

Previously in Star Trek: Fifth Fleet...

Fifth Fleet Vice Admiral Penji Fil, one of the time-displaced crew members of the original starship Arcturus, is tasked by Starfleet Command to divert the fleet flagship USS Dauntless from its current mission and travel to Rura Penthe - the dreaded Klingon prison planet - to retrieve A. Carey Copeland, a former Starfleet Marine Corps officer and shipmate of Fil's from the 23rd century who was unsuccessful in acclimating to life in the 24th century.

Fil and the Dauntless arrives in orbit over Rura Penthe, only to be informed that Copeland refuses to cooperate in the process to be released, fearing it is a Klingon trick to exile him to the surface of the planet and certain death, prompting the admiral to beam down to the surface and travel overland to the underground prison and dilithium mines to personally assure his former shipmate of his release.

And now the conclusion...

“Vessel departing Klingon space,” the Bolian helmsman Lt Peck announced. “We have officially crossed the border.”

“Very well, helm,” Fleet Captain Peter J. Koester, commanding officer of the Sovereign-class starship *Dauntless* replied before turning back to continue his conversation with Admiral Fil. “So he actually thought you were nothing more than a figment of his imagination?”

“Carey was convinced the Klingons wanted him dead,” Fil, who was sitting in the seat to the left of Koester’s command chair normally occupied by the ship’s counselor, replied. “He told me on the way back to the processing center that he had imagined the late Admiral Johnson arriving on several occasions with similar promises of release.”

“With all due respect, Admiral, I would think you would be among the last people he would IMAGINE coming to rescue him. What’s the Colonel’s status now?”

“Doctor Kelley gave him a quick medical check-up when he arrived aboard, just to make sure he wasn’t carrying any diseases or parasite organisms that could easily spread aboard a starship, then recommended he be assigned quarters and rest for at least 24 to 36 hours. As far as I know Carey’s been asleep almost since we left Rura Penthe. Doctor Kelley had him scheduled for a full and detailed examination starting at 0800 this morning, so I guess we’ll find out how he’s doing soon.”

“Sickbay to Admiral Fil.”

“Speaking of...,” Fil remarked with a smile before tapping his combadge. “This is Fil. Go ahead, Doctor.”

“I’m almost finished with Colonel Copeland’s examination, Admiral. He requested you come down here. I think he wants to talk to you.”

“On my way, Doctor. Fil, out.” The admiral got up from his seat as he said, “If you’ll excuse me, Peter?”

“Keep me informed, Admiral.” Koester then watched as the Catullan stepped into the port side turbolift and the doors swished shut.

Space, the Final Frontier...

Star Trek: Fifth Fleet

“The Returned - Part 2” By PJK

Captain's log, stardate 66765.4:

USS Dauntless en route from Rura Penthe in the Klingon Empire to Earth, transporting former Marine Corps Lt Colonel Achilles Carey Copeland, who had been incarcerated in the infamous Klingon prison for the last twenty years. I expect once Colonel Copeland is returned to the care of Starfleet Command in San Francisco, the Dauntless will return to our normal duties of exploration in the Fifth Fleet AOR.

Koester, commanding Dauntless, out.

The doors into sickbay parted and Vice Admiral Penji Fil walked in, looking around briefly before seeing Carey Copeland sitting on the edge of the exam bed across the room. The Tamurilian, as were many native to his high-gravity homeworld, was short in stature, and his feet dangled above the floor. Fil was struck once again by how old the former Marine officer, actually nearly ten years his junior, looked. Copeland looked up at the sound of the door and his face brightened considerably when he noticed Fil walking over.

"Penji! Oh my God, I thought it was all a dream!"

Fil extended his hand for a handshake with his former shipmate, only to have his extended arm grabbed and himself pulled closer by the stronger man, and Fil was once again enveloped in a tight though brief hug.

"Where am I?" Copeland finally asked, looking around sickbay. "What ship is this?"

"You're aboard the Sovereign-class starship *USS Dauntless*, my fleet flagship," Fil replied. "We're transporting you back to San Francisco."

"Your flagship?! You weren't joking that you were an Admiral?" Copeland asked, his face an expression of incredulity.

"I was promoted to flag rank about seven years ago. Prior to that I was stuck on some backwater planet in Tholian space for nearly four years. Served as security chief, tactical officer, and first officer of the *USS Besiege* before that."

"Wow. You've come a long way, Penji... I mean, sir!"

"I don't normally insist on such formalities except on duty, Carey. We're still friends. You can still call me Penji."

