... TJ! Where are you going? She's waking up!"

"Exactly... that's why I need to speak to Captain Austin, right now."

"He's *what*?!" Jack almost lept to his feet, but instead opted to squeeze the arms of the chair even tighter.

"I'm sorry you weren't told sooner but it's true... Councillor Armstrong is dying."

"If this is some kind of trick in order to-"

"If that's the kind of person you think I am then you don't know me at all." Camille pursed her lips and drew a sharp intake of breath through her nose, "Believe it or not, Christopher is still a friend, even to me."

"Why wasn't I told? Here I am setting up polls and all along..."

"You shouldn't even know now." She answered, "The councillor wants to go on as normal for as long as possible, but he won't be able to hide what he's going through. He's locked himself away and people are already talking."

"A few hours ago, I was one of those people. I assume his daughter knows."

"She's the only one, excluding yourself and I."

"So what it is? His condition?"

"A rare form of necrosis of the brain and other major organs..."

Jack sighed heavily and covered his mouth and chin with his hand while resting his right elbow on the ready room desk.

"So where does this leave us?"

"Starfleet have you, they're trained and they can handle this situation..."

"I wouldn't be so sure..."

"The rest of us were *not* prepared for this... myself included... but they need a strong leader, right now. They aren't soldiers, they can't take orders like drones and..."

"We aren't soldiers, Camille, we're explorers."

"Not anymore. Not out here. Out here, you need to be survivors, we all do. But that's not going to happen if we can't work *and* live together in harmony because sooner or later they will crack and fractures will appear between both sides."

"There are no sides..."

"There will be, eventually. Whether you see it this way or not, Starfleet are the ones with the guns and we're just following you wherever you lead us. Doctor Rush may be the one working on getting us home, but ultimately, in the peoples' eyes, you have authority."

"So I suppose that *you* would be this strong leader for the civilian population?"

"I wouldn't say no."

"Johansen to Austin!"

Jack sat up as his commbadge suddenly screamed at him, making Camille jump.

"Oh good... comms are up again and louder than ever. Go ahead, TJ." Jack responded.

"Captain, it's Ruby... I thought you ought to know, she's conscious and is regaining motor control. I don't believe it myself, sir."

"Understood... I'll be right there, Austin out."

Jack didn't have time to give Camille some half-assed story as to why he was checking up on Ruby more so than other patients, as the lights began to flicker in the ready room once more, for longer than the first time.

"There it is again." Camille pointed out, "I think it's time you checked what's happening..."

"Would you be like this all the time?"

"When it's required."

"Austin to Rush!" Jack tapped his commbadge, "Doctor Rush, come in please. Rush?!"

"Riley to Austin!" Riley's separate voice interrupted them, causing Jack to shake his head in disbelief,

"Captain Austin?!"

"Yes, Riley, tell me you know what's happening..."

"A large power drain, sir, can't pinpoint it."

"Where's Doctor Rush?"

"I don't know, sir, he left about thirty minutes ago."

Sudden the lights came back on and back to their full illumination, brighter than they had been since the jump.

"Keep checking, Riley, Austin out." He paused, "Austin to Thomas." There was a few seconds of silence before Jasmine answered.

"Go ahead, Captain."

"Sorry to pull you away from Miss Pallet, but I need you to go to Astrometrics, examine the power drain from there. Astrometrics is one of the few fully functioning systems we have left."

"Right away, sir."

"Thank You Lieutenant, Austin out."

Jack turned to the sheet on the wall before remembering that Miss Wray had not yet left the ready room.

"Camille... I want to speak to Councillor Armstrong myself before I make it official... but I want to make you the offer for leadership of a civilian authority aboard this station for as long as we're trapped out here."

"Why, Captain Austin, it would be my pleasure to accept."

Rush only just caught Ben as he fell forwards off the platform.

"Woah!" Ben shouted, regaining his focus in his original body, "What the hell happened?!"

"I was attempting to access some more data on this device when there was another power surge. It brought you back out."

"You aren't going to believe this..."

"You were in the body of someone on Earth, yes, I know."

"What? You knew that's what it did? All along?"

"Yes."

"So what happened to her? Bree?"

"Nothing. I configured the platform to keep the recipient in a form of... consciousness stasis while you were in control."

"So... if you hadn't... she could have taken control of *my* body? Like a mind-swap!"

"Yes... like a mind swap. Well thank you Mr. Emerson... try to keep this between us for the time being, until I can write up a full report for the captain."

Rush shut everything down in the room and quickly departed with PADDs and paper-based notes, leaving Ben in the dark, buzzing with questions.

Jack and Tamara bumped into each other as they both turned the same corner at collision course angles.

"Oh my, Captain, sorry!"

"No, no, it's fine... so... Ruby?"

Tamara looked around her for any passersby and continued as the last civilian scientist vanished from view.

"I just checked back into Sickbay and Ruby's awake... she can speak, sir."

"Speak?! A few hours ago she may as well have been a vegetable!"

"Believe me, I know. I still can't explain it, but, at least she's alive."

"TJ you said it yourself, she died, now she's fine... I need to show you something."

"Sir?"

"Follow me."

Jack did an about turn and led Tamara on the trek back to the ready room, overtaking a shocked looking Ben and ignoring Rush who had returned to "work" with Riley, while Camille made a call out for any civilian doctors throughout the station. He quickly ushered her into the small office and sealed the doors behind him.

"Captain...?" She insisted, trying to find out what the rush was. But she soon got an answer as Jack circled around her and took position next to the sofa, reaching over to put one hand on the sheet. "What's under there? What is that?"

Jack took a few quick steps back, keeping hold of the sheet, whipping it off and revealing the names underneath. Tamara didn't make a noise, but moved closer, even kneeling on the sofa to get a close up.

"A puzzle that I need to solve." Belatedly replied Jack, "Look there, a bit lower... "

"Ruby?"

"Yeah, her name is crossed out along with the others who have died."

"She did die..."

"Exactly... but she came back, the others didn't. Why?"

"Who did this, Jack?"

Jack smirked and shrugged off her first use of his first name as she continued to survey the wall at very close range.

"I've sat where you're kneeling countless times and I've looked at that wall through the glass. Nothing. There was nothing. This was recent, and by recent I mean FTL jump, recent."

"Someone did this when we were unconscious?"

"It had to be... but of course, we don't have access to the video logs to prove it. But the glass wasn't broken originally. Someone took the time to carefully take the panel off the wall, put all of these names here and somehow, they knew who was dead and who wasn't. Unfortunately for them, they didn't put the panel back on as carefully."

She guided her hand across the many names until stopping at her own.

"But what *is it*? What does it mean?"

"I wish I knew."

"Who else knows?"

"Just you and me, TJ... just you and me."

"But... why did we end up here?"

Mike helped to prop Ruby up as she interrogated him for information on their situation, her condition growing stronger and stronger by the minute.

"We're not entirely sure, but Doctor Rush has a theory." Lieutenant Commander Mike Lahanas answered, "He believes that this is where the TDB intended to jump to in the first place... so this is where we are."

"So, he can just send us back, yeah?"

"That's the plan... once we can use the station's primary systems again. Now enough about the station, how are you doing?"

Ruby closed her eyes for a few seconds and smiled, knowing what her condition was after the jump.

"I don't know whether to tell you I feel terrible, or fine."

"Well, do you feel different to how you did before?"

"Been waiting to see if the supposed brain damage had changed my preference to women?"

"What?! No!" He looked around at the other sleeping patients and returned to hushed tones, "No, no of course not."

"Relax, Mike... I'm kidding... or would you prefer Lieutenant? You always did...."

"We were talking about you, remember."

"Well unless I hit my head harder than.... much harder than I thought," she corrected herself, "You used to be something "about" me."

Mike looked away, with an expression of regret written all over him.

"I thought you were dead." He said sternly, "When I reached Engineering... I thought you were dead."

"Hey, come on, Mike, I'm fine!"

"Yeah well it confirmed what I've known all this time." He said, standing up and moving towards the door, looking back, "I get it, if you love Jasmine then that's your business. But I'll tell you what my business...is, I still love *you*."

"Mike, wait!" She called out, as the Lieutenant disappeared through the large doors, but her reaction only summoned one of the doctors.

Blissfully aware of Ruby's stable condition, Jasmine did what she could in Astrometrics to determine the cause of the malfunctions that had been afflicting the station's systems over the past two days. She was only finding small pieces of a much larger jigsaw comprised of alien algorithms and impenetrable lock outs of information.

As she tried harder to co-operate with AB: Alpha's new way of thinking, she found strange power diversions across the board. Weapons power had gone to external sensors, power for the airlock control systems had been violently diverted to Astrometrics, no doubt causing the incident earlier in the day. But these weren't random chances to the power grid, commands had been inputted to cause them. Even false data had been fed to the computer to make the station believe it had to send emergency power to already maximised systems.

But she was too tired, oh too tired. She had spent so much time looking at the same biobed in Sickbay that her body just wanted to give up. The image on the screen was becoming blurred and distorted as she constantly struggled to keep her eyelids from completely masking her vision. But she couldn't stop yet because the origin of the energy diversions. Operations. More specifically, Operations primary science station. Only one person had worked there since the FTL jump. She looked out from the small rectangular window, reflecting the nebula's glow, towards Ops at the other side of the station. Nicholas Rush had been causing the malfunctions and knew exactly what he was doing.

Jasmine groaned and left Astrometrics at speed, down the steps she was descending when the original knocked her out. In Operations, however, Rush was on the verge of making one more change to the power grid.

FLASHBACK

"What exactly, happened, Doctor?" Tamara Johansen asked Nicholas Rush in Sickbay on his first visit since arriving to lead the research crew for Project Charlie. She was running a dermal regenerator along the cut on his forehead.

"Oh nothing serious." His gruff tones explained, "*Doctor* Amey was arguing with one of your security officers, *again*."

"Oh yes, she told me about him..."

"He knocked a stack of PADDs from the second level of Engineering. I didn't know they were so sharp until one pierced my head. Why were those two ever put together?"

"Well," Tamara said, "He chose her from the line up." At which Rush only made an audible "Ugh" sound, "Ensign Holmes can take care of herself, alright... I had a Klingon miner in here once who looked at her the wrong way."

"Really? I'm surprised she could reach."

"Well, sometimes size really doesn't matter."

"Considering the amount of data I've been inputting to my head over the past few weeks, I could do with a much larger brain to process it all more efficiently."

"On that note," Tamara smirked, turning off the regenerator, "How is the project coming along?"

"Poorly. The more we dig into the alien database, the more encryptions and mathematical equations we find that need to be solved... thank you, Lieutenant." He added, jumping off the biobed on which he was sat, intending to return to work.

"Do me a favour, Doctor Rush."

"What might that be?" He inquired, stopping at the door.

"Don't solve those algorithms until the end of the year." She said, smiling.

"No promises, Lieutenant, no promises."

PRESENT DAY

As Jasmine led Mike and two further security officers into Operations, Jack and Tamara emerged from the ready room.

"Doctor Rush, stop what you're doing right now!" The petite science officer called out, as the two security officers shuffled around her to take places in front of Rush on the other side of the circular console.

"Lieutenant, what is the meaning of this?" Captain Austin asked sternly, coming up besides her.

"Sir, Rush has been making unauthorised changes to the power grid, diverting power to random systems and sections of the station... some of the changes would have been risky enough before but now, without full access to the station's systems..."

"That caused the malfunctions? The explosions?"

"The multitude of patients..." Tamara added,

"Correct." Jasmine confirmed, "All of these changes were made from Rush's console... he knew what was causing the faults from the start. Himself."

Jack turned to Rush, unsurprised.

"Commander of the guard!" He called out to Mike, who nodded his head in acknowledgement,

"Relieve Doctor Rush of his post."

"That would be unwise, Captain." Rush spoke with an impossible calm, "I have just made the last adjustment needed to accessible systems, I have already gained access to some of the alien database."

"Anything about cracking the FTL code?" Jack asked, mostly rhetorically.

"Not of yet, but there is..." Rush began to laugh, much to the confusion of the guards, "...there is something quite... *quite* interesting."

"And what might that be?"

"I have uncovered the original name of this base. I know the true name of Asteroid Base: Alpha."

Mike queried for instructions but Jack told him to hold off for the moment.

“Enlighten us...” The Captain said, now face to face with Rush across the computer terminal.”

“Destiny!” Rush exclaimed, laughing once more to himself and outreaching his arms as the blue nebula behind him vanished into a sea of blue and purple mist as the station abruptly entered Faster-Than-Light, “This station’s name... is Destiny!”

“Of course not, Nicholas, what it means is that you will soon find your destiny.”

“Oh, marvellous... and I suppose it will have a sign saying “destiny” on it?”

“It will be more obvious than you think.”

4

SIX YEARS AGO

PIONEER STATION CONSTRUCTION PLATFORM – ACCOBAR SYSTEM

Camille and the new representative of Earth of the Federation Council, Christopher Armstrong, followed closely behind Captain Amber Munro and Commander Nate Janeway as they were given the tour of functional areas of Pioneer Station. The Ban'mar war was not long over but Starfleet was desperate to get the Accobar-Tyrella asteroid field back to the hive of activity it once was, before the occupation.

Camille didn't really see what this new station would achieve. Surely it would only be yet another outpost for an ancient alien race to conquer? Except this one was defenceless. No weapons, no shields, no patrols and limited security personnel. For its purpose, Camille could accept that, she would be the first to argue against such militaristic approaches to a place of diplomatic harmony. But why here? Why did it have to be here?

"So who have they got lined up to run this place?" Wray and Armstrong heard Commander Janeway ask in front, grabbing their attention.

"His name is Jeffrey Keegan, one of the trio who helped secure the Imperia trade alliance treaty two years ago." The balding diplomat explained as he dodged busy engineers, "Him and Chloe Harper."

"Matthew Harper's daughter!?" Amber inquired, a certain level of discomfort in her voice, "Fresh out of Cambridge, isn't she?"

"That's right, but while she was studying, she helped her father throughout various peace talks and she even wrote up some of his speeches for him. Don't worry, Captain, she's well trusted under Mr. Keegan, I'm sure you won't end up caught in the middle of an alien civil war under their watch."

"I would sure hope not..." Amber sighed, "We've got enough on our plate working with one station..." The Captain took her eyes away from the V.I.P. quarters they had reached and turned back towards Camille.

"Captain Munro?" Camille acknowledged.

"Miss Wray, I heard that you were offered a position here, do you mind if I ask what made you turn it down?"

"Is that a rhetorical question?" Councillor Armstrong intercepted the question, "Starfleet had control of this asteroid field for less than two years before an alien aggressor was welcomed in with opened arms just because they made a few threats. Do you really believe that this station will take off? I'm obliged to support the construction of this outpost, but I don't have faith in it."

"Well thank you, Councillor for your input, but I was asking Miss Wray on her thoughts."

Amber smiled briefly at Christopher before looking back to Camille for an answer. Nate tried to hide his enjoyment of watching Amber dealing with senior delegates of the council.

"Well, Captain." Camille spoke, placing her hands together behind her back, "... don't think that the Accobar system was the wisest choice for this base but I do believe that it can work. Where would we be in politics and diplomatic relations if we didn't take risks?"

"You haven't answered my question... why didn't you take the job?" Amber asked, again.

"As much of a pleasure as running Pioneer Station would be, I don't think I'm up to the challenge just yet and... at the time of being asked; I had just made other arrangements."

"Oh?"

"Yep, a cosy little desk job on Earth. But, I think I can deal with that."

PRESENT DAY

Camille looked up at Chloe Armstrong who had just been permitted to enter her office. It had a very traditional feel to it. Large, wooden desk complete with lamp and leather swivel chair behind it. To the side of the door opposite, a large bookshelf, with the LCARS display hidden behind a wooden panel.

"Miss Armstrong." She said, dropping the informalities within the confines of the room, "What can I do for you?"

"Camille, it's my dad." Chloe replied, her voice almost breaking up, "He needs more of the Diacosin."

"And because he doesn't want anyone to know, he can't simply go to Sickbay to get it."

"Right..."

"Miss Armstrong.... Chloe." Camille caved, "What will happen if your father doesn't get the medication?"

"The pain will get worse and..." She paused for a few moments and swallowed hard, "He'll die, quickly."

"Chloe we don't even know if there is any Diacosin aboard, we don't have replicator access yet and..."

"Then let Rush out."

"What?"

"Doctor Rush, he can get the replicators back on-line and TJ can make up the treatment."

"It isn't that simple, Chloe, Captain Austin has full authority in this matter."

"What? Of our survival? Doctor Rush is the one that can get us home!"

"We're in FTL; we could be going home right now..."

"What if we aren't? What then? We let them keep Rush locked up until we are die of starvation or thirst or some kind of exotic disease which we have no cure for out here?! I won't just watch him die because of Starfleet's rules and I don't see how you can either!"

Chloe was shouting by the time she had finished. Her anger seemed to have emerged suddenly, but not being able to tell many people what she was going through could only have been frustrating. But regardless, Camille let slip a small laugh.

