

The Voyage Home
The Affliction: Book 3

M.J.Petrin

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Prologue

Pete knelt and stared at the floor. He gazed at his image on the cold steel surface. Voices and images of the past raced through his mind. He saw himself waking up that first time in that alley back in Bends Creek, Mississippi, not knowing who he was. He remembered how badly he wanted to regain his memory and emotional capabilities.

Pete recalled how much of a priority it was for him to discover his humanity. He could not feel pain, fear, or love. His lack of emotional capacity made him feel robotic and question whether he was human.

Pete began to think about Sheriff Bill Jackson and his girlfriend, Maggie Carter. He felt lucky that he was able to make friends at a time when he felt so alone. These two individuals came into his life at the most opportune moment.

When Pete needed help to address a crisis that

interfered with his mission, Bill and Maggie used their common sense and empathy for others to direct Pete down the right path. Although Pete could not feel their compassion and loyalty, he sensed something was there. He couldn't identify it then, but he knew it was good.

But what affected Pete the most was Bill and Maggie's efforts to reassure Pete that he was human and not a robot. Bill and Maggie proved time and time again that they could be trusted and were indeed friends.

The Xanoclax, a brutal alien race, were planning on attacking Earth. But the Wen'q'rixshi planned to trick the Xan into not invading the planet. The Wen used Pete, their new herald, to lead the mission. Pete was their first successful herald. The Herald Project combined technology and the latest biological matter they developed. Pete was the first subject to live through the transformation.

Pete's first mission was to make Earth aware of the coming Xanoclax invasion. Pete had to follow the mission to save the planet while combating the constant bombardment of unanswerable questions bouncing off the walls of his mind. In the beginning, these demons attacked him nonstop. Why could he not feel anything? Laughter, sorrow, and pain were unknown to him. How could he be human if he couldn't feel what other humans felt? The overwhelming stress made it difficult to concentrate on the mission.

Pete smiled as he thought of Oz, his Vailen guide. She knew him better than he knew himself. Oz kept Pete balanced and in check. Oz was implanted by the Traa'zels into Pete's head to guide him through his mission. Oz spent much time in his head and saw him from the inside. Oz could feel every thought that Pete's mind generated. They developed a bond that was not conceivable by Wen logic standards.

As Pete's guide, Oz was to report to the Wen High Council on the mission's progress. It was a stringent regimen of straightforward actions to follow. No distractions were allowed to interfere with the goal of the mission. But exposure to the Earth's atmosphere humanly affected Oz. The gases from the atmosphere forced contradiction to her logic. She began to feel human emotions, which no Vailen or Wen'q'rixshi had ever done.

Oz reassured Pete he was human time and time again. To help Pete, against all Wen protocol, Oz researched the records of the Wen High Council's experiments on Pete. Through Oz, Pete discovered the mission's purpose and the experiments' intentions for him. The Wen tried to create Pete into a herald that would carry out their missions and serve the Wen's greater good. Through it all, Oz became his closest friend.

It wasn't until much later that the leader of the High Council, Krix'x, informed Pete that the experiments also removed Pete's human emotions. Krix'x explained that removing human emotions was vital

to the mission because emotions would interfere with his mission. Pete's memory was also erased for the same reason as logic dictated.

Pete shrugged as he stared at his reflection on the metal floor. How could he fight logic? Especially when Pete didn't understand it. The Wen had said that human emotion clouded all judgment. Therefore, having no emotional clouds should have made it easier to comprehend logical thought. But for some reason, he questioned many logical decisions that the Wen were making, which only confused him more.