"So what's happened to all the other members of the *Arcturus* crew in the time I was... um... away? I bet Admiral Johnson is Commander in Chief of Starfleet by now!"

"Actually, Admiral Johnson passed away about a year ago," Fil explained, prompting a look of shock mixed with sadness to appear on the Tamurilian's face. "Several others were killed during the Dominion War just over a decade ago. Of those that survived and are still active in the fleet; Kalin Kale is Starfleet Command liaison for the Federation Fifth Fleet. Setton Arbelo is actually aboard this starship right now, serving as first officer. And you remember Val'ri Raijah?"

"Yeah. I was told she got married and left the fleet just after you all appeared in the 24th century."

"She reinstated her commission just before the Dominion War turned hot, transferred into the command division. She's also a Vice Admiral currently in command of the starbase that acts at home port to the Fifth Fleet out beyond the Typhon Expanse."

"The where?" Copeland asked, his confusion evident.

"Don't worry. You have plenty of time to catch up," Fil said just as Dr. Leonard Kelley, ship's chief medical officer, and Counselor Tanzania Gera exited the CMO's office and approached. The admiral noticed Copeland's expression change to one of mild distrust as he looked at the pair. "What's Carey's prognosis, Doctor?"

"Colonel Copeland was suffering from borderline malnutrition, and while he has numerous broken bones that have healed, it's hard to tell which were inflicted on Rura Penthe and which he had before his incarceration, so I can't ascertain whether he was actually tortured or not. If I were to hazard a guess based on my physical examination with no knowledge of what the Colonel has undergone for the last two decades, I would have guessed

his age to be somewhere between 75 and 80 Earth years, though that may improve with better nutrition, exercise, and a less stressful environment, but otherwise he is relatively healthy considering his circumstances.”

Fil noticed Copeland glaring at the doctor, particularly when he mentioned how rapidly the Tamurilian’s body had aged over the decades.

“Now I just need to give him some vitamin shots and take tissue samples to confirm the Colonel is not suffering from any sort of radiation poisoning and I can release him to your care, Admiral,” Kelley remarked. “If you want to go wait in my office, I should be done in ten minutes or so.”

Copeland seemed about to protest, but Fil simply nodded and headed toward the nearby CMO’s office with its curved transparent aluminum windows looking out into both ICU on one side and the medical lab on the other. He was followed by Counselor Gera, who started speaking as soon as the pair were alone.

“I wanted to speak with you in private, Admiral,” the flame-red-haired joined-Trill woman said. “I’m concerned about Colonel Copeland.”

“Concerned how, Counselor?”

“I was only able to give the Colonel a brief evaluation, it’s quite evident he doesn’t trust psychologists in general and, from appearances, me in particular, but I believe he may not be ready to integrate back into civilian society.”

“What do you mean?” Fil asked.

“Colonel Copeland has spent the last two decades under the lash of the Klingon guards on Rura Penthe. He’s paranoid, angry, and apprehensive. Had he been a normal civilian before his incarceration, I would compare him to a puppy that was kicked and beaten every day of its life.”

“But Copeland was a Starfleet Marine officer,” Fil pointed out.

“Exactly. Which means instead of a puppy, he’s a Pitbull-Rottweiler mix that has been kicked and beaten every day of its life; potentially dangerous and unpredictable. I’m afraid, if he found himself in the wrong circumstance, he could easily snap, and people could get... hurt.”

“What do you recommend? Surely we can’t just lock him up in a Federation prison, or even an asylum. It would be removing him from one cell and putting him straight into another! What would be the point in us having traveled all this way to retrieve him?”

“I’m not suggesting he be locked up, Admiral,” Gera said. “I recommend daily counseling sessions, to help him cope with his new circumstances.”

“Do you think he’ll agree to that?”

“No,” Gera admitted. “But I watched how he interacts with you. He still has a lot of respect for you, and now recognizes you as a superior officer. I think if you ordered him to do it, he would.”

“I’d hate to think it has to come down to me ordering...”

The conversation was interrupted by a knock on the door frame. Both Fil and Gera turned to see Dr. Kelley standing there.

“Mister Copeland is all set for now,” the doctor remarked. “But I told him I want to examine him once more before we reach Earth in four days.”

“I’ll make sure he remembers,” Fil said before stepping back out into sickbay. “Thank you, Doctor.” Fil then stepped over to Copeland and said, “Why don’t we get you back to your quarters. I’ll show you how to replicate some proper clothes and then help you settle in. Then we can catch up on the last twenty years.”