"What's funny...?" Chloe folded her arms.

"I'm sorry it's just... you remind me of another Chloe I met once."

Chloe's mouth opened but a shudder aboard the station and the familiar ultraviolet light which filled the room quickly shut it again. The two women looked at each other before dashing for the door as the combination of the distant whirling sound and the ultraviolet glow could only mean that the station had dropped out of FTL. Their thinking was impeccable.

They emerged from the rock into one of the exterior corridors in the crater, atop of the asteroid. Tamara was already there, looking upwards. When Camille and Chloe looked above their heads, they both gasped in amazement. In complete contrast to the desolate, empty void that they had been in three days ago had now been replaced with one of the busiest sights they had ever seen.

The space around them was filled up with nearby and distant stars, all of different colours, likely due to different chemical reactions taking place within them. Their spectrum of colours bounced off the multitude of nebulae and other gaseous anomalies.

Between then, ships travelling in linear formation, some of them large and other small but all in single file.

"They look pretty advanced..." Camille pointed out, momentarily ignoring the fact that they weren't at Earth's doorstep, "Maybe someone out there can help us get home..."

"Or," Tamara continued, "Maybe someone out there will get us killed."

"It's beautiful but..." Chloe finished off, "We *are* uninvited guests..."

There were mixed feelings of hope and fear across the station as the crew of Destiny saw where they were. On the one hand, they weren't alone anymore, but on the other, they were much further from home and the space metropolis around them could still prove to be hostile.

"Where are we?" Jack asked Riley as he ventured across from the ready room to the Ops windows to look out at the expansive region of space,

"Right where we didn't want to be, Captain... the second galaxy, we've jumped right into it."

Ben smiled over at the science console, in what was Rush's station, watching signals from the multitude of ships whiz around his sensor display.

"This is amazing..." He exclaimed, "I mean, what are the odds, that in this whole galaxy we come across a region of space as packed as this?! This could be the alien equivalent of the Federation for all we know!"

"Or..." Riley said, "The equivalent of the Ban'mar Consortium..."

"Alright, alright... if anyone decides to approach us, I'll let you know." Ben stopped when the console began beeping, but it was Riley who announced it.

"Captain Austin, we're being hailed sir... it appears to be automated."

"Put it on audio." Jack ordered, folding his arms, continuing to look out at the activity above them as a monotone computerised female voice filled the room.

"Welcome, you have entered New Eden, home of the Gallente Federation, guardians of the promise land!"

"See, *Federation*." Ben mumbled to himself, while the computer voice continued.

"Feel free to register your vessel for travel through New Eden space and then visit the Crystal Boulevard on Caille, the Helo Spaceports or the ruins of the Sunspiral on Troux. Would you like to register your vessel now?"

"Yes, I would." Jack announced.

"You have chosen to register your vessel. Please state your business in New Eden. Do you wish to engage in trade relations? Do you wish to traverse through New Eden space? Do have an appointment with a Gallente Federation representative? For any other business, please contact a Gallentean Administrator aboard the Nyx Supercarrier. The Nyx Supercarrier is currently in orbit around Caille, the fourth planet in the fifth system of New Eden."

Jack paused before answering; taking in the information he had just received.

"Urhm, Traverse through New Eden Space."

"Captain!" Ben shouted, "Shouldn't we make contact?"

"And do what? Unless you've found a way to steer us, we're traversing their space regardless."

"Good point well made..."

"We would like to traverse New Eden Space!"

"Thank You, your vessel registration has been identified as 'AB:A,' is that correct?"

"Yes... also known as 'Des...'"

"Thank You. Due to the size of your vessel, you must proceed to the *outer* trade lanes. Our trade lanes provide automated travel through our space. The coordinates for an entry point into trade line G-47 have been downloaded into your database..."

"Which we can't access..." Jack noted.

"...and a confirmation code to present upon approach to the entry gate has also been inserted into your database. Your details have now been sent to the Gallente Information Department for review, for any questions, please contact a Gallentean Administrator aboard the Nyx Supercarrier. The Nyx Supercarrier is currently in orbit around Caille, the fourth planet in the fifth system of New Eden."

"Yes well we may have an issue with..."

"*Thank You* for visiting the Gallente Federation, the bravest men and women of New Eden."

"Once again... the FTL jump drained a lot of our power, so we're just sitting here like we were in the void. But I suspect that once we "recharge our batteries," we'll start moving forward again until we reach FTL capacity and Destiny jumps to her next destination."

Ben shrugged and looked around the conference room table. Once again, the situation was out of their hands, but this time it could have tragic consequences.

"We've been told to enter this "trade lane..." Camille reminded everyone, "What happens when this Gallente federation realise that we are speeding along through some of their shipping lanes or... heading straight for their capital planet."

"Maybe they'll send the Nyx Supercarrier after us... which for your information is currently in orbit around Caille, the fifth planet in the fourth system of New Eden." Ben mimicked.

"The fourth planet in the fifth system." Jack corrected him, "Camille's right. If we get lucky, Destiny will have paid attention and will follow the new coordinates we have received. If not, we will try to contact their... welcoming computer system again and speak to this Gallentean administrator, try to work something out."

Camille placed her hands together on the desk and nodded at Jack, who responded by getting to his feet.

"Alright, for now... keep doing what you're doing. Ben, keep working on navigation. Riley, give him what help you can but see if you can get any information on the Gallente Federation out of that computer voice, maybe they have a greeting pack. Tamara..."

"Yes, sir?"

"What's the situation with Lieutenant Pallett?"

"Well," Tamara said, leaning forward, "I've released her from Sickbay, I had no justifiable reason to keep her there any longer."

"Are you kidding?" Ben interrupted, "Nobody heals that fast."

"But she *did* heal that fast, Ben. We may not know how, we may not know why... but she and that's all there is to it." She lied, looking at Jack, reminding him that she knows what he has on his ready room wall.

"Thanks TJ." Jack said, "Alright, dismissed. Camille, could I have a word."

"Certainly." Camille waited for the chairs to be put back in their place and for the rest of the team to disperse into Ops.

"Captain, It's about Rush."

"What about him?"

"It's been three days, don't you think it's time to let him out?"

"That man is a lot of work. He was responsible for putting nine of my, and your, people in Sickbay and causing damage to this station while it was already in a vulnerable position. When I'm ready to have him back to work, I'll let you know."

"*Jack*, you need to think about this. Keeping Rush locked away will be disastrous for morale. He's the only one who can get us home."

"*Ben* will work it out, Ben can get us home."

"Do you really believe that? Yes, he helped crack the FTL code once but this time it's different and you know that. This time he's up against an alien system too powerful that it grabbed full control of Asteroid Base: Alp... Destiny, right from under your feet."

"I have faith in him, Camille and right now I trust him a hell of a lot more than that man in my brig."

"With all due respect, It doesn't matter if you have faith in him... the people don't. They watched Rush work months on end aboard this station... they saw Ben for a day."

She was right. Jack couldn't admit it, but she was right. But how could he trust Rush after he went behind his back, knowingly caused accidents and all just to learn a name. He couldn't.

FIVE YEARS AGO

PIONEER STATION VIP SUITE THREE – ACCOBAR SYSTEM

Camille shrieked as she came to at the sight of a large beam falling to the ground in the corridor outside her room. The blast had torn the doors away into the debris and rubble that had filled the deck. She covered her ears and closed her eyes as she was curled on the ground to stop the world from spinning around her.

When she removed them, her hearing was mostly back, but there was nothing to hear other than the distant alert klaxons and the small fire which crackled around the corner. Filling in the gaps were creaks in the hull around her. Crawling to the wall in order to look back, she gazed through the window above her bed. The view had changed, instead of looking out towards Accobar Two, she could see the corner of Asteroid Base: Alpha, flames licking the edges of the asteroid, quickly disappearing into the vacuum. It was still spinning, the whole station was spinning on its axis around the gravity core.

The usual yellow dust field that masked the asteroid field had been replaced by orange tinted anomalies weaving in and out of asteroid fragments.

Clang! Camille jumped as someone stumbled to the ground from the corridor, straight into the living room. He groaned and looked around, apparently tripping over the beam which had fell seconds earlier. His face and uniform was covered in dark soot.

"Miss Wray...!" It was Lieutenant Casey, the escort assigned to her for her duration on the station,

"Miss Wray are you alright?!"

"Yes... I think so... what happened?!"

"The anomaly saved us ma'am, we didn't take the full force of the supernova but it still did a hell of a lot of damage. We've just pulled in Captain Munro's shuttlecraft; Commander O'Neill is in sickbay..."

"Wait! How long was I out?"

"It's been about an hour, ma'am, we couldn't get down to this deck any sooner..."

"An hour?"

"Yeah... it's lucky this whole deck didn't collapse, but I need to move you out of here, there's a support team down the hall."

"Then I won't argue with you... let's go."

Casey led her through dark passageways and around hull breaches in order to reach the start of a four deck climb in the Jefferies tubes. She was exhausted, and the stress on the inertial dampeners hadn't helped.

"Is Administrator Keegan okay?!" Camille called down to Casey as he followed her up the ladder rungs.

"Yes ma'am!"

"Harper?"

"Yes ma'am!"

"Councillor Armstrong?!"

"Not sure! I heard there was an incident in the science lab after the blast hit us!"

"What kind of incident?!"

"Not sure, ma'am... but he's also in Sickbay!"

I should have run back to Earth while I had the chance...

PRESENT DAY

"Wray to Lahanas!"

Mike jumped so violently that he scraped his back against the shelving behind him and pushed Shannon against the doors.

"Hey, watch it!"

"Keep your voice down..." He whispered, scrambling to find his commbadge in the confined space, eventually grabbing it from the top shelf amidst the pile of his trousers and her skirt, "Lahanas here, are my thirty minutes up?"

"I'm... sorry Lieutenant, I don't deal with your duty shifts."

"Of course, sorry... go ahead."

"No, I'm sorry to disturb you on your break but I was told that you were seen with our reporter from FNS... Shannon O'Donnell?"

"Oh, yes, that's right, she had a question regarding... dirty clothes." He shook his head as Shannon's face turned to puzzlement.

"*Right*... well, do you know where she went, from dirty clothes?"

"Sorry Miss Wray... I don't."

"Very well. Oh Lieutenant, Captain Austin was looking for you in Security."

"Aye..." Mike sighed, "I'll catch up to him."

"Thank you lieutenant."

Mike closed the channel and cursed, distributing the lower-body clothes. He jostled for space with Shannon in the supply locker as they sped to get back into decent order.

"Same time next rotation?" She asked, finishing buttoning up her blue shirt and then forcing herself back into her light pink suit she had planned to wear on-air after what should have been a successful FTL warm up.

"I didn't know the Federation News Network was so efficient."

"Well if you can't keep up, we'll just have to work on your stamina."

She laughed and checked him over.

"Smart and handsome?" He asked.

"Smart and beautiful?"

"And sassy."

"And sassy... okay, let's go."

She pressed her ear to the door. *Silence.*

"Are we good?" Mike asked.

"I think so." She tapped the door control and both were left stunned when Camille was waiting outside for them, her arms folded with an eyebrow raised.

"Miss O'Donnell... Lieutenant Lahanas.... How are we both doing in the middle of this crisis?"

"Oh, well... we're able to let off some steam now and again." Shannon joked,

"Not that the Captain needs to know... how." Michael winked to Camille's disgruntlement.

"Perhaps, but the Captain does still want to see you."

"Right, ma'am... and ma'am." Mike took a few steps backwards before turning on himself and walked off towards Operations. Once he had turned a corner, Camille turned to Shannon and beamed.

"Good work, Shannon." She said, "What did you find out?"

"Rush is in their main brig, still no plans to let him out though... he has arranged to meet with the Captain when he is available."

"If Captain Austin won't look at the bigger picture... we need to. If Doctor Rush isn't freed by the time this "New Eden" situation is dealt with, do what you do best... make a story out of this, force the people to take action."

"You want me to start a rebellion or something?"

"I'm asking you to remind everyone aboard that we need to get home if we're going to survive... and if we're going to get home we need Rush. Once the general population is firmly behind that, Austin will need to listen. But if worst comes to worst, we outnumber Starfleet... they take orders from a civilian Government. Regardless of our situation, I *will* take command of this station if I need to."

"Can you do that?"

"Just remember, this isn't the military outpost it once was and I won't let Captain Austin slow our efforts to get us back to where we belong."

"We've accelerated again!" Mike heard Riley shout as he ventured through the Operations doors,

"We're changing course aswell!"

"I repeat, I wish to speak to a Gallentean Administrator aboard the Supercarrier Nyx..." Jack had repeated time after time after time, to no avail, "Ah! Michael, you're here... what took you?"

"Sorry sir," Mike replied, "I was dealing with a civilian."

"Well as you've probably gathered, Destiny is proceeding into New Eden space... right where we aren't supposed to go. I've tried to contact this "administrator," but if we can't get a response then we will just have to go to the Nyx Supercarrier itself. Mike I want you to prep a shuttle for yourself, me and Miss Armstrong."

"Chloe Armstrong? What about Miss Wray, sir?"

"Ah, I'm sure Miss Wray will take pleasure in knowing that I will be leaving the station in her hands."

Mike shrugged this off and asked no further questions before backtracking towards the shuttlebay, providing that Destiny would let them open the main doors and depart.

"Captain Austin?"

"Yes... Mr. Emerson?" Jack looked at Ben behind the science console, still getting used to seeing him there as opposed to the Scottish scientist.

"I don't think you need to be told that we can't stop the ship if anything happens to you?"

"I don't think you do."

"Well say we jump into FTL within the same amount of time as before... that gives you about three days to get there, do your thing, get back."

"Riley?"

Riley looked up and cleared his throat.

"I can calculate our position at various stages in the time window... but it will take you just under 24 hours to reach the Supercarrier... you have a day to get there, a day to find this administrator and then a day to return."

"Right then... no pressure. Austin to Armstrong."

A few moments after tapping his commbadge, a croaky voice replied.

"Go ahead."

"Councillor, I may need to borrow your daughter for a few days."

THREE YEARS AGO

STARFLEET'S PRESIDENTIAL RESIDENCE - EARTH - SAN FRANCISCO

Camille kept her hands in her lap as she perched on the edge of the leather sofa, with the view of San Francisco bay glowing majestically through the large crystal clear windows behind the bold, wooden desk, complete with UFP emblem and personalised lamp.

President Nanietta Bacco, one of the unluckiest leaders the Universe had ever seen. Not only had she served through the demise of the Romulan Star Empire, but she was also at the top during the Borg Invasion, seven years ago. On top of that, relations with the Klingon Empire had broken down and the FNN's revelation that the Vulcan's knew of the Hobus threat had caused uproar.

"If I may ask, Madame President, what does Admiral Janeway hope to achieve by leading her own survey team to the Hobus system?" Camille spoke up, pushed by the silence that followed the President's offer of a drink.

"Mission: Ground Zero." Bacco replied, walking around Camille, placing a small reddish beverage on the elegant coffee table between the armchair and the sofa. She settled into the armchair opposite the nervous diplomat, "This is the first scientific survey of the area since the event. It may yet prove to be a pointless exercise, but Starfleet is determined to get a root cause of the supernova... and so am I. A star doesn't threaten the entire galaxy without raising a few eyebrows." The President sipped her own beverage and placed it down on the table, her large white hair bun almost reflecting the light of the bay as she reached over.

"Yes, yes of course. I only ask as the Xai are becoming suspicious of our stream of ships flowing into the region."

"Then you can tell the Xai that that stream of ships will continue until we get a definitive cause. Starfleet has my support on this, Camille, they should have yours aswell. *But*, you didn't seek an audience with me just to talk about supernovas and scientific survey."

"No, Madame President, but it was Xai-related. As you know, their talks aboard Pioneer Station with the Firenze have become somewhat aggressive..."

"Indeed, however, the advantages of both their races coming together under one banner... are unimaginable."

"I agree, but that won't happen soon, they're threatening to go to war... in the asteroid field if necessary. I'm sorry Madame President, but I can't control these talks any longer, you have to take them out of Pioneer Station before there is bloodshed."

"If either a Xai or Firenze force enters Federation Space, we will know about."

"Would we? Pioneer Station sits awfully close to what was Romulan space... they could quite easily cut through there now that the Star Empire has been... well, dissolved."

"We still have our Asteroid Base back in the system... under new management I might add."

"The Asteroid Base is crippled! The crew have been drained... this... Jack Austin won't be able to replace Amber Munro easily,"

"The loss of Captain Munro was truly tragic, especially at the hands of a traitor to Humanity but... time is a great healer, I know that more than many, Camille. Jack Austin will do great things with Asteroid Base: Alpha, I can feel it."

"And what of the Xai?"

"The peace process between the Xai and the Firenze will continue as planned and I will be blunt, Wray. If you no longer feel that you are up to the challenge of negotiating between these two races aboard Pioneer Station, I will take you off the project and assign you elsewhere. Is that what you desire?"