Then Jessica came into his life. Pete smiled slightly, and a tear rolled down his cheek as he remembered their first meeting. She was so sincere and helpful. Jessica helped Pete get on the road to rediscovering his emotions and who he was. During their time together, Jessica began falling in love with Pete. He felt his heart skip a beat as he remembered not being able to reciprocate her feelings. *So much time was lost between us*, he thought. *If I had half the feelings back then that I have now, we would have been so much closer.*

He reached the floor with his right hand to touch Jessica's image. Her image faded as his hand got closer to the reflective surface. Pete lowered his head and closed his eyes. He sighed, realizing that while trying to regain his human feelings, he missed out on bonding with Jessica. Pete could not tell her what she should have heard because he didn't know what love was. He was never able to tell Jessica how much

she meant to him. And when Pete finally regained enough understanding to feel human emotions, Jessica died. On her deathbed, he could finally say what she wanted to hear because he had felt it for the first time.

As another tear slowly fell, Pete realized that maybe Krix'x was right. Human emotions are a hindrance. And even though Pete's emotional capabilities were not 100%, his pain was excruciating as he stared at his reflection. He couldn't lift his head; it was too heavy. He couldn't move his arms; they were too heavy. So he just sat on the floor, helpless in a slumped-over position, staring at the metal surface, oblivious to his surroundings. The pain in his chest, the emptiness in his stomach, and the lack of willpower overwhelmed him.

Everything he came to understand was crashing down on him. The woman who helped him find love was dead. At least, she was supposed to be.

1 Back From The Dead

“You died. I held you in my arms and watched you die,” Pete said softly, still looking down at his reflection on the floor. Pete felt too weak to speak.

The smoke was beginning to clear, but was still heavy in some areas of the bridge. The time funnel was open through the visual, and smoke was still pouring in at the knee level. The emergency system had partially kicked in with the explosion, and a few emergency vents in the far side wall of the room continued to draw the smoke in.

Krix’x was standing next to the captain’s chair, staring at Pete. The Vailen officers at the control panel were also staring at Pete. Everyone was staring at Pete except for one Vailen. She assumed her rightful place inside Pete’s head during all the chaos.

Pete, snap out of it, Oz yelled from inside Pete’s head. You have to get up and defend yourself.

Pete didn’t answer. He just sat there motionless, feeling dead inside. His eyes were fixated on his reflection on the floor.

Jessica stepped down from the time funnel and approached Pete slowly. She wore tight black jeans, a white T-shirt, and

a leather jacket. The jacket had small gold chains looping from one side of the pocket to the other side. The boots Jessica wore were ankle-high with zippers on the side. She was wearing fingerless gloves and a chain bracelet on her right wrist. Her hair was pulled back behind her right ear and pinned.

Oz noticed Jessica's outfit and thought, *If she was going for the biker chick look, she nailed it.*

As Jessica approached Pete, she turned around on her toes and performed a 360-degree spin.

"What do you think of my new look?" She Asked Pete.

"Cass, let me pick out my wardrobe. For some reason, the biker theme stuck inside my head, so I went with it. It's cool, no?"

Pete stared at the floor. He didn't respond verbally or physically. Jessica had a concerned look as she squatted down to face Pete. She slowly stroked Pete's hair, and Pete didn't look up at her. He sat lifeless as Jessica gently caressed his hair. Jessica paused a moment, staring at Pete. She stopped rubbing his hair when a flash inside her head went off. In her mind, Jessica saw Pete lying in bed next to her. She jumped up, startled, and turned to Cass. Cass was standing next to her. Jessica turned her head back to Pete, and it felt like she was moving in slow motion. Jessica turned away from Pete and Cass and began shaking her head back and forth violently. She was trying to get the image of her lying with Pete out of her head. Finally, she

stopped, turned, and faced Cass and laughed hysterically.

“Really? This is the herald that everyone is afraid of?” She shouted, pointing down at the enfeebled figure on the floor. “I thought we would be in for a great battle. You told me he would be a great challenge for me,” Jessica stared at Cass.

The Vailen, Cass, laughed and looked at Krix’x. Krix’x was staring hopelessly at Pete. The look on his face brought Cass joy, and she began laughing at him. Finally, Cass had her moment over the great Krix’x. At this moment, she was in control. She had Krix’x right where she wanted him, defeated. Cass stared at Krix’x and got lost in her triumphant moment. Her victorious thought was interrupted by a screaming Jessica.