“Sounds great!” Copeland replied, hopping down off the exam bed and heading toward the door.

* * * *

Fil had spent the better part of the day instructing Copeland on how to use the replicator and communications equipment in his quarters as the two conversed about all the changes that had occurred in the intervening years. It took Fil a while to realize Copeland had more to catch up on than simply the past twenty years, he himself having gotten used to living in the 24th century for almost half his life and forgetting that Copeland had

only been recovered half a year prior to the incident on Ajilon Prime. As a result, he was still mostly unfamiliar with modern technology and procedures, and he still exhibited a very 23rd century personality and point of view.

During the conversation, Fil mentioned Counselor Gera's suggestion that Copeland attend counseling sessions daily for the foreseeable future. Copeland was at first resistant to the idea, not trusting the woman with the spots across her forehead that he heard had a parasitic creature implanted within her and allowed it to take over her intellect and personality, but Fil countered that he would order Copeland to attend if necessary, even though he would prefer not to. Copeland finally relented and agreed to meet with Gera the next afternoon. The day ended with Copeland expressing his fatigue and Fil promising to stop by early the next morning and treat his former shipmate to breakfast in the 10-Forward lounge.

The next morning, Fil arrived at the guest quarters assigned to Copeland and rang the door chime. He waited patiently for nearly a minute before ringing the chime again. Again, there was no answer. Starting to grow concerned, he remembered that Copeland had been issued a combadge after arriving aboard.

"Computer, what is the location of Carey Copeland?" he asked.

The ship's main computer beeped acknowledgement before replying, "Mister Copeland is currently located on Holodeck 2, deck 8, section 29."

"What's he doing in a holodeck?" Fil wondered aloud before making his way to the aforementioned facility, finding the control panel next to the heavy double doors activated and running an unfamiliar program entitled 'Cop1.'

"Computer, is it possible to enter this program at present, or is the door locked?" Fil asked.

"Program complete. Enter when ready," the computer voice responded before the doors yawned open. Fil stepped in, his eyes having trouble adjusting to the dark as the doors shut behind him.

The admiral found himself standing in what looked like a cave, but not a natural one, rather one that had been excavated. For some reason it seemed familiar to him, and as he groped his way through the passage toward a noise that sounded like a whining laser drill, he suddenly realized why. He was stumbling through a simulation of the mine on Rura Penthe.

"Computer, add mining light," he ordered. A moment later a hand-held portable light materialized near his feet. He picked it up and activated it, moving more confidently toward the sound he was hearing.

It took Fil nearly a minute, turning through several passages, before he found Copeland. The Tamurilian was completely alone and still wearing the same civilian clothes he had replicated the previous afternoon, now covered with dirt and grime. He was swinging a laser pick back and forth across one section of tunnel wall, causing a moderate-sized crystal of simulated dilithium to fall to the ground.

"Carey," Fil called out, but the sound of the laser pick drowned him out. "Carey!" The Tamurilian still did not hear the admiral. "CAREY!"

"AHH!" Copeland shouted, almost falling back as he was startled by the yell. He then looked up at Fil and yelled, "Penji! You scared the hell out of me! Don't sneak up on someone when they're concentrating! Do you have any idea how many Klingon guards I decked over the years because they did something similar?"

"Sorry, Carey. What are you doing in here?" Fil looked around at the tool in Copeland's hand, the crystal sitting on the ground, and the marks left by the laser pick on the tunnel wall. "How long have you been in here?"

"What time is it?" Copeland asked.

"0800 hours."

"I've been in here for about seven hours then, but that includes the two... two and a half hours it took to program this contraption. And I was already more than an hour in before I finally thought to ask the computer if there were any programs utilizing Rura Penthe already in the system. I managed to locate something adequate, but what a waste of time!"

"But what are you doing in here?"

"I only slept about four hours after you left last night," Copeland explained. "Couldn't sleep any more. Never got a straight four hours while I was imprisoned. When I got up I was bored out of my skull. I had the urge to put in some time in the mines. After all, that's what I've been doing for the last twenty years. I started pacing my

quarters. Then I remembered Starfleet had perfected holotechnology during the time I was trapped in my ejection pod. It took me a little while to figure out the controls, but it's really not all that different than the replicator."

"But... Why?" Fil asked again in exasperation.

"There was nothing else to do," Copeland replied straight-faced.

Stunned by the Tamurilian's attitude, Fil fought the urge to shake his head sadly, finally just asking, "Are you hungry? I promised you breakfast this morning, remember?"