Camille was now laid back into the sofa, the moment she nervously entered this room now felt like a lifetime ago as she failed to break eye contact with the President.

"No, Madame President, it isn't. I will continue the peace process, but with the greatest respect, I am warning you... if this goes terribly wrong, then you may be making a decision that will cost us dearly in the long run."

"Then I will be the one to make it... but a Borg Armada couldn't run me out of this office, neither could the extinction of an entire race on our doorstep with allies that knew what was coming... I will survive Pioneer Station, Camille... now, if that's all."

President Bacco pursed her lips and whisked the two glasses off of the table. Without farewell or dismissal, she had left the room and Camille, still looking out at San Francisco Bay. Nanietta Bacco would be out of office in less than three years, stating in her final speech that she had "been there too long" and that the Federation needed "new blood and new ideas." These words came months after word reached the office of the President that the Xai-Firenze war had come to an end – both sides lost.

PRESENT DAY

Camille watched from Operations as the doors to the top-side shuttlebay slid apart, revealing the Delta Flyer IV. Riley confirmed that the away team was ready to depart.

"Mr. Riley, how long until Destiny reaches maximum speed?"

"No way of telling, ma'am. It could be later than last time due to the increased power drain, but I wouldn't want to suggest anything that could get them trapped out here – so my three-day estimate still stands."

"Did you hear that, Captain?" Camille asked in a louder voice over the open comm channel.

"Loud and clear, we'll see you in a few days. Do not under any circumstances attempt to stop the station by extreme force if we don't make it back."

"Captain..."

"Camille, right now and up until we get back, if, we get back... you're responsible for the survival of everyone aboard that station. You said the people needed a strong leader, prove that they have one. If we don't make it, get them home, all of them. Good luck, Austin out."

Camille felt eyes burning into her skull as the comm channel audibly cut off.

"Riley..." Her voice suddenly choked up, prompting her to cover her mouth with a vertical fist and clear her throat, "Clear... clear the Delta Flyer for launch, please." She added.

"Yes ma'am. Delta Flyer you are clear for departure from Shuttlebay One... bon voyage, bring back a souvenir from the Supercarrier for me!"

The Operations crew, and most of the station's residents took to all the windows and observation platforms they could to witness the away team soaring out of the shuttlebay and up towards the hub of New Eden space. For Camille at least, these three days were going to be tough and very, very slow.

21 HOURS LATER

It was nice to see Christopher again, even if it was only for an hour or so. Councillor Armstrong was helping Camille draw up an official census of who was aboard the station – specifically to find out who didn't have time to leave before the Romulan attack which forced them out here. She was dreading this, who would she find? Children? Would there be entire families of all ages trapped in another galaxy? *Damn it...*

"Adam Heaton, six years old... Kasey McDonnell, eleven... Lucy and Bradley Ward, sixteen and fifteen..." The councillor continued, "They were due for departure on the second to last shuttle run out... but you know what happened next."

"How did this happen?" Camille sighed and rubbed her forehead, her elbows sat firmly upright on the ready room desk, looking away from the "Do Not Touch" sign stuck across the sheet at the other end of the room, "Any families with children on-board should have been evacuated first... who missed out on the second shuttle run?"

"Remaining shop keeps, traders and other civilian commodities."

"*What?!* So we still have civilian families *and* a non-research team population on-board? Oh this is wonderful. What kind of people are we talking about?"

"Well..." Christopher mumbled as he worked his way through multiple PADD pages, "Artefact salesmen, and the owner of the Acco-Bar..."

"Clever..."

"Isn't it. We also have a bunch of general traders and... oh, interesting..."

"What?"

"A group of human and alien courtesans from the Apollo 12 colony who 'belong' to a 'Mr. White.'"

"Mr. White? Seriously?"

"That's what it says... oh, and the PR guy from the gift shop."

"Scammers, crooks and human-slash-alien prosti... courtesans. How do Humans still end up in that kind of profession?"

“Power... wealth... greed? This Mr. White fellow could own a couple of moons somewhere...”

Camille would have smirked at this moment, but this moment was an unorthodox one, as she had nowhere to put these people. Where would they fit into daily life out here? Living isn't enough anymore, it's about survival, and Camille couldn't see these people willing to share what they had and pitch in to help others make it through this ordeal.

“Well who knows...” Camille said hopefully, “Maybe fear of death will push them in the right direction.”
“We're currently flying through a region of space filled with advanced races to protect us... I don't think that fear of death will be arriving within the next 48 hours at least.”
That time, Camille did smirk.

“But you're right,” Christopher continued, his eyes drooping and breathing heavier than it was when he arrived, “What do we do with them?”
“We let them do what they do best...” Camille closed the lid on the monitor displaying the station record, “Keep the shops open with limited and closely monitored supplies... keep the Acco-Bar running under close supervision...”
“Would Captain Austin mind?”
“If we can't be civilised... we may aswell activate the self-destruct and be done with it.”
“What about Mr. White and the courtesans?”
“Mr. *White*.... Can expect to see me quite soon.”

“Brace, brace, brace!” Jack called out, moments before the *Flyer* was jolted forward as the trade lane released the small craft at high speed. Chloe groaned as her stomach churned during the momentary lapse within the inertial dampeners. “Are we all good?”
“Fine back here.” Mike confirmed, looking over at Chloe and then back to his display at the elevated tactical console whereas Chloe sat towards the aft at the auxiliary science console which she was using to look over bundles of information which was being poured into the databanks from the New Eden data centre.
“According to this,” She started, intrigued, “Gallenteans pride themselves on being the kings of entertainment, mass producing everything from cheap erotic flicks to elaborate stage shows. Maybe we should book tickets...”
“For what?” Jack joked, “The erotic flick or the stage show?”
“Or erotic stage show.” Added Mike.

The trio shared a laugh but Jack's died away as he spotted something out of the fore windows.
“Ladies and Gentlemen... this is your captain speaking, out of your forward window you will see the Nyx Supercarrier...” Jack leaned forward for a better look at the large cruiser orbiting the fourth planet in the fifth system of New Eden and he was quickly joined by Mike and Chloe. Both of them shared the same sentiment, *Wow*...

Jack's console confirmed that it had finished its scans, and the results were incredible.

“That thing is a ship?!” Chloe exclaimed towards the crescent shaped vessel, with numerous apparent entrances and external docking platforms.
“It's a ship alright.” Jack replied, “A ship that is slightly larger... than a Federation Starbase. Heavily fortified aswell.”

Suddenly, they jumped in their places as the computer voice they first heard aboard the *Destiny* returned.

"Hello, welcome to Caille, current port of call for the Nyx Supercarrier. Do you wish to engage in landing procedures for Caille? Do you wish to dock with the Nyx Supercarrier? Do you wish to declare an emergency?"

"I would like to dock with the Nyx Supercarrier." Jack declared.

"You have chosen to dock with the Nyx Supercarrier. We have the ball. We have the ball. We have the ball."

"What does that mean?" Jack's question was soon answered as Mike sped back to his console and Jack's suddenly displayed limited functionality, "Lieutenant! I've lost helm control!"

"Confirmed, sir... the Nyx Supercarrier has control... they're taking us along a heading that will take us towards one of their starboard hangers."

"I'm getting pretty tired of losing control of my ships..."

As suddenly as the digital female voice had burst into life, the *Flyer's* displays were brought to life with flashing, colourful images that appeared to be advertisements for various events and organisations within New Eden.

"The Protus Type Four Mining Barge." Chloe read off of the display back at her post, "Only three-hundred million ISC... Inter-stellar credits..."

"You could use it to get to Magnar III to see the voluptuous night dancers." Mike added, "Or... I don't believe it..."

"What?!" Jack called out.

"Or... visit the Garden of Eden, sir..."

"Garden of Eden?"

"Really?" Chloe asked, "The actual Garden of Eden?"

"That's what it says." Mike shook his head in disbelief, "What are the odds of that?"

"What were the odds of us being here in the first place?" Jack asked rhetorically, "Miss Armstrong I hope you're ready to meet the Gallentean Administrator... because we're accelerating."

OVER ONE YEAR AGO

PIIONEER STATION OPERATIONS – ACCOBAR SYSTEM – THREE DAYS SINCE THE ATTACK ON THE ASTEROID BASES

Christopher had joined Camille at the fore of Operations and together they watched as Administrator Keegan's office was dismantled and taken out bit by bit. On the viewscreen behind them, Asteroid Base: Alpha drifted the asteroid in ruins and the external Starfleet structure steamed from the aftermath of the spontaneous lava eruption. AB: Alpha's Operations had been completely destroyed following the numerous explosions which almost claimed Jack's Austin's life days earlier. It was a dark time for everyone; many lives had been lost on Asteroid Bases Delta and Charlie and Asteroid Field Operations had been brought to a complete halt and diplomatic relations in the Tyrella Sector was none existent.

Since learning of the Vulcan's knowledge of the Hobus Supernova, the Klingon force had all but departed the Asteroid Field – dealing a crippling blow to the mining operations and testing the Federation's relations with the Empire even moreso than usual. Pioneer Station's services were now meaningless and the President in mutual agreement with Starfleet, decided that it should be tore apart piece by piece.

"End of an era." A new voice said to Camille's side, it was Chloe Harper.

"When do you expect the deconstruction to be complete?" Christopher asked.

"There is still plenty to do... we will be coordinating from the lower decks for the time being but it could take months up to a year..."

"Any ideas what Jeff plans to do after he leaves?" Camille asked

"Not a peep, I don't think he expected the "shining beacon of hope" to fade away so quickly."

"None of us did. But we did our best."

"Apparently it wasn't good enough, regardless of Hirogen infiltrators and supernovas. But what about you, Camille? Any plans? I heard that this new Project Charlie needs someone to coordinate the civilian effort."

"Asteroid Base: Alpha? No thanks... If I go over there I'll probably be thrust in the middle of another war or turned into a blob of jelly... or worse. No, I think I'll take a step back for a while... see how things pan out under the new Government. I'm through with responsibility for the timebeing."

PRESENT DAY

"Miss Wray, ma'am!" Riley called out, as both Lieutenant's Pallet and Thomas entered Operations,

"We've got visual incoming! Oh and... nice to see you Ruby."

"Good to see *you*..." Ruby replied, taking over the auxiliary control station behind Riley.

"What do you see?" Camille asked, striding over to the four segmented stations.

"At least six small vessels, according to the Gallentean database... they're more or less law enforcement ships."

"Damn it, looks like somebody noticed. Can we hail them?"

"Negative... we can't make contact unless they call us first."

The *Flyer* continued to soar towards the Supercarrier with no signs of stopping or even slowing.

"Please transmit your docking ID." The Gallentean computer voice repeatedly blurted out throughout the vessel. "Please transmit your docking ID."

"*We don't have one!*" Jack snapped, "This is an urgent request to see the Gallentean Administrator, we require docking clearance!"

"I'm not getting anything yet." Mike noted, "Nothing that looks like a docking ID, at least."

"What happens if we don't have one?!" Jack called out to Chloe, who was still peering through the database despite hurtling towards the Supercarrier with no means of docking.

"I don't know! But considering the docking procedure is automatic... and we need the docking ID to open the hanger doors for us... I'd say we crash and burn."

"Right..."

"Guys I think we have a problem!" Ben shouted, pointing out of the window, "Two of those police ships are just... hovering or something..in front of us, they aren't moving!"

"Then we need control of the station, now!" Camille gestured for Ben to retake his temporary post.

"I can't give it to you... I need Rush."

"There's no time!" Riley exclaimed, "We're gonna hit!"

Camille tapped the commbadge Jack had provided for her before he departed.

"All hands this is Wray... brace for impact. Damage and casualties to be expected. Medical and hazard teams on standby." The Ops crew took hold of their posts while Camille held onto the circular display, pondering over the implications of the station colliding with two Gallentean ships, "God help us." She added to herself.

But Ruby was much less cautious. While Jasmine was not looking, she stepped forward to the front of Operations, her breath obscuring the large window. Instead of sharing the same face of dismay as the others, a small smile showed itself from the corner of her mouth.

“*Bang* and we’re dead.” She whispered.

Jack continued to rant for assistance from the Supercarrier’s computer, but no help was given in return. Instead, the Nyx Supercarrier obscured the nearest star and the *Flyer* fell into darkness, overshadowed by the approaching hanger doors.

Mike gave up searching for a docking ID as it became apparent as none was being sent. He looked back and Chloe, too, had swapped digging through the Gallentean information for blankly staring at the inevitable through the forward observation windows.

“Hey, are you alright?” Mike called out.

“Never better.” She replied sarcastically, hardly audible over Jack’s insistence that they needed to dock.

“We’ll be okay; alright... we’ll be okay. They won’t just let us crash into them...”

“Won’t they? It’s a big ship... we’re just a tiny, tiny smear on their doors.”

As the last drop of exterior lightning faded from the cockpit, Jack fell quiet. The Nyx Supercarrier was only moments away, and the large, grey tinted mechanical doors in front of them refused to open. The impact alarms were sounding and the *Flyer* would not return control to the passengers aboard her. Jack mumbled the one thing that entered his mind.

“*Shit...*”

5

Some things never change. The majority of the male population of the milky way galaxy, Human, Klingon, Romulan or Ferengi alike take pleasure in intoxication and watching those they find to be sexually appealing perform in public arenas. Such was the case on Borex Three. When settlers from races across the galaxy weren't working for survival in the Trillium mines, they were kicking back and soaking in the exotic night life.

Tonight was the third day of the seven day cycle around the Borex star. Wednesday to us Human folk. It was a pretty average night in the *Corillian* bar, off duty miners and other such labourers goaded on the female entertainment on the neon lit stage in the centre of the main lounge.

There were two unfamiliar faces in *Corillian* that night. One within a trenchcoat, with a glass of Liaopa juice in his hand, his eyes keeping a close watch on the second. The second was the dancer to the right of the first. Keeping in unison with the other two, she wore very little. A red velvet strip ran across her buxom chest and a flimsy cut triangular piece of a similar design shrouded her waistline.

In the hour she had been performing, she had become very popular. But that was the idea. It was traditional for the dancers to each pick a spectator, lead them to the back room and the opposite or same sex counterpart would emerge with a smile on their faces while the performer would emerge much richer.

But tonight it was different; there would be no random selection, not for *her*. She knew her target. Besides the man in the trenchcoat watching her every wave of the hips and stroke of the thighs, was the one she would select to be lead into the private suites in the back of the bar. She intentionally stepped to the edge of the stage, allowing him a glance of what he desired. After strictly finishing off the last of his ale, he was taken aback when she reached down and grabbed his collar, leading him around the stage and towards the back, all the while keeping eye contact with one another as she had been taught to.

As they approached the rear doors, his pace quickened while hers slowed. Eventually, he was in front, giving her the opportunity to look back over her shoulder and give the nod to the Starfleet officer in the trenchcoat. Now inside and with privacy achieved, the target jumped down onto the maroon cushioned sofa and began to tear off his own clothes.

"Come on then, darling... show old Badger what you have to offer..."

While waiting for her opportunity, the best course of action would be to play along, so she did. She turned her back to him and slowly removed the tight velvet strip which allowed her breasts to breathe, just out of his view. She looked over her shoulder and gave him the most alluring look she could while just next door, the Starfleet officer positioned to watch over her had shuffled through the crowds and knowingly pulled the emergency alarm.

'Badger' growled and got to his bare feet as the lights dimmed in the private suite. The dancer turned, giving him the sight he thought he had been denied. He smiled, one last time.

"Forget this, where were we?" He chuckled, but not for long. His upper teeth faded from view after she dealt a powerful blow to his head while crossing under his legs, taking him to the floor. She went down with him, keeping a knee on the back of his neck while the rest of her body kept him down. She leant forward and pulled out a grey tank top from under the sofa upon which he had been sitting. It was Starfleet's own. Now wearing more than two velvet cut outs, she reached around inside his pockets and pulled out all kinds of miscellaneous "accessories" before finding her prize, a piece of paper with notes scribed onto it, and a small data pad.

"Hope you got your money's worth..." She laughed as the door bust open, revealing her Starfleet colleague, "What took you so long?"

"Come on, Ensign, cut me some slack... there were more than a few distractions out there." The charge up of energy weapons from the lounge told them that it was time to go, "Let's get to the beam out site!"

"Right behind you!"

"Ladies first..."

"As I said, right behind you!"

She smirked as he rolled his eyes and took the lead.

PRESENT DAY

Jasmine let out an involuntary cry as she hit the ground. Camille had slid down onto her back, one hand still grasping the display and Ben and Riley had been pushed down onto their consoles as Ruby looked on, still standing as two fiery blasts faded away coming up from the underside of the asteroid.

"Report!" Camille shrieked as a shower of sparks rained down onto the display, trying to maintain her dignity as she pulled herself back to her feet.

"I can only hazard a guess." Riley grimaced as he saw the blasts outside, "We've struck the ships."

"You, you and you!" She aimed her finger towards two Starfleet officers and a member of Rush's team, "Run.... *Run* to sections two through six... I want damage reports, casualty reports... from every department. Go! Riley! I need long range communications; we need contact with the Delta Flyer as soon as possible."

