

CHAPTER ONE

“Absent Friend”

"I had this instructor at the Academy . . . for whatever reason, she was quite convinced that I would someday become a great Star Fleet captain. The Academy Counselor never did find out what she was suffering from."

– Admiral M. Robert Avenger,

Star Trek: The Crouton Generation “The Perfect Game”: Episode 22, “Into the Sunset”

Stardate 104297.6

The Nogura Federation Cemetery is one of several burial grounds, scattered throughout the Federation, reserved for those beings that have served Star Fleet for some part of their lives. Admiral Nogura, the Star Fleet Commander during the V’Ger Crisis, had an ulterior motive in mind when he paved the way for the construction of his namesake. Upon his own death, he wished to be buried close to Star Fleet Headquarters, but with a view of the ocean leading back to his homeland of Japan. He chose a site on the shores of San Francisco Bay, on a plot of land that in the 20th century had been home to a sports facility called Candlestick Park. By a striking coincidence, Admiral Nogura died just days before the cemetery was finally to open, leaving his colleagues with the opportunity to ensure Nogura himself would be the first being laid to rest in the shrine they would dedicate to him on that very day.

Two figures began to hum into existence in a public croutonizer booth across the street from the entrance to the cemetery. The use of croutonizers across the Earth’s surface had ballooned in recent years, thanks to its much lower cost and higher safety rate than traditional transporters. In order to maintain a measure of security and safety for the populace, booths with high quality computer safeguards had been set up across the planet to ensure that no two people materialized inside of one another by mistake. Star Fleet croutonizers, obviously, were able to bypass the booths and croutonize a being to or from any location, but Star Fleet generally stuck to the public booths as much as possible.

Admiral M. Robert Avenger and Lt. Cdr. Crossfire stepped out of the booth, looked both ways, and crossed the road. Avenger was carrying a long flat box under one arm and seemed mostly oblivious to his surroundings, clearly lost in silent reflection. Crossfire’s senses were at full alert, however, and for good reason. It had only been days since the horrible incident at Alpha Centauri, and the reporters were still anxious to get their noses deep into Star Fleet’s business.

Avenger had been insistent on visiting the cemetery *now*, despite Crossfire’s frequent objections, but rank ultimately won out. Crossfire decided to tag along, just to be safe, and to provide Avenger with a human shield against the press.

Avenger stopped just inside the gate to talk to the groundskeeper, who apparently knew him from past visits to the facility. After a short conversation and a shaking of hands, Avenger stepped back onto the main path and began walking. Crossfire followed.

A few hundred meters on, Avenger stopped abruptly. Only Crossfire’s lightning-quick reflexes allowed him to overcome his inertia and stop his forward momentum in time to avoid

becoming entangled in Avenger's gangly legs.

The Admiral licked his left index finger and held it in the air, apparently checking the wind direction. He scanned the horizon from left to right, then back partway until he found a distant point interesting enough to focus on intently. He drew in a deep breath through his nose, and was rewarded a few seconds later with a violent sneeze.

"Ah, yes, now I remember," Avenger muttered aloud, although Crossfire could not be sure whether it was for his benefit or not. The Admiral wiped his nose on an old-fashioned white handkerchief and marched forward, deftly zig-zagging through the rows upon rows of markers for the ashes of the fallen, climbing a steep bluff until reaching a particular unremarkable grey triangular pyramid near its crest. The name plate on the forty centimeter-high marker faced outwards towards the San Francisco Bay, giving the deceased a room with a view for all eternity.

"Captain Annika Hansen, died 2418," Crossfire read off the marker. "Never heard of her. Old girlfriend?"

Avenger tossed Crossfire a short, cold glare, then knelt down to clear the grass clippings out of a narrow vase built into the back of the marker. He unwrapped the box he had been carrying and gently removed seven azure blue flowers with petals arranged in the eight centimeter-long bells. Crossfire remembered that these were a Vulcan variety of rose known as Trikahri, that were only able to bloom during one week of the year in Earth's climate, even under the most controlled conditions. Avenger carefully lowered the seven flowers into the vase, then removed two simple yellow daffodils from the box and added them to the mix.

"The Trikahri must have cost you a bundle," Crossfire remarked. "Sure she wasn't somebody special?"

"Could we have a moment alone, please?"

So he didn't take the bait, thought Crossfire as he nodded and stepped just out of earshot several meters down the hill. Drags me all the way out here with him and then gets all mysterious again. Crossfire's eyes landed on the marker near his feet. Hey, cool! I found Captain Sulu's marker.

Crossfire pretended to read the names, ranks and other biographical information about the former Star Fleet officers buried around him, while instead watching Avenger from afar. The Admiral was still crouched down on one knee, talking quietly, as if catching up with an aunt on his comings and goings.

You don't think they're related, do you? Crossfire asked himself, with a smirk. Naaah. I was probably right the first time. Mysterious as he likes to be, he probably wouldn't want us to know about an old girlfriend, especially if it was an older woman. You sly dog. Crossfire stopped on that and frowned slightly. Then again, "older" is relative when we're talking about the Admiral.

Crossfire caught movement with his peripheral vision and turned to see several reporters hurrying up the road from the cemetery gate, video cameras hovering just behind them. As Crossfire turned back to warn him, Avenger was already marching down the hill towards him.

"Croutonprize, this is Crossfire," he said into his Star Fleet insignia pin. "The Admiral and I need beam-up ASAP."

"Acknowledged," came the reply. "Locking on to your coordinates now."