"Oh yeah! I'm famished!" Copeland said as he dropped the mining tool to the floor and started heading down the tunnel. "I could really go for a good sautéed tribble right now. Didn't get them often in the mines, but when we did, that was some good eating!"

"Uh... Carey? Where are you going?" Fil, who was still standing where he first found Copeland, asked.

"I'm heading to the elevator so we can get out of here."

Now Fil could not resist the urge. He slowly shook his head back and forth a few times before saying, "Computer, save program and exit."

Almost immediately the scenery around the pair faded away, to be replaced by a grey grid-lined floor and framework supporting a network of holo-emitters along each wall. Fil headed toward the door as Copeland looked around in amazement for a moment before quickly turning to follow.

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It took some time to convince Copeland to return to his quarters and change clothes before heading to the lounge for breakfast, but finally the pair of former *Arcturus* crew members entered 10-Forward. The lounge was crowded with members of the crew who had just gotten off the mid-watch, but the two men managed to find an empty table with two seats near the middle of the room. Copeland looked around in amazement as Fil motioned for one of the waiters to come over.

"This is pretty nice," Copeland remarked. "None of the lounges aboard the old *Arcturus* were this nice."

"Modern starships are expected to operate for longer periods further from Earth than ever before. Starfleet tries to make the crew as comfortable as possible," Fil explained.

"Good morning, Admiral," the Bolian waiter said as he approached. "I don't believe I have met your companion yet."

Copeland looked at the waiter suspiciously as Fil said, "This is Lt Colonel Carey Copeland, former of the Starfleet Marine Corps. He is our guest as we transport him back to Earth."

"Welcome aboard the *Dauntless*, Colonel. What can I get for you this morning?"

Copeland looked at Fil quickly before saying, "You don't have any tribbles, do you?"

"I'm afraid not," the waiter replied with a laugh, sounding like he was not sure if the Tamurilian was joking or not. "Can I interest you in some eggs perhaps? The sausage and egg on a biscuit is my own personal favorite."

Copeland started looking around the lounge again, taking note for the first time of all the people around them. Some were eating meals of their own, others were drinking beverages, still others merely conversing animatedly. Finally Copeland looked back at the waiter and said, "Yeah. Give me one of those. And water. A big glass of water."

"Very good. And you, Admiral?"

"I'll have the same, but make my drink a raktajino." As the waiter walked away toward the bar, Fil noticed Copeland looking around once again, much as a guard dog watches for approaching danger.

Copeland started noticing occasional glances in his direction from those around him. Each glance made him feel more vulnerable, more paranoid. He was sure they were all observing him, silently watching, waiting for the moment he would let down his guard – even just a little. That would be the moment... the moment they would attack!

Right then, the waiter returned with Copeland and Fil's food, startling the Tamurilian once again. He watched the waiter closely and suspiciously once more as the Bolian first put plates with breakfast sandwiches down

in front of each man, then placed a large glass of ice water next to Copeland's plate before starting to hand Fil his mug of steaming raktajino.

Out of the corner of his eye, Fil saw Copeland suddenly move. A second later a scream emanated from across the lounge as one of the crew was hit by the plate and food Copeland had thrown. Several people stood up, apparently prepared to subdue the thrower as Fil yelled, "Carey! What did you do that for?!?"

Copeland was already on his feet, looking around at everyone with a feral expression and causing everyone to hesitate and look at him.

"I know what you're trying to do!" he accused. "I know what you're all thinking! He's weak! He can't defend himself! Well I have news for all of you! Try me on for size! I may be shorter than all of you but I'm capable of defending myself! I had to be, or I never would have survived the first week in that hell-hole Penji took me out of!"

Before Fil could say anything more, Copeland stormed out of the lounge, every eye in the room watching him trudge through the carved wooden doors. Fil exchanged a puzzled look with the Bolian waiter before getting out of his own chair and following after Copeland, but it was too late; the Tamurilian had already disappeared somewhere down the corridor.

"Computer, location of Carey Copeland?"

"Mister Copeland is located at the port entrance door of the 10-Forward lounge."

"Impossible," Fil said, looking around. "That's where I..." Then he noticed the combadge sitting against the corridor bulkhead beside the door. Copeland had evidently taken it off and thrown it down as he exited the lounge.

"This is going to be fun," the admiral remarked to himself.