"No promises, ma'am."

"Do your best!"

Jack shuddered as a cold wave flew over him. Was that what it felt like to die? Not unless hell was the cockpit of the *Delta Flyer*. He opened his eyes to see the inside of the Nyx Supercarrier in front of him.

"Did you see that?!" Jack heard Mike ask behind him, "the doors didn't actually exist... we just flew through them!"

"Yeah, terrific." Chloe mumbled at the back, still shaken.

"Greetings, Delta Flyer."

"Oh here we go again." Jack said in response to the female voice over the comm.

"I'm sorry, what was that?" She asked in return to Jack's mumblings.

"Wait, you heard that? You're a living, breathing person?!" Jack couldn't help but sigh with relief.

"Very much so, sir." The presumably Gallentean woman laughed, "We get that a lot. Now, about this urgent request to see the Administrator."

"Yes...?"

"I'm afraid he is quite occupied at the moment, there has been an incident on the outskirts."

"What..." Jack hesitated, "What kind of incident."

"I don't have all the details, sir, but I've heard reports of an asteroid colliding with some of our ships." Jack's mouth was left hanging open.

“Is there a reason for your urgency, sir?”

“You can say that.” Jack retorted, bluntly, “I’m the Commanding Officer of that asteroid.”

The voice on the other end of the channel fell silent but for muffled whispers.

“One moment... I’ll have to transfer your communication channel.”

The Nyx Supercarrier wasn’t just a ship, it was a city – and a bloody big one as Mike described it. There was a Presidium, where the ruling council of New Eden, with representatives from the five major races of the New Eden – the proud Gallenteans, the religious Caderilli, the fierce Yumok, the scientifically advanced Ashara and the mysterious Eternals.

When Jack queried The Eternals at the security check-in for entry into the Presidium, the blue-skinned amphibious looking create that was patting him down gave a rather curious answer. Only three Eternals had ever been seen at the same time – and sightings around New Eden were rare. Despite being outnumbered by the other races by billions upon billions, these few secluded figures had earned enough respect to sit on the council.

But delving into New Eden society wasn’t Jack’s biggest concern. For all he knew, Destiny had been destroyed by its supposed impact with Gallentean ships. Even if that was not the case, there were bound to be injuries – injuries that they could not afford to have out here. Not only that, for reasons beyond his comprehension, he had admitted to being the commanding officer of Destiny and was either minutes away from a jail cell, an interrogation room, or if things started looking up, an alternative to the Gallentean administrator.

Upon emerging from the Delta Flyer, Jack, Mike and Chloe had been separated from eachother and after what felt like a thirty minute walk and a quick grounded shuttle trip; Jack had been escorted through one of the many markets on the Nyx Supercarrier. For such an advanced looking vessel, the parts of the interior he had seen were akin to Old-Earth society. Market traders had been barking to passing customers while news criers traversed through the crowd. The market itself was in a large rectangular area, with a large bubble shaped skylight – letting the atmospheric light of the orbited planet gleam through. Table stalls were scattered everywhere while the more up-market stores had their own buildings built into the hull of the carrier – complete with audio advertisements and large neon signs.

Every now and again, Jack passed large cylinder holographic displays, which scanned his identification badge in a millisecond. Each one displayed an alien face and proceeded to call him “Visitor 381830” followed by reasons why he should purchase certain narcotics and personal shields.

On the other side of the technologically deprived and yet technologically advanced marketplace, Jack was hurried into a much cleaner and much more sophisticated area of the Nyx Supercarrier by means of a lengthy elevator ride upwards to the Presidium. So here he was, being patted down by a large fish-like figure, unaware of the status of his station and the people he was to protect.

Camille stood in the centre of Operations aboard Destiny, much as she stood in the centre of the command deck on Pioneer Station and watched as those around her waited to see what happened next. What more could they do? Ben had given up, declaring it impossible to retake control of the station without Doctor Rush’s help and he knew she agreed.

Captain Austin's reasoning for keeping the Scottish scientist in the brig became less and less apparent as events unfolded. Destiny was still being pursued by the remaining police ships – but they were taking no further action as the station continued to infiltrate New Eden space. Worryingly, larger contacts had been detected on an intercept course – as Destiny kindly brought them up on the main display, but they were too far away to make identification in the Gallentean database. But they would be on top of them in just under a day. Giving Jack and Chloe the time they needed to explain their situation to the Gallentean Administrator – or so she hoped.

One thing she had noticed since arriving in the... whatever galaxy they were in, she was noticing small things which concerned her. For example, the Chief Medical Officer dropping off a PADD for the Captain in the ready room while he wasn't here – where was the logic in that? She definitely took longer than she needed to do it aswell. She also had Ruby Pallett, the supposed science/engineering department hybrid who since recovering hadn't done much other than stand around and spectate – much like Camille was doing now.

Curiously, however, Chief Science Officer Jasmine Thomas hadn't stopped since Ruby had been released from Sickbay after exposing doctor Rush as the one responsible for the malfunctions aboard the station. What was even more curious was how Jasmine had begun to glance at Ruby when she wasn't looking – as though she was suspicious of her somehow. But Camille could see why. Lieutenant Pallett was not the same person she remembered meeting on Pioneer Station. She was hardly speaking to anyone in public, never cracked a *warm* smile. Granted, she had been thrown the length of Engineering, slammed into the core casing and had her body fall down to the ground level... only to wake up to find herself potentially millions of lightyears away. Nobody had too much to smile about, but Camille and Jasmine knew Ruby – and something wasn't right.

FOUR YEARS AGO

USS EXPLORER – TRANSPORTER ROOM ONE

Captain Anthony Thomas began to laugh as Jasmine Thomas and Mike Lahanas materialised onto the pad of the Intrepid Class ship. Jasmine beamed as she lifted up the data pad she had collected from the planet while Mike looked on.

"Well done, Ensign!" The Captain stepped onto the pad and took Jasmine into his arms, "I knew you could do it." He whispered.

"Captain..." Mike interjected, "I had a moment to quickly look over the information contained on the data pad... it *is* what the Commodore was looking for."

"Then we may have a problem." Captain Thomas led them off the transporter pad and tapped his commbadge, "Thomas to the Helm."

"Go ahead, sir." A voice replied.

"Set a course for Commodore Wright's coordinates... what was it? 'Asteroid Base: Alpha?'"

"That's correct sir."

"Maximum warp, Lieutenant, Thomas out." He took the pad out of Jasmine's hand and held it up, "Get some rest you two." He directed at Jasmine and Mike, "If this information is accurate, we may have a hell of a lot of work to do tomorrow. See you at 0700."

Mike nodded in acknowledgement and headed for the door, where Ensign Ruby Pallett was waiting outside. Jasmine watched as he hugged her following his three-day mission, but her vision was soon blocked by Captain Thomas.

"I expect I'll be getting a... omitted report... at least I hope so." He joked.

"You got it..."

"Well done again, Jasmine... for all we know, you two may have just saved a *lot* of lives."
"Thanks dad... you're welcome." She smirked and he replied with a smile. When he turned to leave, Ruby and Mike were gone and Jasmine's smirk had vanished.

PRESENT DAY

Jack only just caught a glimpse of what appeared to be a public council chamber behind the lush green flora before he was hurried into a small office-like room, complete with rounded desks, pictures of various industrial items and a strange device in the corner that was emitting a rather pleasant freshly cut grass scent. The two men... what he assumed to be men... in black armoured suits, complete with opaque astronaut-esq helmet guided Jack to the fragile, plastic looking chair on the other side of a large, white desk made of some metal.

He watched silently as Chloe, too, was guided into the room and placed next to the seated Jack. He rose from his chair to let her sit, but one of geared "guards" placed a stern hand on his left shoulder, pushing him back into it... he would apparently be sitting for this tense meeting. After sharing an equally curious glance, Jack and Chloe were drawn to look at the white, quite shiny wall on the other side of the desk as a rectangular shape suddenly began to turn, functioning as a doorway to whatever was on the other side and vice-versa.

From the darkness within emerged a humanoid male. In fact, he could easily be mistaken for a Human, had it not been for the purple highlights around his extruding eyes, not to mention the slight ridges up his neck. He made no eye contact with either Jack nor Chloe as he positioned himself above the luxury brown chair on his side of the desk. The second the wall behind him closed once more, he shot down onto his backside - with pinpoint precision and timing.

There was an air of suspense in the room while he reorganised items in front of him, still not yet acknowledging the potential criminals in front of him. Of course, that's if this person was in fact a male - it's so hard to tell with new alien life. But for now at least, Jack went along with the assumption, then his voice pierced the silence.

"So..." He almost shouted, his tones lowering for the rest of his sentence, "You are the two who have been nagging our computer nervous systems for an audience with the Administrator aboard this command carrier?"

"Yes..." Jack cleared his throat, "May I ask where my security chief is...?"

"You may not."

"Excuse me..?"

"Mr... Austin... you command the large death asteroid currently piercing our space?"

"Now there's a story that you need to hear..."

"I think not. Two of our interceptors were destroyed attempting to make contact with your rock."

"Asteroid..."

"You ignored our laws... then you have the nerve to turn up here. Explain."

His eyes were directed at Jack, but it was Chloe who jumped in between them.

"Excuse me, Mr..?"

"Craice. Xevior Craice."

"Mr Craice. In order for us to explain our actions, we must inform you of our situation aboard our... rock."

"Very well... proceed." He said tiresomely, "But I advise you to hurry before we have no choice but to stop your... asteroid... by force."

Rush smirked and looked up at Camille as the Brig forcefield lowered.

"So... the captain has finally seen the error of his ways." He declared.

"Not quite. Doctor Rush... walk with me."

"Very well."

Camille and Rush brushed past the dubious security officer in the doorway and walked out into one of Destiny's longest hallways - traversing the width of the station with junctions and offshoots every few steps.

"There is a bit of a situation developing, Doctor."

"I gathered that when I was thrown from my rather uncomfortable rack." Rush said while acknowledging the apparent looks of relief from passers-by.

"We have entered a region of space which does not allow a ship... or other means of transport of Destiny's size to simply traverse through at will. They are restricted to... trade lanes on the outskirts."

"The Atroxin use similar methods of transport for trade and commerce transports. There are various 'gates' along a route which ships travel through. Each 'gate' pushes that ship along at almost warp speed."

"Well you see our problem?"

"Of course. Destiny doesn't want to use the trade lanes."

"Precisely."

Rush came to a halt, Camille followed suit.

"So let me guess. The captain wants me to stop the station."

"Actually... the captain doesn't know you're out."

"I expect he will notice when I turn up in Operations."

"Yes... well... keep walking, there's more to this story than you know."

SEVEN YEARS AGO

USS EXPLORER - CREW MESSHALL - DECK 3

When Mike queried Ruby's unusually quiet nature, she placed her fork in the centre of her mostly empty tray and nodded her head in the direction of Jasmine at the other end of the mess.

"What? She's sitting alone..." He pointed out... which ironically was her point entirely.

"She doesn't sit alone, it's not her style or nature... she doesn't sit alone."

"We all need a little space now and again, Rubes."

"Did you say something to her down on that planet? She was fine before she left with you."

"Aw come on! I didn't say a thing, we were getting on as well as usual."

"No... I'm going over there."

"Hey, hey, come on... she might just need some time to think about a few things, that's all."

"Michael." She said with force, using the full length of his forename, "I am going over there to make sure my friend is alright."

"Yes ma'am." He quickly replied.

Ruby took her time walking towards Jasmine's table, giving her a chance to see her coming. But she didn't and it took her slightly by surprise when Ruby sat herself down sharply opposite.

"Sorry!" She quickly apologised, after Jasmine's tray was flipped over after her hand hit the side of it after being brought out of her deep chain of thought. Fortunately for both of them, there was nothing on it. "Not hungry?" Ruby added, noticing this.

"Not particularly."

"Look Jas, why don't you come and join-"

"No thanks." She snapped, "I'm... okay, here... really. But thanks."

"Nice try, lady... I'm not some stranger you can brush off... talk to me, what's going on?"

"I *could* tell you." She replied, looking up and smiling weakly, briefly, "But you wouldn't like it."

PRESENT DAY

There was a spell of silence as Rush returned to Operations, led by Camille, but the crew soon returned to their duties. Ben didn't hesitate in stepping aside, allowing Rush access to the Operations console besides Riley. Camille watched as he turned his gaze back and forth between the stars and distant planets, and his console.

"Our course has been altered since your last coordinates calculation." He said in time for a map of the region to appear on the main display, gaining the Ops crew's attention, "This is not the first time Destiny has been here."

"What?" Camille inquired.

"This chart did not come from the... Gallentean... database you have connected with..."

"Alright... where are we going? The trade lanes?"

"The trade lanes, yes... but much deeper into New Eden space... we're going to draw a lot more attention than the two ships you destroyed."

"We didn't destroy them, Doctor... it was an accident."

"Quite an accident... now, I believe you have a problem."

"Captain Austin and the away team..."

"They won't know where to find us." Riley confirmed, facing Camille, "Unless of course they can gain help from the administrator they went to see."

"Then it's up to them... but Doctor Rush... why did Destiny change course?"

"I'll just give her a quick nudge and ask her, shall I?"

"Doctor..."

"I can only assume that... this is what Destiny intended from the moment it ended the star system... traverse through and enter the same trade lane it did do the first time it was here. Whether New Eden law has changed since then... I would not know."

Camille sighed and turned towards the circular display, placing both hands down upon it and closing her eyes.

"Rush..." She spoke through her contemplation, "Ben informed me of something you found... in the transporter room?"

"Yes..." Rush sighed heavily, glaring at Ben, now at the other side of Operations.

"A communications platform... to Earth... of some kind?"

"Correct." He subtly snarled.

"I need you to reactivate it."

Jack got to his feet as Craice did, due to Xevior's intentions to leave.

"Mr. Craice, please..." Chloe pleaded, "It is not a lie. We have no control over Destiny's course."

"Well that's unfortunate, because it is heading towards us now. I must depart and inform the administrator."

"Craice!" Jack barked as Xevior turned towards his secret doorway, "Allow us to speak to the administrator directly... we can work this out. Destiny is not a threat to you."

"Not a threat... not a *threat*? We have already had to restrict access through our space for all visitors and two of our pilots have been disintegrated by your "station."

Jack was left reeling when Mike suddenly fell into the room. From what he could see, the security chief's face was slightly blooded on one side. Chloe slumped to the ground to help him out.

"Mike! What... are you okay?!"

"What the hell is this?!" Jack resisted the urge to dive over the table, "We come here in peace and you attack my security officer?!"

"He was resisting processing." Stated the third armoured patrol who entered the office behind the flung Lahanas.

"*Resisting?!!*" Mike shrieked, "Captain! I was only trying to find out if you were okay! Then this one slams me against the bulkhead and throws me through that processing chamber of theirs! I didn't retaliate, but I should have..."

"Don't rise to it, Commander... Listen to me, Craice... Destiny is intelligent somehow, that station out there adapts to situations. You would be making a big mistake to confront it with force... not that you could make a bigger mistake than to assault my man."

As Chloe helped Mike back to his feet. Xevior stood firm, but calm.

"Guards... escort these three back to their ship and have the docking command drag them out into space. Get me a line to tactical response..."

"Tactical what?!"

"Tactical response, 'Captain,' your threats have been respectfully noted and will be passed along to the administrator."

"I thought you were the supposed peacekeepers around here? You're supposed to be promoting peace, not inciting conflict!"

"Who *are* you, Jack Austin... your race is new to us, you have not visited our territory before and yet you come here to tell us what we should and shouldn't be doing after destroying *two* of our ships. You are very fortunate to be escaping with your lives. It is a shame that those you lead aboard your station will not be granted the same fate."

OUTSIDE STARFLEET RESEARCH & DEVELOPMENT COMPLEX - PARIS - EARTH

James Robertson stood on the second level of the Eiffel Tower, awaiting his rather unusual rendezvous. His hands were closed around the metal grill which prevented him from falling over the edge. He was looking directly at the Presidential office, over the river. That's where she was being sent from, or *had* been sent from, as the turbolift signalled its arrival.

He turned towards the centre of the spire when the doors slid apart. Out walked three Starfleet officers. Or rather, *two*. Whereas the two male officers were in fact Starfleet security, the central female had travelled a rather vast distance to meet the curious captain.

"I have to say..." James said, "It's nice to see Elizabeth Weir again, after all this time... but obviously that's not why you're here, is it Miss Wray?"

"Captain Robertson... it's good to see you again... and trust me, it's good to be back. But I had to meet you halfway as I can't stay... this mind swap process takes up power we can't afford to waste."

"We were getting worried... after Ben returned to Destiny, we didn't hear a thing."

"That's because Doctor Rush swore him to secrecy after he found the communications platform."

"Why would he do that?"

"Why does Rush do anything?"

"Good point." He said, shaking Camille's hand, "So what's your situation?"

"Not good... we've made contact with an advanced race of beings in..."