“You promised!” Jessica screamed at Cass. Jessica’s temperament changed quickly. Her anger was rising.

Cass stopped laughing and put her arm around Jessica to calm her down. Cass looked at Jessica with motherly affection and placed one hand gently on either side of Jessica’s face. She looked into Jessica’s eyes and smiled softly.

“Sister,” Cass said calmly, “we have to take what we get. There are no sure things in life. Look at that Wen up there.” Cass pointed to Krix’x. Cass slowly turned Jessica away from Pete to face the puzzled Krix’x.

“You see, sister, that is the head of the Wen’q’rixshi High Council. The mighty Krix’x. He always has everything planned out according to logical premises and outcomes.

But by the look on his face, he didn't account for human intervention. Human intervention never has a precise outcome; nothing is certain or exact. No, sister, Krix'x did not see this coming. Don't you see what we've done? We have done the impossible. We have beaten logic."

Cass leaned closer and whispered to Jessica, "And all we had to do was walk into the room." Cass glared at Krix'x and laughed louder.

Jessica threw Cass's hands away and addressed Cass face-to-face.

"I don't care about the High Councilor, logic, or human behavior. I came here to fight the herald, and all I see is this lump on the floor. You promised me a great battle," Jessica screamed angrily into Cass's face.

Cass laughed again, "Let's look at the bright side, shall we?" Cass raised her arms and shrugged her shoulders. "It's a bit easier, that's all. There will be plenty of battles to fight. We have to visit the Xanoclax, and they have great warriors. So let's chalk this up to a fun surprise and move on to the real fight."

Jessica smiled in agreement and turned to look at Pete, "What do we do with him?"

Cass looked down at Pete and touched his head to comfort him, "You should put the poor human out of his misery."

As Cass stood up and stepped away from Pete, Jessica smiled and energized her right hand. The glow radiated

around her face and hair. She flicked her wrist slightly, and an energy beam flowed from her toward Pete. Again, Jessica smiled and grew anxious. She was finally about to do battle with the great first herald. Fighting or finishing him off, either way, was acceptable with her.

Cass told her that Pete was universally famous for his fighting prowess. His skills were unmatched, and he defeated the best that the Xanoclax had to offer. Jessica wanted that type of notoriety. She wanted to be the herald that beat the famous first herald of Wen'q'rixsh.

Surprisingly, her beam encircled Pete, but it didn't touch him. Jessica continued to blast Pete, but her beam was blocked. Cass instructed Jessica to stop.

Cass yelled, "Oskalan, you in there, sister?" Cass bent down and tapped Pete on his head with her knuckles. "I'll give you a few minutes to come out of the vegetable you call a herald before we incinerate him. But, please, sister, don't be foolish. Come out and travel back home with me. You can be a part of this great new movement. You can lead by my side, and we'll be together again like we always wanted."

Oz did not reply to Cass.

"Oskalan," Cass began to sound upset. "I don't have time for this. Please answer me, or my herald will begin again. But, you know, with Pete in this vegetative state, there is only so much you can do to help him. So why don't you avoid the drama and come out so we can get on with our lives? There is so much we need to do."

Oz knew Cass was right. Cass was a guide and trained with Oz on Wen'q'rixsh. They had gone through school together and became close as sisters. That is, until Cass chose this new path.

Pete, please snap out of this. Oz pleaded. *I don't know how long I can keep the force field up.*

Pete did not respond. He just sat there. Pete was almost unconscious. Pete was in a deep, dark void, and the chasm was so deep that he was unaware of everything outside and inside his body. Images of him and Jessica together, laughing, flashed through the abyss.