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Almost forty-five minutes later, and with the help of some coordination through the bridge, Fil finally located Copeland. He was staring out the window in the aft-most lounge located in the fantail of the secondary hull in an area considered part of the embarked Marine barracks. When Fil arrived, two armed Marines stood at the ready near the open door. Fil dismissed them, then quietly stepped into the lounge. The admiral found Copeland standing near one of the aft-facing windows, staring out at the warp streaks as they receded behind the starship.

"Carey?" Fil said, slowly approaching the stout Tamurilian.

"I'm sorry, Penji," Copeland said, still staring out the window. "I guess I overreacted a little back there."

"Yeah, just a little," Fil agreed with a touch of sarcasm, stepping closer. "What brought that on?"

Fil noticed Copeland wipe his cheek quickly with the back of one hand before he said, "When you're locked up in Rura Penthe, you constantly have to watch your back. There's a hierarchy inside prison, and the easiest way to move up that hierarchy is to beat up or somehow eliminate someone higher up the food chain than yourself. I can't tell you how many times I was almost shanked by some new prisoner, the only thing saving me was my constant vigilance and my training from the Corps. I looked around the lounge this morning and was convinced everyone there was plotting against me. Everyone but you. I had to get out of there or I was afraid I was going to hurt someone. This was the only place I could think of going."

"Because you knew you would be alone here?"

Copeland finally turned to face Fil. The admiral was surprised to see tears streaming down both sides of the Tamurilian's face. In all the time he had known Copeland, Fil could not remember ever having seen the tough Marine, a warrior in every sense of the word, cry.

"No," Copeland finally answered. "I came down here because it was as close as I could get to Rura Penthe aboard this ship." He turned back to look out the window once again.

Fil moved another few steps closer, saying, "Why would you want to do that? Rura Penthe is a brutal, horrible place!"

"The prison may have been brutal, horrible, dangerous, and filled with the very dregs of the galaxy, but for the last twenty years it has also been one other thing to me, Penji."

“What’s that?”

Fil could see a fresh stream of tears appeared in the corners of Copeland’s eyes in the reflection of the window as he answered, “My home.”

Fil stepped right up to Copeland and put comforting arms around the stocky man’s shoulders.

“Come on,” the admiral said gently. “Let’s get you back to your quarters.”

Copeland did not resist as Fil led him back toward the nearest turbolift. A few minutes later, they were back in Copeland’s guest quarters, where Fil summoned Counselor Gera. The ship’s counselor arrived a few minutes later.

* * * *

Later that day, both Fil and Gera were sitting in the captain’s ready room with Fleet Captain Koester, discussing the recent incident involving Carey Copeland.

“I’m seeing the word ‘incident’ associated with Mister Copeland all too often lately,” Koester remarked. “I hope he’s not going to be causing any more trouble aboard my ship before we reach Earth?”

“I’ve given him a mild sedative. He’s sleeping in his guest quarters,” Gera said. “However, I must agree with you to some extent, Captain. I have reservations that Mister Copeland will ever really be able to successfully fit back into civilized society. I’ve done some research since my initial interview with him when he came aboard the other day, and I believe his current mental state is the result of two closely related traumas he suffered. I believe he could easily have coped with either one by itself or with a sufficient amount of time in between. Mister Copeland’s problem was that these two traumas occurred - from his point of view - literally within days of one another.”

“You’re not referring to his release from Rura Penthe, are you, Counselor?” Koester asked.

“No, these mental traumas go much further back than his recent release from prison. In fact, they may have been a contributing factor to his incarceration in the first place.”

“You mean the fight that got him put in prison isn’t one of the traumas you’re talking about?” Fil asked, his concern for his friend and former shipmate showing.

“No, Admiral. What I’m referring to is the trauma, both physical and mental, he suffered during his battle with the Orions and his near-death a century ago, compounded by waking up to find himself in an unfamiliar time period almost a century later with just about everyone and everything he knew gone. I believe it was only the fact he woke up among familiar faces – his former shipmates from the 23rd century - that prevented a major mental breakdown much sooner. If he had been found by any starship other than the *Arcturus-A*, I’m almost positive he would have had a mental breakdown almost right away.”

“Even though he’s a Marine?” Fil asked.

“Especially because he’s a Marine, Admiral,” Gera replied. “From their first day of training, Marines are taught things are set in stone. Black and white. Follow your orders and don’t ask questions. A side effect is often it will lead to an inability to think creatively.”