"Wait, what? Where are you?"

"The next galaxy we jumped into..."

"Oh, that's all? Carry on...."

NYX SUPERCARRIER DOCKING RING SEVEN – NEW EDEN

Jack sprinted to the front of the Delta Flyer and hopped in the oversized seat at the helm.

"Full systems check, make it quick!" He shouted back to Mike.

"No signs of tampering, but I wouldn't have put it past them to scan us a few dozen times."

"Well we're sure as hell gonna be scanned a lot more before this is over, prepare for launch! Spool up the long range communicator and prepare to open a channel on all known-Federation channels."

"Making it happen, Cap'n!" Mike looked up at Chloe while the computer swiftly processed his requests, "Urhmm, Chloe... look.... Thanks for... helping me out back there."

Chloe turned her head towards the tactical station and simply smiled.

"*Lahanas!*" Jack barked as three small craft took position in front of the *Flyer*, hovering over the deep chasm below, into the superstructure of the carrier.

"Got it sir, green across the board! Ready to go!"

Jack engaged the engines and pulled two levers back besides him, raising the craft to the same level as the three Gallentean ships ahead. Jack engaged the thrusters and took the ship over them and towards the *hopefully still* holographic entrance. But Mike detected that the Gallentean ships were following.

"I thought they were letting us go?" He pointlessly asked Jack and Chloe.

"Yeah, while we were in *public*! Now they can make up whatever story they want once they've obliterated us!"

With such perfect timing, the *Flyer* jolted forward after taking an energy pulse up its backside. A faint explosion could be heard in the aft compartment in time with another pulse. This one projected the *Flyer* out of the carrier. Now in free space, a barrage of coloured weapons fire was being shot across the bow as Jack did his best to evade the enemy ships.

"Sir we need to defend!" Mike said as his training kicked in.

"Negative! Then we *will* be the guilty party here! I've got an idea, but I need that comm channel!"

"Working on it, sir!"

"Work faster, Lieutenant!"

Jack's evasive manoeuvres failed again as the *Flyer* was knocked off course, putting obvious strain on the inertial dampeners and Chloe struggled to stay sat upright.

"Changing our heading!" Jack announced, "Prepare for trade lane... speed... whatever!"

"Comm channel open, Captain!" Mike also announced.

"Destiny this is Austin, please respond! Destiny!"

"What if they can't reply?" Chloe suggested, "They might still hear you."

"Destiny this is Captain Jack Austin, if you can hear me, we need your current coordinates!"

Almost immediately, Mike's display was showing a grid map of the region, including Destiny's location.

"Sir... I... I don't know how but I have the coordinates."

"Already? That's impossible... I don't even think..."

"Well they're right here, sir, transferring to your console."

He was right, Destiny's location was clear and the trade lane Jack was heading to would cross paths with the station after only an hour's flight. With no contact with anyone aboard Destiny, Jack could only think of one explanation.

"Maybe it was Destiny..."

"Sir?" Mike said, curiously.

"*Captain Austin?*" Chloe inquired in unison.

"Destiny... the station... what if it... *she*... listened to my request and responded?"

"I don't think it works like that, sir." Mike shrugged off Jack's suggestion.

"Yeah well, a few years ago we didn't think that harmless "lump of rock" would have engines or romulan super weapons *or* that it was created by supernatural beings..."

"Good point."

"Alright buckle up! We're approaching the trade lane!"

In front of them was a large circular structure. As the ship neared, breaking off from their pursuers, the ring was lit up by an energy charge of sorts, illuminating it against the dark backdrop of space. A few more weapons were fired behind them, but they overshot and struck the ring. Fortunately, it was protected by a shield of sorts which glowed upon being hit.

"Hold on!" Jack cried out as he took them through the ring structure. The *Flyer* was instantly propelled forward and the star system around them was pulled back as the ship's controls turned themselves on autopilot. Jack, Mike and Chloe was now being dragged into their seats. Mike couldn't help but shout out at the amazing sub-light speeds they were performing.

"Hell of a ride, huh?!"

The conduit Jasmine had been working on in Operations suddenly lit up with a vibrant blue glow. She smiled, looked up and nodded to Doctor Rush who proceeded to divert more power to systems he had outlined in his "plan to gain access to Destiny's systems."

"Okay." He said to Jasmine, Ruby, Ben and Riley who were now crowding around his console, "Since Astrometrics is our only 'outside of the box' system, we're going to reconfigure it to control other systems as and when we need them."

"Where are you going to start?" Ben asked, peering over his shoulder.

"With all the data links running to the computer core... more specifically, the hidden files we discovered after the AOTAB."

"AOTAB?"

"Attack on the Asteroid Bases..."

"Right... sorry.... But did I miss a memo about abbreviations?"

Rush sighed and began tapping away at the limited LCARS controls he had functioning for him. Jasmine got to her feet and took position behind Ruby who momentarily looked back at her with the same cold glare she had been looking at since they arrived in this galaxy.

SEVEN YEARS AGO

USS EXPLORER – CREW QUARTERS – DECK 4

Ruby dried her eyes as she sat down on the lower bunk of one of the six beds in the room where Jasmine was based.

“You were right...” She stammered, “I followed *him* from the messhall and... he waited around outside one of the storage lockers. As soon as the night shift went on duty... he went in there... with *Ensign Vincent*.”

“Bastard.” Jasmine declared, pouring a glass of the “shared” and very “authorised” wine kept in crew quarters 3, “He wouldn’t know a good thing if it hit him in the crotch... then again, it might not be such a good thing for him if... nevermind. Look, I’m sorry and...”

“No it’s not your fault... you were right to let me know... how did *you* know?”

“I overheard him on the planet... I was getting ready for the night job and he was in the other room... sounded like he thought I’d already left when I walked back in.”

“Then you’re right.” Ruby said, downing as much of the glass as she could in one go, “He is a bastard.”

“Well I’m not going anywhere, you know that, right?” Jasmine said softly, sitting on the bed next to Ruby and crossing her legs. “If you need anyone to talk to...”

“I know where to come... thank you...you’ve always been here for me.”

“For how long now?” Jasmine joked.

“Hey! I’ve helped you out plenty of times.”

“I know, I know...”

“That time when you accidentally blew out half a dozen power conduits on Deck 12..”

“,,and you generated a malfunction report, yeah I remember.”

“They never caught on...”

“No they didn’t.” Jasmine smiled and refilled their glasses, “When was the last time we did this?”

“Did what? Listen to me moping about someone who isn’t worth my time? Last month, probably.”

“No...” Jasmine pointed out, exaggerating the word, “I mean... just sitting... talking...”

“...drinking..”

“Yeah, drinking.”

“I don’t know, the academy, probably.” She laughed, “Oh... good times.”

“Yeah, they were. Just me... you... the rest of our lives unfolding in front of us...”

“You got that from Professor Johnson...”

“Oh, yeah... I did...”

When the quarters began to fill up, Ruby and Jasmine moved their conversation to one of the quiet observation rooms, on two of the large cushions in front of the observation window, looking out at the passing, streaky stars.

They had lost track of time and Jasmine was now curled up on one of the cushions, her eyes losing the will to stay open.

“What’s the point...?” She heard Ruby say dreamily, “What’s the point of... anyone else...?”

“Anyone... else...?” Jasmine said hypnotically as she followed the stars as they soared past.

“You know... like... Mike... or... anyone else... why not just us two... we’re fine together aren’t we?”

"Of course..." Jasmine dragged herself up, back onto her knees, gently resting her head on Ruby's arm, much as she would do on Pioneer Station several years later, "I told you... I'm not going anywhere."

"I know..." Ruby muttered, prompting Jasmine to look up to see a tear rolling down her cheek. She lifted a finger and wiped it away, but kept her finger on the side of Ruby's face. Looking wide-eyed at each other, Jasmine started something which seemed to come so naturally to her in a strange, dream-like moment of realisation.

Jasmine slowly propped herself up, placed another four fingers on Ruby's face and lent forward to kiss her, holding it for a few moments before pulling back.

"Is that the point you were trying to make...?" She whispered. Ruby sat, not reacting for a few seconds, her eyes rapidly switching between Jasmine and the stars outside. A few hours ago, it had been a man she thought she loved kissing her lips, now it was a woman, only, more than just a woman. Her closest friend for years, and yet, it didn't feel wrong in the slightest.... So she took Jasmine by surprise when she suddenly responded with a much lengthier version of the same action.

Looking back, it was quite funny for them both, looking back. Ruby has spent so long trying to make her life work... when all she needed was right in front of her.

PRESENT DAY

Heads were turned when Camille jogged into Operations.

"Why did you pull me back?!" She directed at Rush, "I was trying to keep Captain Robertson up to date when-"

"The Gallentean database recognised the three vessels approaching us." The good doctor replied, "Right before we were disconnected from it..."

"Disconnected?"

"More importantly, they are military vessels capable of wiping us out with ease... and one of them appears to be a boarding ship of some kind."

"The Delta Flyer?"

"We haven't heard anything... and we're approaching the deadline."

"*Shit...*" She muttered, "Doctor Rush, can you access weapons... shields...?"

"I'm trying, but reactivating those systems doesn't seem to be enough, Destiny won't respond to my commands."

"Keep trying... in the meantime, Riley, contact Lieutenant Holmes, organise security checkpoints across the station. Get all civilians back into secure areas and lock this place down... wait, Riley, patch me through to Sickbay."

"Yes, ma'am!" Riley said, working with Rush to get the comms active.

"Something else, Destiny's has begun correcting some of my power-diversions... we couldn't afford to keep the communications platform active... I believe we will be entering FTL shortly." Rush added.

"Shortly?" Camille inquired.

"Yes, shortly." Rush replied in an almost pleased voice, smiling in the same way he had been when he first realised the initial FTL jump had worked... somewhat.

Camille placed her hands behind her back, took a deep breath and looked around her. She was still getting used to being there, in the centre of Destiny's operations centre and not just observing, but being in command. Of course, these weren't the best circumstances for she could very well never be handing the position back to Jack Austin should they jump into FTL too soon. When Riley announced

that he had got Sickbay on the line, she knew what she had to do – explain to Lieutenant Johansen as delicately as she could that TJ may have to take command.

“Hey, wait up!” Jasmine called to Ruby as she ventured down the corridor from Operations to the large auditorium.

“Yes?”

“Where are you off to?” She asked, catching up by her side.

“Our quarters.”

“...seriously?”

“Why wouldn’t I be... serious?”

“The whole ‘might not get our Captain back’ crisis... amongst many?”

“I can’t assist in getting the Delta Flyer back in time from here.”

“But you’re still on duty, right?”

“That’s what the rota says, however my services are not required in Operations at the...”

“Ruby what the hell?!” Jasmine snapped, seemingly taking Ruby aback, “Once upon a time you were the one dragging me from my bed while lecturing the finer points of ‘turning up on time.’ Now you’re swanning off home while the rest of us are trying to-“

“Where *you* thrown across the room to crack your head open on the warp core casing only to then fall down to another level?”

“No, and I’m sorry, but I’m starting to wish I was so that I might be able to understand you better!”

“Understand me?”

“You might think you feel fine... but you aren’t the same person who came over from Pioneer Station and everyone can see that! I know... *I know* you’ve been through-“

She was stopped in full flow when Ruby unexpectedly caressed Jasmine’s lips with her own. In the flurry of both confusion and excitement during this moment of passion, Jasmine didn’t realise that Ruby’s grip on her arm was getting tighter and tighter. When they parted, Jasmine, with her eyes still closed, bit her lower lip gently and smiled.

“You did that just to shut me up, didn’t you?” She said, opening her eyes. The sight which greeted her was that of Ruby’s clenched fist swinging towards her face.

SEVEN YEARS AGO

ASTEROID BASE ALPHA - ENGINEERING

The morning after Ruby and Jasmine’s confessions of feelings for each other, the USS Explorer arrived at the new Starfleet post of Asteroid Base: Alpha. Following on from meeting several of the senior staff, including Daniel “Grizz” Faraday, Quince Richards and a strange Andorian first officer who had adopted the name of “Jordan,” the Chief Engineer, Mr. Darknight, was giving various members of the *Explorer* crew a tour of Main Engineering.

“You know when I woke up this morning I thought it was all... a dream.” Jasmine whispered, leaning on the railings which surrounded the core on the upper level, looking out of the large windows into space.

“What gave it away?” Ruby asked.

“The fact that I had a hangover and you were slumped in the corner of the observation lounge... for the most part.”

“Makes sense.” Ruby shrugged and looked down upon Darknight and then took in the sights around her of this dark and dusty place, “You can see why this crew were sent here for *punishment*.” She whispered, triggering a snigger from Jasmine.

"The funny thing is, though... they'll need replacements eventually."

"Well I'll stick to starships for the time being... I'm only just getting the hang of *them*."

"What if I decided to file for transfer here...?" Jasmine joked.

"Well even on the rare chance that it got approved... nah... you would still be on your own."

Jasmine laughed it off and nudged Ruby in her side.

"Ensigns Pallet and Thomas!" A voice called up. Their moods were quickly diminished upon seeing Mike Lahanas' tense posture, arms folded and looking straight at them, "We're moving out!" He held his gaze for a few moments longer before joining *Captain* Thomas and the rest of the group. Jasmine's father looked between Mike and the two young women on the upper level, but his daughter's returned smile threw him off from sudden suspicions that something was, as some would say, 'up.'

PRESENT DAY

"That's it, they're almost on top of us!" Rush shouted to an about faced Camille. She spun on the spot after instinctively looking at the main display for details - but seeing nothing, "Destiny isn't taking any kind of evasive action but we're seeing massive energy spikes... we're gonna jump!"

"The *Flyer*?" Camille inquired, but Riley only shook his head.

But in fact, the away team was closer than they thought.

"Time?!" Jack cried out loudly as the distant asteroid grew ever larger in front of them.

"Thirty seconds." Mike confirmed, "But they're accelerating and the FTL drive is *active*."

"Then there's no time to dock in the hanger... I'm preparing to take us down on the landing pad!"

"Sir, if you don't time it right..."

"I know... we'll be vaporised as soon as the station jumps... don't remind me... *pressure*."

Jack took a deep breath and tightened his grip on the manual controls, putting all of his focus into the upcoming landing procedure he would have to perform - that's if Destiny didn't jump away *before* they dropped out of the trade lane.

"Alright that's it!" Mike shouted above the rumblings of the hull, "Break, break!"

"There.... THERE!" The entire Ops crew stopped what they were doing to follow the direction of Ben's violent pointing. There, just off to the side, the Delta Flyer had emerged from the trade lane and was en route to the crater's landing pad.

"Destiny's in final spool up." Rush announced as external lighting dimmed across the station, "They aren't going to make it."

"They'll make it." Camille assured herself, "Captain Austin is flying."

"Chloe!" Mike didn't turn around to warn her, "You might want to grab onto something!"

"Way ahead of you!" She replied, already grasping the beam next to the rear console as much as she could.

There was no turning back now. Jack didn't say a word he flew the ship into Destiny's crater. They would either land and lock onto the platform safely, or the station would jump into FTL in the next few moments and kill them all in an instant. He ignored the drops of sweat landing on the panel underneath him, lining up the ship to land onto the locking clamps - but as the Flyer once again began to shake violently, it wasn't easy.

"That isn't us." Mike pointed out, a fact which Jack already knew, "Destiny's jumping!"

Suddenly, the ultraviolet glow which accompanied every FTL jump blinded all three occupants and everyone on the station.

Camille beamed and was overcome with laughter as she threw herself on a shock-struck Jack. She had never been happier to see a Starfleet Officer step through an airlock.

"We thought you were gone! But when the light cleared and... there you were... still in one piece."
"Our Captain is one *hell* of a quick thinking pilot." Mike cheered while leading Chloe back onto the station.

"When I realised I didn't have enough time to land her on the docking clamps... I just rammed the ship down into them. I didn't know if it would work or not."

"Well it did, and for once I'm not going to argue." Camille laughed again and took a step back as Rush brushed past her, with a PADD in hand.

"Captain Austin." He said in the same monotone voice, "How fortunate that you returned..."

"Careful Doctor," Jack replied, "You *almost* sound as if you really care."

"Captain?"

"You knew... you always knew..."

"Jack what is it?" Camille asked, seeing Jack step closer to Rush.

"We've had control of Destiny from day one!"

"What?!" Camille and Ben shrieked simultaneously.

"Destiny! Disengage FTL!" Jack boomed in Rush's face before the ultraviolet light returned once more and the distant sound of the FTL drive shut down.

"What just happened...?" Ben asked as he blinked away the ghost images of the UV light imprinted on his vision.

"What just happened, Ben... is that Destiny listened to my command and carried out my order."

"Hadh't you tried that before now?!"

"No... because the man who knows more about this station's systems than anybody else told me not to bother as soon as I stepped back into Operations for the first time."

Rush smiled and placed his hands behind his back, facing his own lynch mob.