He wasn't mentally on the ship. His mind returned to Bends Creek, where he first met Jessica. Now that he remembered with awareness, it was more depressing to realize how much time was wasted not being able to express his feelings to her. In Pete's mind, he wasn't concerned with life and death. His psyche was trying to reconcile his past with Jessica, and that's all that mattered to him. It was as though Pete's spirit had left his body.

Oz could see Pete zoned out of the situation. She tried to stimulate his receptors to get a reaction from him. But she was afraid to take her concentration off of Jessica. Oz had to work on the force field that was protecting Pete. If it weakened, they were both dead.

“You need to stand down!” A loud voice yelled behind the smoke-filled doorway of the bridge.

Cass and Jessica turned away from Pete and took a few

steps toward the doorway. Cass was the first to respond.

“And who are you?” Cass smiled and stepped away from Jessica.

A Xan warrior dressed in full Xan armor stepped out of the doorway and onto the bridge. Cass was shocked. What was a Xan warrior doing on this ship? And why would a Xan warrior defend Pete?

“What business do you have here?” Cass asked, confused. She took a few more steps away from Jessica in case the Xan would fire.

“These are my friends, and I will defend them if they need help,” Rialla yelled back through her mask. Her voice was disguised through the armor.

After the initial explosion on the bridge, Rialla returned to the armory to gear up for a battle as soon as she saw Cass enter the ship. But now that the smoke cleared and she was looking at Cass, she noticed someone else. Someone Rialla became close to when she first arrived on Earth. Rialla saw Jessica standing there, smiling at her. She froze in place and was speechless. She thought the explosion must have done something to her brain.

Jessica was dead; Rialla watched her die in Pete’s arms in the hospital. How could she be standing here in front of her? Rialla felt light-headed and took a few deep breaths to calm herself, but she couldn’t move.

Cass took a small step toward Rialla and stood between

Rialla and Jessica. She looked at Rialla as she stared at Jessica. Cass smiled and looked at Jessica and then back at Rialla. She did this several times and then stopped and grinned at Rialla.

“Do you know Jessica?” Cass asked as she tried to get a reaction from the warrior before her. Cass felt a connection between the two and became more amused at the possibility.

Rialla didn't answer and still couldn't move. Standing in front of her was the human woman who saved her life. When Jessica was taking Rialla on a tour of the National Park in DC, the biker gang president, Bronson Pike, attacked them. Jessica jumped in front of a knife thrust intended for her.

Bronson Pike was a white supremacist hired by a Xan warrior to kill Jessica. Pete and Rialla later discovered that Cass, in Xan armor, approached Pike.

Rialla and Jessica were unaware of Pike's intentions when he first confronted them. They assumed Pike was a thief. Rialla could have quickly dispatched Pike on her own, but when he came at her with his knife, Jessica stepped in front of Rialla, taking the blow.

“I watched you die,” Rialla whispered as she removed her helmet.

Jessica looked at Rialla, and another flash popped into her mind. It was an image of her and Rialla laughing together. Jessica shook her head and gazed at Rialla, “Rialla? Is that

you in that armor?”

Rialla smiled, “Jessica, yes, it is me. How are you here?”

Rialla took a few steps toward Jessica.

Oz began communicating with Rialla through their earpieces, “Rialla, stand down. Do not approach Jessica. That is not our Jessica. It is, but it’s not. It’s complicated. Do not let your guard down.”

Rialla smiled and whispered, “Ok,” to Oz. Then, she took another step closer to Jessica. They were about fifteen feet apart when Rialla stopped. Rialla could see the entire bridge. She saw Pete slumped on the floor, his left arm wrapped around the rail that lined one side of the steps up to the left-side control console. It looked to Rialla that Pete’s left arm kept Pete sitting up on the top footstep.

Rialla tilted her head to the left and asked, “What are you doing here, Jessica?”

Jessica laughed, “Am I not welcome here, Rialla?” Jessica felt her energy rising.

Rialla smiled, “Always Jessica, but why are you here with this evil Vailen?”