“Oh, trust me, Counselor. Creative thinking is not one of Carey’s inabilities,” Fil remarked with a laugh. “He was the number one prank artist aboard the *Arcturus*. Even his clone, Jim Copeland, displayed this ability when he arrived aboard the *Arcturus-A*, going all-out and pulling practical jokes of all sorts on Admiral Johnson.”

“Perhaps that is one reason why Mister Copeland was able to survive as long as he did in prison without a complete mental breakdown. Unfortunately, as a coping method, he submerged himself into his role as a prisoner of the Klingons, and he’s finding that habit very hard to break right now. That was why, as much as he hated the place, he longed to go back to Rura Penthe this morning.”

“But there’s still hope Carey could eventually become a productive part of 24th century society, right?” Fil asked.

“I can’t say for certain. He’s going to have to undergo a series of tests and exams by professional counselors at Starfleet Medical, probably for months if not longer.”

“What about Starfleet?” Koester asked. “The majority of the old *Arcturus* crew managed to adapt, overcome, and succeed in their new time period, mainly because they stayed in Starfleet. Heck, we work alongside

several of them in the Fifth Fleet now! Is there any possibility Mister Copeland could be re-integrated back into Starfleet or the Marine Corps. Perhaps the stability of the service...?"

"I have serious doubts, Captain," Gera replied. "Even if he were accepted back in, and taking the incident on Ajilon Prime into account I doubt they would, there would always be that unspoken thought in the minds of everyone serving with him. 'Will today be the day he snaps?' I just don't see it working out. Right now, my best hope is that, after extensive therapy, Mister Copeland will eventually be able to settle down into a relatively normal civilian life."

"I don't think Carey is going to like that answer," Fil remarked.

"Engineering to Captain Koester!" shouted the voice of the starship's chief engineer over the intercom, cutting off whatever answer Gera might have given. "This is an emergency!"

Koester quickly hit his intercom and said, "This is the Captain. What's going on, Commander?"

The emotional Vulcan's voice sounded more stressed than Koester could remember him ever being in the time since the engineer returned to the *Dauntless* as he said, "We have an intruder in the port nacelle control room! Before I lost contact with the watch standers up there he knocked one of them out and was attempting to access the plasma stream!"

"Any idea who it is?" Koester asked, already standing up and heading out of the room toward the bridge.

"Yes. Our passenger; Mister Copeland. From what Lieutenant Patch said before I lost contact, I think he's trying to commit suicide, Captain!"

"Helm, all stop!" Koester ordered as soon as he was on the bridge, followed closely by Gera and Fil. He then ordered, "Mister Bloom, vent the plasma stream!"

"Venting will commence as soon as the ship is out of warp," Bloom advised. "However, it will take approximately seven minutes to completely vent the warp plasma."

"Just do it!" Koester ordered before looking at the Scotsman sitting in the center seat. "I'll be in the port nacelle control room, Commander."

"Aye, sair," Commander Alasdair Wallace replied.

"I'm coming with you," Fil said.

"Me too," Gera added.

Koester paused just a second before saying with a scowl, "Fine. Come with me."

* * * *

Several minutes later, Koester, Fil, and Gera emerged from the Jefferies tube into the access way of the control room in the port-side warp nacelle. The control room was crowded with two medics attending to the two unconscious watch standers, several technicians working at the main control console in the center of the room, and both chief engineer Jeffery Bloom and first officer Setton To'Lock Arbelo overseeing what was going on. Koester looked around a moment before seeing Copeland standing on the upper catwalk, punching commands into a panel right next to the open isolation door that separated the control room from the vast interior of the warp nacelle. The glow of the warp plasma flowing from the injectors could still be seen through the opening, which occasionally crackled with energy, indicating that the forcefield was still in place.

"Status?" Koester quietly asked Bloom.

"Both Setton and I got up here as quickly as we could," Bloom replied. "Mister Copeland had already managed to raise the isolation door and lock out the controls on the main panel down here. I can only assume he's trying to drop the forcefield so he has access directly to the plasma injectors. If he can get the forcefield down, he can jump right into the plasma stream."

"You can't close the door from down here?" Koester asked.

"As I said, he locked out the controls. I've got my technicians trying to re-route control back down here, but for the moment the only functioning control for the isolation door is the panel he's working on up there right now."

"How much longer until the plasma is completely vented?"

“At least another four minutes,” Bloom replied. “Commander Windsor needs to shut down key systems in a certain order or we risk blowing out the entire EPS conduit network.”

“Maybe if I go up there and talk to him?” Gera suggested. “Distract him long enough to allow the venting to complete?”