"While I was extracting information from Destiny's databanks by force... I discovered an interesting line of code with what appeared to be a command code embedded into it. Upon further investigation, it turned out to be the Captain's."

"So what?"

"So... that same line of code was in every command line processor I could find... I had an inkling, therefore... that Destiny would respond to Captain Austin's commands... as he was in official command of the station. Another surprise the TDB must have left behind."

"When, exactly..." Jack said surprisingly calmly as he grabbed Rush's jacket and pushed him against the rock wall, "...were you planning on telling any of us this?"

"When were you planning on telling anyone else about the writing on your wall, Jack?"

Jack pushed harder but Camille prised him away.

"What writing?" Chloe asked.

"Captain?" Mike also inquired, in the dark.

"It's not important." Rush said, "At least, not as important as this." He revealed the PADD and tossed it towards a silently raging Jack, who looked at it for a few moments without understanding what it meant.

"It's just random characters." The Captain noted.

"Not quite." Rush corrected him, "It's a reference point for a certain point on this station... it was sent to ever display in Operations moments after the rest of you rushed to greet the not-very-triumphant-three, here."

"Then where is this place? What does it mean?" Camille asked, taking the PADD off Jack without asking.

Rush responded by kicking the storage locker behind him with his heel. As he reached for the controls, Mike reached for his phaser. Rush tapped the panel without hesitation and the gathered crowd of Starfleet officers and non combat personnel rushed backwards as the bodies of Jasmine Thomas and Ruby Pallett tumbled out from within, sprawling across the floor.

"Mike! MIKE!" Jack barked, rushing forwards, trying to bring Lahanas out of his trance, "Run up to Ops, call Sickbay, get TJ down here now!" Mike hesitated for too long, signalling for Ben to instead start making the trek up to Operations. Camille kneeled down by Ruby while Jack checked Jasmine's pulse.

What nobody had yet realised was the most important thing of all - lying right in front of them. The injuries long-since sustained on Ruby's body were 100 per cent consistent with those she sustained in the initial jump. There was a reason Ruby Pallett was on the list of the dead in Jack's ready room, and without realising it, he was staring in shock straight at it.

6

FIVE DAYS LATER

Jack awoke as he had done so for the past few days; his head resting on the biobed, brushing against Jasmine's leg. He slowly lifted himself up, compensating for an aching back which had been arched all night as he slept while sat atop of a low stool. With the lights still dimmed, he placed his head in his hands and groaned quietly at the prospect of another day of hell.

The station was a mess, suspicions were high and the finger was being pointed at everyone amongst the civilian population. At the first minor change in someone's routine, others would point and call out words such as "intruder" and "brig" or occasionally "shoot." But for most of the day, the cavernous halls were quiet and left in constant shadow as few dared to venture out while the so-called "ghost of Ruby Pallett" roamed free, but not seen since Jasmine was left for dead. Jasmine, oh Jasmine. Surviving New Eden should have been a small victory on the road to rebuilding hope, instead, it was overshadowed with fear which had cast a parasite of depression into everyone aboard - one which would continue to feed and grow until this situation was put under control, but that didn't look likely any time soon as nobody knew where to start.

The Operations crew had long since abandoned their work to overcome their latest puzzle of unlocking Destiny's systems for all and not just Captain Austin. Only Rush remained, still under the belief that he was there for a purpose and nothing could sway him in his efforts to learn as much about the station as he could - seeking his reason for being brought to the station.

Camille spent much of her time walking the loneliest and longest corridors, deep in the station, just to spend time alone, thinking. Thinking what to say to those mothers with children still at risk in this place. Thinking what to say to those claiming to be overworked - they were *all* overworked. She had once said that she could only maintain what small amount of positive morale remained for a certain amount of time. That time had long since passed.

Councillor Christopher Armstrong's condition had deteriorated and Tamara was helpless to comfort him. All that she could do was to help Chloe to stay strong as she watched him slip away from this life. But she wasn't alone, even in these dark times as Ben and Mike both helped to support Chloe and give Christopher company when she was unable to. It was hard for all of them to watch a daughter lose her father under these circumstances - but they knew they also couldn't stand back and do nothing.

Surprisingly, the messhall had still been rather active as for the first time since the FTL incident, the remains of the actual alcohol was rationed and distributed by Riley in a last ditch attempt to stop all life on the station from coming to a full stop. But it was only marginally working... but it was something.

Mike's security team were at a complete loss of things to do. It was clear that this fake-Ruby, or 'Fruby' as Ben called her (or it), would not simply appear again in plain sight as they roamed the station endlessly searching for clues. Even Ensign Holmes no longer had Doctor Amey to contend with as he had finally found a calling to assist TJ in sickbay when she required it. In a way she was proud of him for being able to put his infinite amount of complaints aside for one moment to think of others - it was quite admirable considering their situation.

Those surviving a living hell aboard Destiny were not the only ones feeling the strain of the on-going crisis. From the skyscraper apartments in San Francisco Bay to the living quarters on the mining colonies of the Praxis moons, the families and loved ones of those aboard waited anxiously for any word from Destiny. Camille's impromptu message five days ago had provided only temporary relief -

but her sudden disappearance had also caused a small panic in the minds of everyone waiting to see if they were ever coming home.

There were good and bad days for everyone left behind by Destiny and her crew. But they were mostly bad. As Commodore Anthony Thomas held pictures of his daughter in one part of the Universe, she herself lay unconscious in another after a vicious attack. As Bree Austin held her daughter and looked at the stars through the window of their apartment on Earth, their husband and father struggled to not only hold together the hearts and minds of those under him on that fateful station - but also struggled to cope with his own as a rising guilt showed itself to him.

He sat there by Jasmine's side for days under the belief that what had happened was preventable ever since he saw Ruby's name on that wall. The answer was right in front of his eyes but he refused to believe it. Ruby's miraculous survival and impossibly quick recovery, linked with her cold and distant behaviour. All the signs that something was wrong were there. But he let them slip past him for the sake of moving forward in the quest to return to *his* family, *his* life. In Jack Austin's mind, this was his fault, and it could only get worse....

THREE MONTHS AFTER THE AOTAB

James' footsteps echoed infinitely as he marched down one of Asteroid Base: Alpha's darkened halls. For some time, the station had been at its quietest. It was only when he passed the occasional hurried crewman did he remember that he wasn't alone. The preparation for the arrival of the Project Charlie team had meant emptying the station of its usual residents, at least most of them, for the time being.

The recently promoted captain stopped in his tracks upon passing through one of the many transparent junctions overlooking the hanger bay. Three months ago, that was where he fought John Sheppard for the final time as the infrastructure collapsed around them.... where he sent Sheppard to the afterlife. He couldn't have saved him, but a large part of him didn't care. If he had known that hours later, Amber would be back in the mortal world, things may have been different. But regardless, he couldn't save Sheppard from the crumbling shuttlebay as much as he could save the half-Romulan from himself. James cocked his head slightly, dismissed all thoughts of Sheppard, and moved on.

Despite there being no obstructions, it took him a whole ten minutes to reach Operations – the downside of having no turbolifts. Ops was almost ready for service once again – all that really remained to be done was the fitting of the new main display between the ready room and the briefing room doors on the circular bevel. It was strange seeing nothing but bare rock there, but it was all much brighter than other rock-showing areas of the station as they had to be fitted manually after the wall was blown out during the attack.

James initially turned his body towards the ready room, but didn't need to, as Amber was standing with folded arms looking out into space.

"I didn't want this station to be associated with death and destruction..." She said, sensing him behind her, and echoing the words of one Chloe Harper, "I wanted it to be a place where people could come and it could change their lives... experience all kinds of new things. That's why I agreed to take this post over... six years ago, now? But that was just me... being optimistic... or insane. When people think of Asteroid Base: Alpha, they think of Romulan cults, Ban'mar pathogens, and alien massacres, death tolls... rising death tolls. They overlook everything else... the new civilisations, the strange and wonderful life forms we've discovered... the technology hidden in these walls just waiting to be uncovered. All those worlds we've helped. All those supplies we've sent out to new friends. But the loss of one life completely overshadows one million saved.

"So you think that by stepping aside and letting this... science team come aboard for a few years... will help AB: Alpha's reputation?"

"AB: Alpha's reputation is as far underground as John Sheppard. No... this place is beyond redemption but it needs a *break*. Something positive needs to come out of this asteroid again and if that means me not being here when it happens, so be it."

James stepped closer, almost by her side now.

"I suppose our arrangement is out of the window, now, huh?"

"Arrangement?"

"We agreed... me and you... finally running this place side by side...you made a promise to stay."

Amber placed both her hands together and rested them on the transparent aluminium. She looked over her shoulder, a stray strand of her auburn hair laying down the side of her face.

"If they fail... if they don't find anything. I'll be back... of course I will."

"You know a friend once told me... not to give in to beaurocratic bastards. Now that same person is handing her station over to them on a plate and leaving me to run around after them. What did they offer you? Because it would have to be more than a peaceful couple of months on Risa for you to agree to this."

"What's to say they offered me anything? Camille Wray once said that she would never want to return to this asteroid field... now she's on her way to practically run the place. One of those beaurocratic bastards we talked about. She changed her mind. So did I."

Amber returned to looking out into the rocky minefield, leaving James without a definitive answer. But he wouldn't it rest. Not yet.

PRESENT DAY – DESTINY CIVILIAN SECTOR B – ROOM 147

Shannon watched with a tear half way down her left cheek as Mike fastened up his trousers by the side of the bed. She quickly flicked it away, blinked a few times and took a deep breath – regrettably taking in the hanging smell of sweat which had yet to be filtered out.

"What happens if you find her?" She asked, "Will you kill her?"

"Her?" He laughed, reaching down for his upper uniform, "We don't know even know what it is. A ghost, a demon... an alien from the wrong side of the Universe."

"Well? What will you do?"

"If it was up to me... it would be a lifeless corpse... or whatever it calls a body... lying on the ground in seconds. But it isn't... the *Captain* wants us to stun it to 'answer questions.' I assume Camille agrees with him."

"Of course... and so do I. I may report on murders... but I don't endorse it... regardless of the situation."

"Self-defence. If this thing tried to kill Jasmine then-"

"Then what? You said it yourself, Captain Austin..."

"Captain Austin has hardly been seen."

"So you're placing yourself in a position to ignore his orders by default?"

"Of course not, I would never do that." Mike grabbed his carelessly discarded phaser rifle from under the bed, "But we can't just wait around for him to emerge to tell us what to do if and when this being appears... and I won't."

DESTINY MESSHALL – 0745 Hours

Rush looked up from his coffee-smelling solitude and was silently surprised to see Jack stagger in through the far doors. It took a few moments, but Jack turned his head in Rush's direction and the corner of his mouth formed into a weak smile, as though he had been wishing to see him.

"Captain." Rush acknowledged with the first word, placing both hands around the silver coffee cup.

"Doctor... I want you to answer me something."

"I don't expect I would have a choice."

"You don't. So tell me..." Jack was now sitting down opposite him at the square table, "Why is it that you can still stand in Operations... smiling... because I seem to be missing what there is to smile about."

Even then, Rush was smiling.

"What do I have to *not* smile about, Captain? Look around at where we are. This *is* our destiny."

"I came here for some coffee because I do it every morning, not because it's my destiny."

"Are you familiar with The Seer of the Lunar Colony?"

"I can't say we've met... but I've heard Riley mention him."

"Her, Captain... her."

"Whatever."

"Well I saw her... I was talked into it but I still went."

"Did she say that you would meet a tall, handsome ma... woman...?"

"She *said*... the most curious things. For one, that I should not ignore the call should Charlie knock on my door."

"Who's Charlie?"

"Later that day... funnily enough..." Rush continued, "On the day that the doorbell on my apartment seemingly malfunctioned for no apparent reason, James Robertson knocked on my door."

"There's a difference between Charlie and James, Rush."

"Really, I never could tell the difference?" Rush snarled in reply, taking the joke out of it, "But it was the same conversation with which James Robertson used to introduce me to Project Charlie."

Jack waved his right hand and shook his head, knowing that was coming.

"But that wasn't all she said to me." Rush continued, "I asked her... as a passing comment... whether my destiny would have a sign saying "Destiny" hanging above it..."

"And then..." Jack finished, "You did everything in your power... to go against my instructions... and find out the name of this station."

"Destiny, yes."

"Coincidence, Rush, *please*."

"Do you really think that we were all shot into the Universe on this station... *this* station... by coincidence? You did everything you could to get away from this place and yet here you are... unable to escape it. All the history, all the secrets... on a journey into the unknown..."

"*Rush...*" Jack muttered, looking at the table now and gritting his teeth.

"No, Captain... you tell me something. Why do you find it so *hard* to believe?"

"*Why do you find it so easy?!*" Jack slammed the palm of his hand on the table before shooting to his feet, "Ruby Pallet! Was that her Destiny, Rush? To have her head smashed against the casing of a warp core?! Jasmine Thomas lying unresponsive in Sickbay! The children separated from their families!"

"It's never *been* easy, Jack!" Rush finally raised his voice, suddenly shooting daggers into Jack's body through resentful eyes, "Do you think I haven't suffered... haven't *lost*... like the rest of you?! People on this station look at me with disgust because they seem to be under the impression that I am loving every second of this... as though I am in such an easy position to be able to say that everything in

our lives happens for a reason! My *wife* was killed protecting this station; you aren't the only one who tried to run away from this place!"

Jack was stunned, he had no idea that Rush was even married, let alone having family serve on the station.

"How did she die?" Jack asked, now much calmer than before, not screwing up his one chance to gain insight into the enigmatic Nicholas Rush.

"She didn't make it off when the Ban'mar boarded..." Rush didn't hesitate, "According to the point of view reports by Amber Munro, they executed her as a lesson for any officers remaining on board attempting to resist their... occupation."

"I'm sorry, I... I didn't know."

"You didn't need to... it was before your time and... I'm not one of your officers."

"We can't afford to think like that... not out here. There is no Federation... no Starfleet... we *are* on our own out here, so we have to stick together."

"Does this mean that I won't be returning to the brig for minor modifications?"

"Are you kidding? Make any more changes to my station without letting me know and I'll ship your ass back to New Eden piece by piece."

Jack retook his seat and the would-be rivals looked at each other for a few tense moments before sniggering with laughter at the confrontation they had just engaged in. But Rush didn't take to Jack's disbelief lightly, and Jack had no plans to entertain Rush's suggestion of an ascertained destiny for he and his crew.

FLASHBACK – THREE MONTHS AFTER THE AOTAB – AB: ALPHA READY ROOM

When James' and Shannon's hands parted from one another, the captain sat back in his new chair and smiled.

"Miss O'Donnell, I hope you realise that certain restrictions need to be put in place should a Federation News Network reporter such as yourself be wandering the station..."

"And I'm sure that you realise captain that such restrictions will only apply for as long as you are sitting behind the desk." Shannon retorted, holding her ground, "Which as I believe... won't be for much longer."

"Yet here I am, for now... so... about those restrictions."

James paused and looked towards the head-cam resting on his desk facing towards him.

"That's off, right?" He asked, to which she responded with a cheeky expression.

"Not camera shy, James Robertson, I hope?"

"Of course not... but this is a project briefing after all... the word 'classified' comes into it."

"Then yes, captain, it's off... or, for the layman... the big light on the front isn't on."

James flashed another insincere smile before turning the head-cam around, regardless of her statement, unaware that such models had the option to simply disable the external spotlight should the user desire.

PRESENT DAY – DESTINY CORRIDOR 1-2A – 0759 Hours

Ben met up with Camille on the way to Operations. He was still wearing the same navy blue jacket and red shirt he had on when he first arrived on the station.

"I guess you didn't bring a change of clothes, huh?" Camille noticed upon first sight.

"I guess I didn't expect to end up out here, either."

"Guess not."

"How's Lieutenant Thomas?" Ben asked as they passed the subtle entrance to one of the upper-shuttlebays and airlocks.

"Last I heard..." Camille sighed, "Still unresponsive, but stable. I'm sure she will be fine... but Captain Austin hasn't exactly been giving me up to date information as of late."

"Yeah where is he anyway? He usually comes to collect the video diaries on a daily basis. I want him to put them in a capsule or something... just in case we never get home."

"Well that's thinking on the bright side."

Camille slowed when Ben came to an abrupt stop. Instead of asking why, she turned to her front and saw the back of a slender woman in a plain blue sweater and tight leather trousers. She began to turn her head towards them and through the gaps in her dark auburn bob; they saw the eyes of Ruby Pallett looking back at them.

Ben gasped quietly and as if on cue, "Ruby" bolted up the ramp to Operations and surprisingly, Camille gave chase. Ben looked around for help, stammered a few words before groaning and dashing after them as fast as he could.

The sprinting contest didn't last long, however, as when Ruby entered Ops, she ran right into Mike's start-of-the-day security briefing for, ironically, the search for the imposter. The four-man team turn on the spot and raised their weapons to tactical height. Mike's jaw dropped upon seeing Ruby again so suddenly as she came to a dignified stop, with Camille and Ben coming up behind her but daring not to get too close.