Jessica laughed, “Cass isn’t evil. She saved my life, and I am forever in her debt.”

“It is not good to be in debt to the likes of this one,” Rialla pointed at Cass. “She means harm to Oz and Pete.”

“Pete?” Jessica asked. It was Jessica’s turn to tilt her head slightly and smile. “Rialla, why do you defend Pete with

such enthusiasm? Are you and Pete a thing?”

Rialla shrugged nervously, “I don’t understand what you mean by a thing.”

Jessica laughed and taunted Rialla, “Rialla, you’re a bad girl. Have you been doing the nasty with Pete while I was gone?”

Rialla couldn’t hide her embarrassment. Pete was in love with Jessica, and Rialla knew that. She felt a bit closer to Pete since Jessica died, but wasn’t sure if it would go anywhere. Rialla and Pete shared a few awkward moments, but nothing ever came of it. Rialla knew Pete needed to grieve for Jessica’s loss, so their minor flirtations were nothing more than that.

“I don’t understand the term nasty,” Rialla replied, confused.

Oz spoke again in Rialla’s ear, “Rialla, listen to me. She’s trying to distract you and catch you defenseless. Pay attention to her movements, not her words.”

Rialla nodded slightly and concentrated on Jessica’s stance. She noticed Jessica was slowly moving into an offensive posture. Jessica was planning to strike. But before Rialla could prepare, an energy blast hit her square in her chest plate. The blow knocked her off her feet and back through the door. Rialla landed on her back, hitting her head on the floor and knocking her unconscious.

Jessica lifted her hand and pointed her index finger straight

before her mouth. She blew on it as if to cool down the smoke from a gun barrel.

“I really like this toy,” she smiled, looking over her shoulder at Cass.

Cass smiled back, “I told you this would be fun. Come and finish Mr. Pathetic over here so we can go home.”

Jessica and Cass walked over to Pete, who was still slumped over the step. Jessica began firing her energy beam at Pete as Oz continued to yell at Pete to wake up. Jessica, growing bored, began firing with her other hand simultaneously. The power of her dual beams was wearing the force field down quickly. The force of the blast caused the energy to swirl around the bridge. Any item not attached to the floor or counter began flying around the room. The smoke was twisting in circles, rapidly forming mini-tornados. The sound was deafening, and everyone except Jessica was covering their ears.

“Pete, please snap out of it. I don’t want it to end like this. Please.” Oz pleaded as she struggled to maintain the integrity of the force field.

Pete didn’t move. In his mind, he was still with Jessica, living in the past. As far as he was concerned, he was ready to stay there forever.

It wasn’t easy to see who was in the room. The smoke kept pouring in from the time funnel, and Jessica’s energy blasts filled the room with chaos. The Vailens at the control panel secured themselves to their chairs due to the high winds in

the room. Krix'x did the same, sitting in the captain's chair. From his seat, Krix'x could see the force field around Pete failing. The color of the protective area around Pete was getting dimmer, and he knew it wouldn't be long before it was all over.

Krix'x didn't know what to do. He wasn't a warrior. There wasn't a need to learn combat skills on Wen'q'rixsh. Krix'x was confused. The intake of Earth's atmospheric gases had affected him slightly, and Krix'x wasn't sure what he felt. *Maybe helplessness?* he thought.

Oz could feel the heat from Jessica's blast. The field was thinning, and the heat from the beam was beginning to get inside. As she knelt and lowered her head, Oz kept pleading with Pete. She had provided all the available power to the force field. The field was not intended to take a continuous blast for long periods. Oz was surprised they lasted as long as they did. As the heat poured in, it became harder to breathe. Finally, Oz lay down, accepting their fate.

"Together, forever. Goodbye, Pete," she whispered as she fell into unconsciousness.