Admiral Fil exchanged a look with Commander Arbelo before saying, “No, Counselor. With all due respect, I don’t think that would help. Carey sees you as an adversary right now.” The admiral then looked at Koester as he said, “Monster and I will go up there. Maybe two familiar and friendly faces will be able to talk some sense into him?”

Koester reluctantly agreed, adding, “Good luck, Gentlemen. Be careful.”

“Jeff,” Arbelo said to the chief engineer. “Keep trying to re-route control of the isolation door back to the main control console. Use a silent hand signal if you manage to succeed.”

“Aye, Exec,” Bloom replied before turning his attention back to his technicians. Meanwhile, Fil and Arbelo both started climbing up the ladder to the catwalk on the outboard side, further from where Copeland was still working on the panel, and slowly moved closer to the Tamurilian. It looked like he was oblivious to the two approaching officers as he continued to punch commands into the control panel with his left hand. The pair got as close as the opposite side of the open isolation door when Copeland spoke, his eyes never leaving the control panel.

“Don’t come any closer, guys,” he said. “I really don’t want to have to use this on either of you.”

Copeland turned slightly, revealing a small type-I hand phaser in the palm of his right hand, one of the reasons it was taking him so long to access the forcefield controls.

“Your Major Mendez needs to train her Marines better,” Copeland said almost conversationally. “No Marine aboard the *Arcturus* would have allowed their secondary weapon to be appropriated so easily without notice or resistance. And it’s really not my intention to have to use this on myself to accomplish my goal; I’ve heard death by phaser is such a painful way to die when the setting is too low. But I will use this on myself if I have to! Or on anyone that tries to stop me. Even a former shipmate!”

Fil and Arbelo stopped where they were, standing side by side on the catwalk, hoping that Copeland might at least be willing to listen.

“Carey, why do you think you need to kill yourself?” Fil asked. “Surely things aren’t THAT bad!”

“Penji, I just have nothing left to live for,” Copeland replied. “The universe is vastly different than the one I knew in the late-23rd century. Most of the friends I had have either moved on to new careers or passed-on entirely. I’m a relic that belongs in a museum, where kids can point at me and say, ‘Hey, look at the cave man!’ At least on Rura Penthe I had purpose! Yeah, it may be the most brutal place in the entire galaxy, but at least mining 16 metric tons of dilithium a day was an attainable goal! I have no clue what I’m supposed to do now!”

“Not all your old friends are gone, Carey,” Fil pointed out. “Two of them are right here with you! And we want to help you in any way we can!”

“You can’t help me,” Copeland said. “It’s too little too late.” He looked back at his two former shipmates again, a very sad look in his eyes, as he said, “I should have died a hundred years ago. I’m only correcting an oversight. You can pretend you guys never found me. You won’t even need to bury me.”

Right at that moment, Copeland entered one last command into the control panel. A second later the barely audible buzz of the forcefield ceased. An alarm sounded in the control room, followed by the computer voice announcing, “Warning! Isolation forcefield has been deactivated! Danger! Plasma stream still flowing!”

Copeland looked at his friends one last time, prepared to say a final farewell. He opened his mouth to speak, but suddenly and unexpectedly found himself being tackled to the catwalk grating, the hand phaser he was holding flying out of his grip and clattering to the deck below.

Quickly, both Fil and Arbelo joined Fleet Captain Koester, who had managed to climb up onto the catwalk behind Copeland while he was distracted by the admiral and his first officer, in a struggle with the Tamurilian. It looked like the three men would quickly subdue him, and Copeland stopped struggling, but as soon as they released their grip on him and Fil tried to help his friend to his feet, the Tamurilian employed his superior strength, breaking away from all three men and pushing them back several meters out of reach before moving toward the opening

directly overlooking the still-flowing plasma injectors. Koester, Fil, and Arbelo were all frozen in indecision, knowing none of them could reach him before he jumped through the open doorway.

Copeland appeared ready to plunge head-first when he suddenly paused. Slowly he turned his head to face Fil, the look of sadness still evident, and spoke a single word. “Why?” At first, Fil was not sure what Copeland meant. Was he asking why he needed to kill himself? Why his life had taken the turns it had? Why he had survived the battle with the Orions only to lose his freedom to the Klingons in what seemed to him like only a few months later? Then Copeland added, “I’ve been such a pain in the ass to everyone around me my entire life. Commodore Johnson, Kira, Athena, Dave, you guys. Why are all of you so insistent on saving me?”