"Hello Mike." Her words found chilling by the skeleton Ops crew, now transfixed, "How've you been?"

As though knowing exactly what was coming, Ruby sharply raised her right hand, showing the security team her palm as Mike led a barrage of fire in her direction. Ben and Camille ducked for cover as the plasma bolts ricocheted around Ruby and into the walls and doors behind them.

"Cease fire!" Mike reluctantly called out as his efforts proved fruitless.

"You're all a long way from home... I suggest you save your energy cells for when you might actually need them... or when they might actually prove useful." Ruby slowly circled into the centre of Operations, towards the windows, "Now... I'd like you to pass on a message for me."

As she stated her intentions, Destiny dropped out of FTL and behind Ruby was a gleaming Earth-like planet, illuminated by a distant star, warming the planet and its two dusty moons.

"In one hour, Captain Jack Austin will meet me at the coordinates highlighted in your sensor information. Failure to comply will result in the death of more crewmembers than just Ruby Pallett."

"What do you want with the Captain?" Mike asked, lowering his useless phaser rifle.

"He will find out when he comes down."

"How is he supposed to get down there...?" Ben piped up at the back.

"In a shuttlecraft you idiot... aren't you *supposed* to be a genius?" Ruby smiled and turned back to Mike, "Tell Jasmine I look forward to having her again."

She winked as Mike tensed up and gritted his teeth. But before he could make a move, Ruby's body turned limp and raised up, momentarily hanging in the air before morphing into a shining white entity – like those previously encountered as the primary method of transport for the trans-dimensional beings. The entity remained in Operations for a few seconds, lighting up the walls and casting vivid shadows around the room. Some averted their gaze while others witnessed the being shoot out through the windows and through space towards the approaching blue planet.

“Just another day at the edge of the Universe.” Ben mumbled.

DESTINY BRIEFING ROOM – 0805 Hours

“We *have* got the coordinates on the planet where the entity wishes to meet with you.” Rush confirmed, glancing at the information on the PADD before sliding it down the centre of the renovated conference table to Jack.

“Yeah and I think we can also deduce that this is the biggest, most obvious trap in the history of traps. You’re not actually considering going down there?” Ben asked, leaning around Riley to get a better view of the captain.

“What would I do, then, Ben? Sit and wait for that thing to kill more of us? So it... he... she... can pick us off one by one until there’s nobody left? Of course I’m going down. After all, it *is* my grand purpose in life.” Jack added with an off glance at Rush, referring to their previous conversation.

“Alright, say you do go down to the planet.” Camille started, placing both hands together on the table, “What’s to stop her from just killing you stone dead then and there?”

“Nothing... but I’d rather take my chances following her instructions than simply ignoring them to ‘see what happens.’”

“This could all be part of a very calculated attack.” Rush said, now looking at the table, not making eye contact with Jack, “With Captain Austin gone, we lose any control we have over Destiny’s most basic systems. If things go wrong, we can’t jump away.”

“I don’t think it would matter if we *did* jump away.” Riley pointed out, “That entity we saw looked far too similar to a TDB for us to ignore.”

“Riley’s right...” Camille agreed, “They agreed to give us Asteroid Base: Alpha... but that was before we started digging into their ancient systems. We’re alone out here... they might be coming to get rid of us once and for all without anybody back home even knowing about it.”

“If that was the case, they would have come en-mass like last time. They had us to dead to rights and this station wouldn’t be here if Captain Munro hadn’t intervened. But if this entity is a TDB... I think I know which one.” Jack sighed, remembering his numerous close encounters with death during the attack on the asteroid bases, “It was the same being who tried to kill me time after time after time... Eleanor called him Olni. He effectively led the attack.”

Ben laughed out loud, grabbing the attendee’s attention.

“Then surely that’s even more reason not to go down?! This guy holds a grudge!”

“We’re in no state to take risks, Ben. If Olni wants me dead, he could have killed me ever since he swapped with Ruby... even before then. He must need me for something.”

“I wouldn’t like to be the one to tell Jasmine who she was sleeping next to every night since the jump.” Mike murmured, “Not to mention... hugs... kisses... you know.” He shuddered in his seat.

“Mike I want you to stay close to Sickbay while I’m gone... help TJ out down there... and if Jasmine *does* wake up... I’m sorry but as far as I know you’re the closest friend she’s got. She will be destroyed on the inside... and she needs all the support we can give her.

Mike nodded slightly and sealed his lips, dreading the very prospect.

"This hasn't been easy for any of us." Jack got to his feet, sliding the chair away behind him with the back of his legs, "But we've come this far... and no matter what happens on that planet, Destiny's journey doesn't end here. Camille, you've shown me that you, yourself, are the strong leader you've been raving about... so you're in command again while I'm gone. Doctor Rush tells me that Destiny is capable of jumping into FTL at any time but without my signal, the station will jump in three hours anyway. So you're not stuck here... but we need to be on the safe side. Rush, Riley and Ben... keep trying to redirect the vocal command processors... because if Destiny comes under attack, you need to jump away, quickly."

Riley and Ben tilted their heads in acknowledgement.

"If I'm not back by the deadline, then that's it... I'm gone, you can't come back for me and don't even think about sending any more shuttles down to collect me. If Olni wants me dead, I'm sure he won't say no to a few away teams, either. That said, if Olni attacks this station... Starfleet personnel's directive is to protect all non-combatants... civilians. Do what you can... but ultimately, I won't lie to you because you probably all already know it... there might be nothing that can stop him."

Seeing the just worthy depressed faces around the table, Jack attempted to lighten the mood, even just slightly.

"But of course it might not be Olni at all and it may just be some attempt for contact gone wrong. But either way, good luck."

Quietly yet hastily, the mixed up crew departed from the room. All but Jack and Camille. She got to her feet in silence but went no further. Still standing by the large table, her fingertips still resting upon it, she looked at the sharp walls around her, concealed by glass.

"Something on your mind?" Jack pried.

"Of course there's something damn well on my mind... you *know* that it's Olni, don't you?"

"I most certainly do. Why else ask for me, and me only, to come alone... plus we can't jump the station ourselves again."

"Then you go willingly to your death?! If he only wished to talk then company would be permitted."

"Call me old fashioned, Camille, but I would rather die alone under the blue sky with the vibrant green grass underneath me than be slaughtered with everyone aboard this station in this... this cave."

"But it doesn't make sense... the trans-dimensionals left our Universe..."

"Obviously they left someone behind... who probably isn't best pleased that we decided to continue to plunder deeper into Destiny the moment they turned their backs... and that we reminds me, while I'm down there I intend to find out their name... there's only so many times I can say the words 'trans-dimensional beings' in one lifetime."

Jack walked around the table and when Camille positioned herself to face him; he placed both hands just underneath her shoulders. No matter how she was feeling about the whole thing, she couldn't help but force out a small smile as he did.

"Goodbye Camille. Get these people home, somehow. "

Jack passed Camille and walked through the doors into Operations, leaving her looking over her shoulder as he left.

The long, slow walk to the shuttlebay was what Jack had been dreading since word had spread of his departure. His heart was in his mouth as he passed his own officers and others who had been placed under his command specifically for Project Charlie. But then he still had the civilian sectors to hike through – and that was only worse. This was the first time he saw the children left behind on the station and it crushed him to see them standing behind the legs of their mothers in the doorways of quarters who had emerged to witness Jack's departure. The man who said that they would survive and would get home... was seemingly abandoning them.

Jack had opted to use the auxiliary Delta Flyer to get down to the surface, planning to set the navigation controls to return to the station once he had disembarked. Whatever happened, he knew in his gut that he wouldn't be coming back up with it anyway.

Entering the underground bay of the Flyer, Jack's path to the Flyer's hatch in front of him was blocked by Christopher and Chloe Armstrong. Not speaking, Jack looked over their shoulders and there was at least a 20-strong group behind the councillor. Hearing the panting of someone behind him, the puzzled captain looked over his shoulder to see Camille – who had clearly run to catch up with him.

"Alright. I'll bite." Jack folded his arms and stared at Christopher, with a small smile on his face to see him up and about, "What's going on?"

"Captain... Austin..." Christopher took a deep breath and shrugged off Chloe's supporting grasp, "We wish... to come down to the surface... with you."

"That's not possible."

"Jack..." The councillor strained his eyes and drew stammered breath, "I can hardly... remember... anything that I did... more than a week ago. Doctor Johansen informed me... that the planet... is capable of sustaining Human life..."

"Did she now..."

"She also... told me... that there was nothing more she could do... to ease my pain... but there is something that you can do. Let me live out... the rest of my life... with the sun on my... my... my..."

"...face."

"I know what it is, damn it!" He raised his hand to his mouth and coughed violently, still resisting support from his daughter. "I am not... dying... on this station... with these crumbling walls... and dark halls..."

"And them?" Jack nodded over his shoulder to the small crowd.

"Well... they just actually want a life."

Jack didn't notice Starfleet officers in the gathering other than those who had come over to see what was occurring. He looked at Christopher for a few moments, then at Chloe and Camille. He sighed and leapt forward, marching through the group before reaching the Flyer. He opened the hatch of the craft and climbed the small embarkation ladder. On the top rung, he turned, standing in the doorway, steadying himself, hanging onto the doorframe.

The onlookers had increased in size as Jack used his free hand to pull out the tricorder he was taking with him and to tap into the rudimentary station-wide comm network that had been set up.

"All hands... this is the Captain!" He shouted, so all in the shuttlebay could hear his actual voice and not just the digitalised equivalent, "In fifteen minutes, I will be departing Destiny from shuttlebay three! Weeks ago, I made you a promise! I told each and every one of you that we would all survive and that we would all make it home. That promise has already been broken... and from the moment I step onto this shuttlecraft and leave this station... I can no longer be held that promise any further! So!" Jack boomed, stepping off the rung and onto the Flyer, "From this moment onwards, nobody should feel obligated to remain aboard Destiny! Anyone who has given up hope... who does not believe that we will return home.... has fifteen minutes to report to the shuttlebay with minimalistic supplies and

belongings! There is no limit... there are plenty of shuttlecraft to go around... but once they are on the surface and you have all disembarked... they will return to Destiny... and the station will jump away with whomever is still aboard! To clarify... this will be... a one way trip. A small settlement will be constructed in a remote area... away from my meeting point with who could potentially be a trans-dimensional being... led by... Mister Councillor... Christopher Jonathan Armstrong! Fifteen minutes on the clock.... make your decision... I won't be opening the hatch once it's closed."

The original crowd of civilian staff suddenly split, heading off in different directions out of the bay, presumably to collect what belongings they could take with them. Jack sighed at the sight... knowing that it was against everything he had been taught and instructed to simply leave them to fend for themselves out here. But they weren't officers. They weren't his to command... they had their own lives to look after; he could respect that, especially in a situation like this. As even Jack, deep down somewhere, ignored... a feeling... a horrible feeling, that they would never return home.

FIVE MONTHS BEFORE FTL JUMP – SAN FRANCISCO SPACEPORT – 0915 Hours

Jack kissed his daughter's forehead and planted her gently on the ground next to her mother besides the shuttle docking port. A casually dressed Bree, on leave from Starfleet service, wrapped her arms around Jack and pulled her head towards his right ear, over his shoulder.

"I wish I could come with you." She whispered. As she released him, he put both hands on her arms and smiled.

"I said you would never have to step foot on that station again... I meant it."

"Well... I expect you to call... every day, you know that, right?"

"I wouldn't have it any other way..."

"This will be our first working time apart in... years..."

"Well it's only temporary... once they get what they're looking for, I'll be out of there and back here as fast as I can... well Sydney, providing you're still there."

"More than likely... I'd like to spend more time with my parents, you know?"

"Of course. I'm sure our little spoiled princess down there doesn't mind, either..."

Jenna looked up and laughed.

"You promise... you won't stay... not this time." Bree looked behind Jack and saw that the transport was preparing to depart.

"Read my departing lips... I promise, I won't stay."

Flashback - 'Unstable Trajectory'

"Captain Jack Austin... Starfleet CO of Asteroid Base: Alpha... it's not going to be easy getting these people home. But they are the wrong people in the wrong place and I'm not going to let anybody down out here. As of this moment... nobody else dies under my command. Nobody. I won't let Rush convince me to stay aboard this station any longer than I have to. Bree... Jenna... I'm coming home. I promise...."

PRESENT DAY – AUXILIARY DELTA FLYER PRE-LAUNCH – 0820 Hours

Jack looked at some of his passengers in the Flyer before taking the controls. In the cockpit were Christopher and Chloe Armstrong. Something about that sight wasn't right – was Councillor Armstrong asking his daughter to give up hope and spend the rest of her long life ahead on a strange new world? Either way, the most disturbing sight was of the young children in the aft compartment whom Jack had passed on his way to the shuttlebay. He had thought about going back on his speech and making them stay on Destiny... but then it was a case of whether he, as a child, would rather spend his time running through lush fields, or perhaps speeding through the Universe for his entire life around places which could get him killed.

Fortunately, there hadn't been a mass exodus from Destiny. They hadn't been lost long enough for the majority of the crew to give up hope – but Jack had to accept that there would come a time when that would happen. But that was most likely Camille's problem now, as it was time to leave.

Jack slowly lowered into the raised pilot seat and wrapped his hand around the unusual starter throttle. As onlooker outside, even Rush was standing on the upper level of the bay, his hands resting firmly on the rails, backed away from the craft, Jack eased the control back towards him and the engines powered up. The shuttle's vibrations strengthened as the manoeuvring thrusters were engaged the small ship unclamped from its docking struts.

Jack flew the craft into the large opening, separating all three shuttlebays around it. With the large camouflaged space doors ahead of him, through a short cylindrical tunnel, he looked to his left and activated the forcefield which isolated the station from space. After nodding to her on the platform, Camille licked her lips, took a short breath and pointed up at Shuttle Ops – where the attending officer proceeded to open the outer doors.

This was it. Once the Flyer was out of the station, there wasn't time to turn around and drop off the evacuees and shut his open door policy on leaving Destiny. When the vacuum of space opened up in front of him, Jack took his hands from the control and squeezed his ring finger. Possibly about to sacrifice his future with his family, he kissed the ring, placed his hands back on the controls and with the thoughts of Bree and Jenna raging through his mind, whispered; "I'm sorry."

Camille pulled back as the Flyer jolted forward, speeding through the tunnel and out into space. With it, over twenty of the civilians she herself had also sworn to help through this ordeal.

The decent through the atmosphere had been tense. Would Olni know that Jack was taking a diversion, carrying passengers? If he did, what would he do? But when the Flyer shot out of the clouds like a speeding bullet, the mood lightened as they travelled over green plateaus, rolling hills, flowing streams and crystal seas. Jack had picked out a large clearing for this planet's new inhabitants – with easy access to safe water, fertile land and nearby shelter. But they wouldn't be left to entirely fend for themselves. What survival kit they could take would be with them – along with a basic, limited replicator system powered by a small power core which Doctor Rush had been reluctant to give away due to Destiny's fading power with each FTL jump. He had been insisting, much more of late, that one day after a jump, Destiny would simply stop, unable to find the required resources for another shot of FTL. What would happen then would be anybody's guess, but one possibility on the cards would be that the station would start travelling at conventional warp speeds.

Either way, that was in the future and this was now, as the Delta Flyer touched down on a soft bed of grass. When the engines powered down, there was an awkward silence in the shuttlecraft. Jack stayed seated, looking ahead, awaiting some kind of reaction to their new home, but they remained

silent, as though still seeking guidance. Jack gave up and unsealed the outer hatch before getting to his feet.

"Alright, move out, but stick together!" He shouted, trying to limit his involvement as some from the rear compartment came through. But they didn't move out, they stayed where they were, looking at each other in confusion. Even then, on the surface of the planet which they wanted to call home for themselves, they remained lost.

"Councillor Armstrong," Jack tried, "Your new home awaits."

Chloe gently nudged her father, who looked at her and smiled weakly.

"Quite right." He said, "Quite right. Everyone... who is coming... make your out and urhm... stay near the Delta Flyer... I will be with you shortly."

With instruction from whom they see as their new leader, the Destiny refugees took what they had and filed out of the cockpit.

"Captain." Councillor Armstrong said once only he, Jack and Chloe remained, "Nobody could have seen this situation coming. But you... you held it together and you aren't the only to be... be... sad, at how many have given up. For all that could happen, you could get home tomorrow but, that isn't a risk I want to take considering..."

"I understand, Christopher." Jack replied, using the man's first name, his title carrying little weight in this part of the Universe.

"But I do have one... final request."

"Name it."

"This ship will return to Destiny once you disembark?"

"It will."

"Then my daughter shall be on it."

Jack's earlier doubts about Chloe coming along need not have concerned him. She hadn't come to stay, she had come to say goodbye.

"I'm sure that Camilla..."

"Camille, dad." Chloe corrected him reluctantly.

"Camille... I'm sure that Camille will look after her but... if you get back up there alive..."

Jack nodded, pausing Christopher in his trail of speech.