Because Cass and Jessica were focused on Pete, they didn't see a small hand reach the control panel and flip the black metal switch. Flipping the switch set off an astral block at the other end of the funnel. The astral block immediately began sucking the contents of the bridge through the time funnel opening. Before anyone could react, everything and everyone not secured to the deck flew into the tunnel.

Cass and Jessica were sucked into the time funnel backward. Jessica's beams were still ignited, and multiple holes were cut in the side walls and ceiling of the ship as she flew away. Krix'x watched Jessica and Cass disappear into the void. Their mouths were open, but no one heard their screams due to the noise level.

When Pete initially slumped to the floor, his left arm wrapped around the rail of the footsteps. Luckily, the angle of the pressure forcing him into the tunnel was to his advantage. His arm locked around the railing at the inside of his elbow. Rialla, who was still unconscious, began sliding toward the bridge. The pressure from the tunnel pulled her closer until the doorway of the bridge stopped her movement. She, too, was in luck, wearing her armor that would not fit sideways through the entrance to the bridge.

The small hand that flipped the switch returned to the control panel and flipped it off. The time funnel immediately disappeared, and the smoke dissipated. All the loose items, furniture, and equipment swirling around in the air fell to the floor. A deadly silence fell over the room.

Those strapped in were unconscious from a lack of oxygen lost to the pressure of the astral block. Only Oz was awake and alert. She materialized in the room and looked around.

She saw the metal burning in the ceiling and in the walls where Jessica's beams hit on her way out of the room. The room was strewn with objects from around the ship that were not securely fastened. The clutter was enormous, and it was hard to see across the room to the captain's chair or

the control panel. Oz could barely make out the doorway. Chairs, tables, desks, and appliances from the kitchen Pete requested were everywhere in the room. Oz made a mental note to check why the emergency backup system didn't remove all the furniture from their rooms when the pressure changed.

Oz stood next to Pete. She had already checked his vitals, so she knew he was ok. She watched him sleep and knew returning him to the old Pete would be a long, arduous journey. She was in his head, literally. She saw firsthand how messed up everything was in there. Maybe Krix'x and the science team could help, she was hopeful. She straightened Pete out and let him lie on the floor. She then walked around to check on the crew and Rialla. After removing several pieces of furniture, she reached the doorway and saw Rialla lying on the floor in her armor.

Oz bent down and gently tapped Rialla on the face, "Hey, you ok?"

Rialla moaned. She opened her eyes and smiled, "Vailen? You're ok?"

Oz smiled back, "Yeah, why wouldn't I be? Anything broken?"

Rialla sat up, "No, I was lucky I had my armor on my body. I'm ok."

"Good, then get up and help me see if everyone else is ok."

Rialla nodded, and they both headed toward the control

panel. Rialla stopped at the captain's chair to clear all the debris around the sleeping Krix'x. Oz kept making her way to the control panel. She noticed the crew asleep at the control panel. They were ok and didn't need attending. Oz looked around the control panel and saw that the switch for the astral block was too far away from the closest crew member to activate from her seat. She thought whoever triggered the switch would have been sucked out of the ship.

"I don't get it," she said out loud to Rialla.

"What is it, Vailen?" Rialla answered, tossing debris away from the captain's chair.

"If everyone fell asleep during the astral block, who flipped the switch to stop it?"

Rialla shrugged her shoulders and continued clearing debris.

Oz continued thinking out loud, "It doesn't make any sense. Everyone on the bridge is accounted for and strapped in. Who flipped the switch?"

"Guilty," A muffled voice spoke up.

"Who? What?" Oz spun around, looking for the voice.

"Where are you?"

"I'm under what I believe to be what you call a sofa," the voice replied.

Oz walked around, moved some clutter out of her way, and found the sofa.

"Are you under the sofa or in it?" Oz asked.

“I believe I am inside this contraption.”

Oz walked around to the front of the sofa. She removed several pieces of debris from the seat and slowly pulled the bed from the couch. When she unfolded the mattress, she received a big surprise.

“Braylin?”