Fil moved half a step closer to Copeland as he answered, “Because you’re worth it! You’re a friend. And helping each other is what friends do!”

Copeland looked back at the stream emerging from the plasma injectors, the flow now visibly slowing, and looked about to jump once again, but again hesitated. He realized if he did not act soon, his opportunity would quickly be lost. Again he prepared to jump, and again he hesitated.

Fil saw the opportunity and stepped closer to Copeland, holding out his hand. Copeland looked at the extended hand, as rigid as a statue. Fil shook the hand slightly, emphasizing his gesture as he said three simple words. “Let me help.”

Almost immediately, Copeland broke down. With seemingly great effort, he reached his own hand out toward Fil. As the two men’s fingertips barely grazed each other, Fil suddenly grabbed for the Tamurilian man’s wrist and pulled him away from the opening and into a tight embrace.

“Got it!” Commander Bloom suddenly shouted out from the deck below, and immediately the forcefield snapped back into place just before warning alarms sounded and the isolation door slowly lowered only seconds before the plasma stream finished venting and the injectors closed.

“Thank you,” was all Copeland could say.

“That’s what friends are for,” Fil assured.

* * * *

“Approaching Earth orbit,” announced Lieutenant Peck.

“Very well, helm,” responded Fleet Captain Koester. “Mister Cerilli, hail Starfleet Medical and inform them that Doctor Kelley and Counselor Gera will be beaming down with Mister Copeland as soon as we enter standard orbit.”

“Aye, Captain,” Ensign Wyatt Cerilli – also known as Five of Twelve – acknowledged.

Down in sickbay, where Copeland had been confined in a private ward since the incident in the nacelle control room – visited daily by not only Gera, Fil, and Arbelo, but on other occasions by Koester, Bloom, and even Major Mendez – Dr. Kelley was reviewing the Tamurilian’s medical record one final time before their arrival at Earth when Admiral Fil and Counselor Gera walked in.

“Good morning, Admiral,” the chief medical officer said pleasantly. “Come to say good-bye to Mister Copeland?”

“Actually, Commander Arbelo and I will be accompanying you to the surface to make sure Carey gets settled in at Starfleet Medical,” Fil replied. He then turned his attention back to Gera as he asked, “Do you really think he’s going to have an easier time adjusting than before the incident in the nacelle?”

“I’ve spent several hours with Mister Copeland since that afternoon,” Gera replied. “I believe he has really reached a turning point and finally come to grips with the situation fate has put him in. Given enough time and support, which I’m sure he’ll get at Starfleet Medical, I honestly believe he’ll be able to successfully integrate back into modern society now.”

“Do you think he might even be able to re-join the Marine Corps?” Fil asked. “I know from some of our conversations over the last few days that re-joining the Corps is his eventual goal.”

A look of skepticism crossed Gera’s spotted features before she said, “I suppose anything is possible, but I have my doubts that he will ever serve in Starfleet again.”

“I think he’ll surprise you, Counselor,” Fil said before excusing himself and entering the ward where Copeland had been confined to inform him the *Dauntless* had finally arrived back at Earth.

Twenty minutes later, Fil, Arbelo, Copeland, Dr. Kelley, and Counselor Gera were in the transporter room. As all five stepped up onto the platform and the transporter chief prepared to energize, the doors opened once more and Fleet Captain Koester entered.

“I just wanted to take the opportunity to say good-bye and wish you the best of luck, Mister Copeland,” he said to the Tamurilian, offering his hand to shake.

Copeland accepted the offered hand and replied, “Thank you, Captain. For both your hospitality and assistance. Hopefully we’ll meet again soon.”

“I’m not sure how likely that will be with the *Dauntless* stationed way out past the Typhon Expanse,” Koester remarked.

“You never know, sir. I might be back out there sooner than you expect.” Copeland then snapped to attention and, in spite of the fact he was wearing civilian clothing, sharply saluted Koester. Having not expected the gesture, all Koester could think to do was return the salute. Copeland then stepped back into position atop one of the transporter pads between Fil and Arbelo and said, “Request permission to disembark, sir.”

“Permission granted, Colonel,” Koester replied with a smile before turning to the transporter operator behind the transparent aluminum partition. “Is the system ready, Chief?”

“System standing-by and synchronized with Starfleet Medical, sir.”

“Very well. Energize, Chief.”

The transporter operator activated his console. A moment later the five people on the transporter platform dematerialized. Just as he felt the annular confinement beam take hold of him, Copeland’s last thought was, *‘I’ll be back!’*

The End