"Yeah... she will be fine, you have my word."

"Thank you, Jack... you're a good man."

"A good man who wouldn't have stranded all those people on that station if I had just kept my mouth shut."

"What you and Commander... sorry... Captain Robertson uncovered was incredible... remarkable... we wouldn't know that these beings existed if you hadn't searched for the truth. You did the right thing, Jack. They might even come by to save you..."

"Let's hope so... I'll... give you both a moment..."

Christopher waited until Jack had retreated into the aft to ensure that the passengers had got off okay before he said his farewell.

"Do you remember... what I told you on Destiny...?"

"Yeah..."

"Good. Because I sure as hell don't." He laughed half heartedly but Chloe was far from amused.

"I told you not to joke about it, Dad."

"I'm sorry but..." Christopher paused, looked to his feet and tried to steady his shaky exterior, "I have to decide what my daughter's last memory of me... will be."

"Dad..."

"I'd rather it not be of... some decrepit old sod who can't remember his best friend's name or... his own daughter's face..."

He lifted a finger and placed it on her left cheek. She gasped and closed her eyes at familiar touch.

"If your mother could see how brave you're being right now... she would have been *so* proud."

"I want to come with you..." She stammered, fighting back the oncoming storm of grief and tears, "I can't do it, Dad... I don't want to be alone out here."

"You won't be alone... you'll never be alone on Destiny... I believe Rush."

"Wh-wh-what?"

"This proves it, Chloe... we all have a purpose in life... and yours isn't to throw away your life with mine. Destiny... is where you need to be... it's where you *should* be."

Christopher flattened out his hand into a palm on the side of Chloe's face and gently stroked it with his thumb before removing it entirely.

"I have no doubt that you are going to see so many things on that station... things which nobody else will ever see. You... my daughter... my... perfect little girl... flying around the Universe."

Despite his approaching death, his new life on an unknown world and a goodbye to his only child, Christopher Armstrong remained strong and was doing extremely well in holding his emotions in. But Chloe was on the other end of the scale. When he made the slightest movement towards the exit from the cockpit, she grabbed his arm. But time was up, and he knew he had to leave now or never, so he placed his left hand on hers and she accompanied him to the aft airlock where Jack was waiting.

Christopher patted Chloe's hand, signalling for her to let go of his arm. He stood opposite Jack, his new life to his left and old life to his right. He lowered his eyelids, his expression tensing up. Suddenly, he snapped to attention and raised a salute to Jack. Jack returned the gesture with a reply;

"Federation Councillor Christopher Eli Armstrong... is departing."

"Starfleet Captain Jack Austin... it has been an honour to have known the man who opened our eyes to things beyond our comprehension."

"...the honour was mine, sir."

The pair lowered their salutes and shared a smile. Without saying a word, Christopher stepped out of the Flyer and lowered himself off the craft. He turned and looked back at Chloe, who was now holding onto Jack for support as she came close to collapsing onto the ground.

"I love you!" She shouted, her words now barely comprehensible.

"Have a wonderful life, Chloe... I have and always will, love you."

It was then up to Jack to perform one of the hardest tasks of his career and life. He extended his arm outwards and tapped the airlock controls. The hatch closed downwards, separating father and daughter forever. Chloe let go of him and placed her hand on the small viewport. Jack was of no use to her now and so returned to the Flyer's controls in the cockpit. As he brought main systems back online and started up the engines, his whole body shook as a desperate cry shrieked from the aft.

Jack launched the Delta Flyer without another word and set a course for his final destination on the other side of the planet. For Captain Jack Austin, it was judgement day.

After a literal trip around the world, Jack left the Flyer's systems active and prepped for return to Destiny as she landed once more on the surface. This time, it was just at a treeline. On the other side, Jack had seen the small river and the waterfall laden cliff while he was landing. The journey over had been quiet, and Chloe hadn't been heard of the entire flight, so it would be up to Jack to make the first move as he made his way towards the exit.

He found her slumped against the wall, sat on the floor, next to the airlock. He considered leaving and sending her back up to the station without a word, but only for a brief moment.

"Miss Armstrong?" He said quietly, looking down at her, her face partially hidden behind strands of hair.

"Don't tell me... everything will be okay... everyone says that... and then something equally as bad happens."

Jack crouched down, bending his knees.

"I'm not everyone... and I'm not going to tell you that everything is going to be okay because you're smart and you wouldn't buy it anyway."

"You're right, I wouldn't."

"But I can say that-"

"-you're not coming back, are you?" Chloe interrupted him, looking up and clearing her vision. Jack got to his feet and turned, facing the hatch. "When the man who says that we will all survive and get home, vanishes after somebody dies, what do we do then?"

"Believe me," Jack whispered, pressing the controls to open up the hatch once more, "I've been asking myself that very question from the moment Lahanas told me what 'Ruby' wanted from me."

As the sunlight shone through when the hatch was fully opened, Jack took a breath and walked out onto the hull, stepping down and using a little jump to get onto the ground. He didn't want to linger or explain or make pointless attempts to comfort Chloe, in contrast, he turned back and simply said "Goodbye."

Chloe once again stood there, limited to looking through the viewport when the hatch sealed. Jack looked away through the trees and towards the obstructed cliff edge at the opening on the other side of a small forested area. When the sound of the Flyer taking off was heard, it was his cue to start walking towards the trees, towards the cliff, not turning back or watching as his only way off the planet now left him behind.

When Jack stepped over the odd broken branch and patch of moss, he emerged into the clearing. As he expected, there standing with her back to him, was Ruby... or rather, Fake-Ruby. To confirm what he already really knew as fact, as the memory of their discovery of Ruby and Jasmine's bodies compacted into a small cupboard flooded back to him, Jack just lost it.

"*Olni!*" He screamed, dragging it out for as long as his breath would allow.

Sure enough, Ruby turned and smiled.

"Guess what!" Jack shouted, his voice echoing off the precipice, revealing something tucked into his uniform, "I got your knife!"

"It's been a while, Jack... so tell me... how's Jasmine... Bree... Jenna?" She smiled again. Through the vastly different exterior, the smile was the same. The same smile Olni had given Jack after the

unstable TDB threatened his family with the very knife he was holding. That was it. There was no turning back.

Jack tightened his grip on the melee weapon and bolted forwards, because if he was going down, he was going to be damned awkward about it. Ruby readily positioned herself as the Starfleet officer drew closer and closer into contact range. But she was too quick for him. Before Jack knew it, she had edged ever so slightly out of the way and had grabbed his weapon wrist, dropping the knife into Ruby's hand. She pulled him behind her and twisted his arm right around while pushing her boot into the back of his legs, forcing him down. If any further proof was needed that this Ruby wasn't the same officer Jack welcomed aboard Asteroid Base: Alpha... this was it.

Jack rolled onto his back in time to see the knife point approaching his face. He rolled again, this time sweeping his leg to bring Ruby down with him. The knife dropped near his feet but he kicked it as hard as he could towards the edge of the cliff, but he couldn't see where it had fallen. He scrambled to get to his feet but a flash from behind pummelled him back to the ground, his face hit home hard enough to make a small mould in the dirt.

He roared through his teeth as he spat out the soil.

"That's cheating... I never had you down as a coward." Jack surprisingly had time to get back onto his feet. He was now dangerously close to the edge and Ruby clearly had the upper-hand.

"It's no fun if you know what's coming." She said, "Although I did try to give you a few hints..."

"It was you? The writing on my wall?"

"It's not your wall, Jack... it's *mine*."

It was then that a distant noise had become quite prominent. Unfortunately, Ruby saw where it was coming from first. An AB: Alpha shuttle had broken through the cloud layer and was fast approaching what was the Flyer's landing site.

"Game over, Jack!" Ruby raged at him. She stepped away from the edge and paced a few steps towards the treeline where the shuttle was headed. Ruby raised her palm and a familiar golden glow began to emanate from it. She was going to bring the shuttle down.

Jack yelped and charged at her. In response, her energised hand was drawn into a fist and slammed into Jack's stomach. The impact lifted him off of his feet and tossed him away. The distraction had clearly affected Ruby as well as she stumbled backwards once again towards the edge of the cliff where the rock met the flowing water. It was as though she had drained her own energy in an attempt to bring down the shuttle, but all of that energy was instead used to get Jack out of the way. In the process, the shuttle had been allowed to land.

"I hope you're watching, Austin!" Ruby called out, falling to her knees but once again raising her right hand. But this time it wasn't towards a shuttle, it was up into the sky, "Just remember... you did this." She helplessly screamed as another surge of seemingly electrified golden mist coursed out of her body and up into the blue sky.

Ruby lowered her hand, panting, but a few moments later, the sunlight shining on her face had been blacked out and in a flash, a puff of smoke and the smell of burning flesh made its way up her nose. Looking down, a large blast mark sat on her chest. Looking back up, Jasmine Thomas' silhouette stood in front of her, carrying the same phaser rifle which Mike had used earlier.

"We saved you an energy cell!" She loudly proclaimed, passing on a message from the security chief, before dashing forward and shoving her boot firmly in Ruby's wounded chest. The trans-dimensional being disappeared over the edge. Jasmine limply got there in time to see Ruby's body disappear into

the mist of the waterfall below but the sound of her body slamming against the rocks echoed up. The sound made Jasmine shudder as she stayed frozen on the spot in disbelief of what she had just done. Only Jack's groans pulled her out of it.

"Captain?!" She shouted, turning in time to see Jack scream upon waking – something had to be wrong, "Captain.... Cap... Jack!" She was violently thrown out of her daze and she fell to the floor by his side.

"I don't... I don't... what are you... oh God..." Jack stammered, before clenching his teeth, "Back.... back... oh..."

"I'm sorry..." She said in advance before sliding her hand underneath. He winced, but not audibly this time, but when her hand emerged, it was covered in blood, "Oh my God..." She began looking around underneath him to see an object which Jack had clearly landed on, "I don't want to alarm you... but I think you might have landed on..."

"I gathered..." He muttered.

"Okay, I'm going to get you back to Destiny.... Don't worry, everything going to be fine, I promise."

"Oh I know that... I've had worse..." He forced a smile momentarily but soon withered in agony again as the slightest moving caused Olni's knife to shift ever so slightly, "You need to go... back to the shuttle... get outta here... Destiny's gonna jump."

"I'm not leaving without you. I didn't discharge myself from Sickbay just to go back empty-handed."

"Lieutenant... that's an order! That bastard's killed me... we both know it..."

"Well right now I see my friend laying here, not my Captain... besides, we only have to walk a few thousand miles to join up with the others." She joked. "You're not going to die."

Jack's body spasmed, which could only have caused him more damage. As painful as it must have been, Jasmine placed both hands on him to hold him still. When she considered turning him over, Jack urged her not to.

"The pressure of the ground might be the only thing stopping me bleeding to death quickly... and... I don't want to die with my face in the dirt."

"Do you think you've come this far just to let it end here? You aren't going to die... and Camille won't just leave us down here... she'll have sent someone down already."

"She... she let you come..?"

"Of course she did... she needs you Jack... we all do."

Unfortunately for them both, Camille had worse things to worry about.

"Well what the hell is it?!" Riley shouted as the Operations crew looked out at the golden mist soaring towards them.

"Doctor... jump the station." Camille said calmly.

"Hey, wait... we still have people down there!" Ben argued, "We can't just leave Jasmine and the Captain."

"We'll find a way to come back for them... Doctor... *jump* the station! Now!"

"Camille, please."

"Ben I don't have time to argue with you.... Now jump, do it, just jump!"

Rush started work on getting Destiny to comply with his requests, but nothing was coming of it was the strange cloud headed towards them.

"Engage FTL!" He shouted, to no joy, "Initiate FTL Drive! It's no use... Destiny only responds to Captain Austin." He grumbled, disgruntled.

"Then close the blast shield!" Camille ordered, predicting the 'cloud's' course, taking no chances, "Everybody out, now! I said now! All hands this is Wray, secure all stations and brace for impact!"

Everyone except Camille, Riley, Ben and Rush evacuated Operations as the blast shield slowly lowered against the observation window. But it was too slow. Camille took a step back and Ben and Rush stopped work at both ends of Ops.

"It's not going to make it... we have to..."

The station shook as the strange golden discharge from the planet surface hit the asteroid early, at the edge of the crater. The blast pushed a large gathering of asteroid fragments towards Operations. The three left in Ops didn't have time to escape before the rock shower struck the area around the command centre. Rush dived to the floor and Ben pushed himself up against the wall as the sheer force of the impact ran like a wave through Ops. Camille shrieked as she was thrown off her feet and back onto the circular floor-mounted display. Above her, the equally as circular light platform groaned for a few moments before cracking in the centre, bringing it down in a swing onto the display and hitting Camille's side, knocking her onto the floor with a distinct shriek.

In Sickbay, Tamara was still tending to one of the burns victim when the blast hit. One of the rocks on the exterior station struck the area above sickbay. In one moment of madness, the lights went out and panic ensued in the medical bay. TJ was working in the surgical bay when one of the glass panels came off the wall and smashed into her back, taking her to the ground with a small cry, her head bouncing off the side of the biobed as she fell.

Taking a shortcut to Sickbay, Doctor James Amey and his security escort, Ensign Holmes, were dashing across one of the station's many reinforced glass bridges when the asteroid was struck. Both slipped to the floor, protected by the dense railings from sliding off the edges. James crawled back and scrambled to get Cam back on her feet. As the lighting in the cavern began to flicker, Cam pushed the stubborn scientist forward to take the lead, but as they reached the half way point, the impact above Sickbay struck loose some of the clamps above their heads, releasing a large boulder which shot down towards the bridge. Cam heard the fall and instinctively shoved James forward as hard as she could. As he stumbled and fell face first off the bridge at the other side, a piercing smashing noise emanated from behind him, sending a blast of air across the top of him.

James looked up to see a pair of bloodied hands trying to grasp the sharp edges of what remained of the latter half of the bridge. He quickly crawled towards them but he only managed to see her distraught, struggling face through the glass before her left hand slipped, one of the shards slicing across it. The shock caused her to lose her grip with her right hand. James pushed himself up and made a reckless dash for the edge, but he was too late.

"*Cam!*" By the time he had a clear view over the edge, she was gone, but the echoed *thud* below was clearly heard.

On the other side of the station, Shannon and Mike were on their way to Operations to attend to Camille and Rush, respectively, when they were both knocked to one side at the bottom of the vertical ramp way, but both remained conscious until a bulkhead to their right gave way to enormous pressure behind it, unleashing a powerful blast, sending pieces of equipment, steel and rock fragments into Shannon's head, just covering Mike from being struck full on. Without making a sound, she was pushed and collapsed into Mike's lap as he slumped to the ground for protection as evacuees from Ops landed on the floor around them.

Just up that ramp, Camille's eyes opened. She couldn't see Rush, or Ben, but she could feel the weight of the light platform burying itself into her at an angle, leaning at a slant against the computer display. She couldn't move, but she could tilt her head just enough to see the crumbling ceiling above her.

The manmade covering for the Operations ceiling was cracking, giving way to the force of the shifting rock above it as the drifting asteroid fragments impacted the area directly above them, “bouncing” along the top of the station. Camille coughed and sputtered in a thin cloud of dust that had filled the air. But that wasn’t all that could be heard, as a distant rumbling got ever closer and closer until it became overpowering. Camille knew what was about to happen, her eyes filling with tears from the dust, but also pure fear.

In what could be her last few seconds awake, she gave it one final try muttering two words to the station around her.

“...FTL.....jump...!”

With that, Camille screamed as the ceiling gave way to an avalanche of rock, glass and other materials which poured down uncontrollably into Operations. Camille, Ben, Rush and Riley had vanished in the devastation. But most curiously, most curiously of all, as the station fell quiet, the blackness of space around them was replaced with the shimmering glow of an FTL jump.

On the planet surface, left behind, Jasmine closed her eyes, unable to comprehend the events unfolding around her. In twenty-four hours, she had shot and killed the person she had believed to be her partner for the last four weeks and now she was kneeling on the floor of a strange new world, alone, as Jack’s eyes closed in front of her. He was slipping away, and there was nothing she could do.

But as the world in front of Jack faded away, it was replaced with something most interesting. There was no tunnel of light, but there *was* light... everything around him blended into this endless void of white light. But he wasn’t alone as some humanoid manifestation materialised in front of him. What remained of Jack’s brain recognised her. It was Eleanor... the trans-dimensional being which called off the attack on the asteroid bases.

“Hello Jack.” She said, her voice echoing in the white void, “We have a lot to talk about before you go.”

STAR TREK: UNIVERSE

COMING SOON... MAYBE

Earth. Starfleet Headquarters. The sky is a vivid red, completely free of clouds. On the ground, fires burn across the complex, but there are no people or shuttlecraft in the air.

At the Starfleet Academy site, one of the two towering structures opposite the main building begins to crumble at its foundations before a shuddering groan signals its imminent collapse.

“There’s a war coming.” A tired, female voice says, “And if you’re not on Destiny when that happens... the wrong side is going to win.”