"Reporters coming, I see," Avenger noted as he stepped to Crossfire's side.

Crossfire nodded. "Did you two have a good talk?"

Avenger let out a contented sigh as the croutonizing process began its customary tingle in

their extremities. “Yes. Yes, we did. Several of them, in fact.”



Crossfire paid for the drinks and looked back to Soraya expectantly.

“Captain Annika Hansen?” Soraya manipulated the name in her mind for a moment. “She was my advanced astrometrics professor at the Academy. What about her?”

Curiosity may have killed the cat, but at that moment Soraya would have believed that the pleading in Crossfire’s eyes would have vaporized the whole litter. She decided she had better elaborate, before the FSPCA showed up on her doorstep wanting to know about the three meter-high pile of dead felines stacked neatly behind the warp core..

“Uh, she was a tough old bird. She expected perfection from absolutely everybody, including her superiors. There were a lot of people that didn’t make it through her class, including several people that ended up dropping out of navigation or astrophysics majors altogether.”

“So how did you do?” Crossfire asked, not expecting an answer different from the one he was about to receive.

“Well, I got an A,” Soraya admitted. “But I *really* had to work for it. All that work for her class almost dropped me to a B in Junior Lab.”

“Oh, well, now that would have been a shame, wouldn’t it?” teased Crossfire. “You know, some of us had enough trouble just passing Astrometrics for Jarheads.”

Soraya harumphed and crossed her arms. “I think Kabeta told me that she had to take the class twice. A lot of people did, actually.” She unfolded her arms and sipped at her tea, thoughtfully. “So what’s this sudden interest in Hansen, anyway?”

“The Admiral went to visit her at Nogura today. Seemed to know her *really* well.” Crossfire wiggled his eyebrows for effect. “If you know what I mean.”

“Crossfire, I don’t think Captain Hansen would have had sex with *anybody* or *anything*, let alone Avenger, if that’s what you were trying to insinuate.”

Crossfire arched an eyebrow, Vulcan-style.

“Hansen,” Soraya explained, “was cold, logical, blunt, and absolutely to the point, in *everything* she did. If Avenger had hit on her, which I seriously doubt, she would have eaten him alive. And I certainly don’t see her hitting on him.” She paused, deep in thought. “She seemed kind of asexual, you know, driven by other motivations. Not that half the male cadets, and a good fraction of the females, weren’t drooling over her behind her back, even at her age.”

“Well, *something* happened between them or he wouldn’t have been so insistent on seeing her now.”

“You’d have to ask *him* about that,” she snorted.

“I might just do that,” Crossfire contemplated.

“Here’s your chance,” she noted, as Avenger strolled into Ten-Forward.

Avenger leaned over the bar, placing his order, when Crossfire waved him over. Soraya tried to activate her cloaking device, then remembered that she hadn’t had a chance to put in to spacedock for a refit yet, so she instead tried to disappear by sinking deep into her seat.

“You two conspiring behind my back?” asked Avenger, as he plopped down at a chair beside their table.

“How did you know?” smiled Crossfire. “Did you intercept my transmission?”

Avenger cut to the chase. “You want to know about Seven, don’t you?”

“Who?” That was Soraya, who had ceased trying to mind-meld with the furniture.

“Seven of Nine, Tertiary Adjunct of Unimatrix Zero-One. Also known as Annika Hansen, best astrometrics professor the Academy ever had, and one of the few people Star Fleet has managed to liberate from the Borg.”

“That . . . would definitely explain her personality,” Soraya realized.

“You’re shitting me,” Crossfire responded. “She’s *Voyager*’s Seven of Nine? I’ve read all about her.”

Avenger cocked his head at Crossfire, in seeming surprise. “But that information’s classified.” Crossfire stared at his commanding officer, wondering when Avenger would remember just how high Crossfire’s security clearance went. After a moment’s hesitation, Avenger smiled and winked – a self-congratulatory pat on the back, if Crossfire had ever seen one.

Avenger took a frosted Mason’s root beer from the waiter and twisted off the bottle cap with an anachronistic palm-sized piece of rubber that appeared from one of his many voluminous pockets. (Interestingly, most Star Fleet uniforms didn’t even *have* pockets, yet Avenger’s had *several*, all bulging.) He knocked down one swallow of the fizzy indulgence, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and set the bottle down on the table before him, before realizing that both Soraya and Crossfire were still looking at him, expectantly.

“I suppose you want to hear the story.” Nods of agreement. “You’ll have to be patient. It’s a long one.”

Crossfire checked his watch. “I seem to remember Rhee saying the engineering team needed another thirty-six hours to get the ship in shape.”

“And as your new first officer, it wouldn’t hurt for me to understand you a little better,” added Soraya.

“All right.” Avenger took another sip of root beer. “Well, it really started back in my third year at the Academy. John Heins, Chi An and I were walking back from baseball practice . . .” Avenger paused, watching his audience of two roll their eyes at yet another reference to that ancient sport. “John and I were roommates at the Academy, you know, long before he was my first officer. Chi An and I were randomly assigned to adjacent seats in our math class on my second day at the Academy and the three of us were together a *lot* after that.

“For some reason, I got it into my head to take the *Kobayashi Maru* test early. I was taking some command school classes then. I didn’t really have it in my head to become a starship captain. I just wanted the credits out of the way, to save time before moving up to department head or senior staff later, you understand. I figured I’d just take the test early and get it out of the way, so I wouldn’t have to deal with it while working on my senior project . . .”