

STAR TREK: ENTERPRISE

ELYSIUM

BY
RIGIL KENT



Genre: Action, Drama

Rated: PG ...mild language

Disclaimer: Not making a dime off of this, they belong to Paramount, they don't belong to me, because if they did, I'd be married to T'Pol.

Summary: The Romulan War begins with a single battle...

Cover Art: The absolutely spectacular cover art is by Chris Garner. Thanks, Chris!

Author's Note: This completely discards TATV as the absolute piece of garbage that it is. It simply did not happen. 'Cause it sucked. Hard.

Credits:

- Ensign O'Connor originally created by **Eratta** and appeared in *Of All the Times, Places, and People!*
- Hailey Burke created by **Zane Gray** and appeared in *Differential*.
- T'Run created by **Ragua** and appeared in *Miscommunication*.
- The *Krazny Oktyabr* originally created by **Tom Clancy** and appeared in *The Hunt for the Red October*. Man, I can't believe nobody called me on this...
- Scott Reynolds (aka The Professor) created by Yours Truly. Feel free to use or abuse him as necessary although I do ask that you be gentle...

Fair warning: Major character(s) will die, major character(s) will be injured, and Very Bad Things will happen.

TEASER

New Elysium, Earth Colony. March 2156.

Thunder boomed out of the mid-afternoon sky and, with a frown, Doctor Samantha Beckett pushed aside her status reports before rising from her desk. She strode to the window and stared at the clouds anxiously. There had been no hint of a coming storm, not on the weather satellites that orbited the colony or on the localized scanners set up for that very purpose, and Sam felt the first stirrings of concern. She was still not entirely comfortable here, despite the ninety-seven days she had been on-planet. New Elysium wasn't yet home.

Its official designation was Mu Virginis V but one of the early colonists had looked at the virgin landscape and promptly rechristened it after the mythological Roman afterlife for heroes. The name stuck. Discovered by *Columbia* during her shakedown cruise last year, it was an idyllic world of lush trees and windswept plains, a veritable paradise marred only by the occasional lightning storm. It was uncanny how much like Terra the planet was; there were differences to be sure - Earth was a couple thousand kilometers larger and the gravity of New Elysium was fractionally less than Terran standard - but there were days when Sam could close her eyes and fool herself into thinking she was in Georgia or North Carolina or Virginia.

The persistent cloud cover was probably the most difficult thing to adapt to and turned out to be the only thing that seemed to be totally *alien* to the colonists. It completely blocked the local star from view yet did not prevent the necessary radiation from reaching the planet's surface; local flora thrived and the colonists had quickly learned that they could get sunburns just as easily under the clouds as they could on a Florida beach during summer. When Sam had asked about it, the xeno-planetologist - a burly Swede named Olafsson - had tried to explain it to her but she barely understood him to begin with, let alone something as complicated as extra-terrestrial cloud cover. Rationally, she knew that she'd grow accustomed to the lack of a visible sun, knew that, once she acclimated (a word that suddenly had new meaning for her), she'd think nothing of its absence. Rationally, she knew these things.

But that didn't prevent her from missing the sun.

The colony itself was steadily growing. Already, six children had been born with another fifteen on the way. Everyone was adjusting, none more quickly than the forty-two youngsters under the age of ten. Even now, as Sam studied the sky for the threat of a storm, she could hear many of them at play.

Standing at the window, she studied the clouds for long moments, looking for any sign of the bluish lightning that always heralded the worst storms. There had been two of them since her arrival and they had been brutal, resulting in a dozen injuries and a single death, yet the colonists took it in stride. A local engineer had even gone as far as to develop an engine that he promised would be powered by the lightning. He didn't seem to mind that he was the only one actually looking forward to another storm.

The absence of sound drew her attention to the construction crews and she saw them studying the sky with equal concern; they had suffered the most casualties during the last storm and clearly had no desire to do so again. She could see the foreman trying to get his people back to work; already three weeks behind schedule, they could ill afford any time to watch the sky. For a long moment, it seemed as if the entire colony held its collective breath.

But no storm came.

Sam exhaled and started to turn away when a glint of...something caught her attention. She squinted, trying to make out what it was that was tumbling through the air. Toward the colony. Man-sized, it had a distinctive shape, a shape she recognized at once. She opened her mouth to scream a warning, knowing that she was already too late.

She was right.

ACT ONE

Captain's Starlog, March 13th, 2156. We are on course for the Mu Virginis system to investigate the mysterious silence from the New Elysium colony there. It has been over two weeks since Starfleet last had contact with the colony administrator.

As entered the launch bay, Captain Jonathan Archer briefly paused, reflecting on the state of his life. It was, he grudgingly realized, probably for the best that his father was no longer around. Jon could only imagine the horrified expression on Henry Archer's face if he saw his son doing something with the resident Vulcan that the younger Archer had been doing since she first came aboard. It was embarrassing to admit that, no matter what Jon's intentions were, he was drawn toward this very thing.

He was losing an argument with her.

Upon their arrival in-system, he had quickly declared his intention to lead the landing party and, almost as quickly, she had began pointing out why he should not. Her points were, as usual, distressingly logical and each of his counter-arguments had sounded weak even to his ears; she destroyed them with that casual efficiency he had come to expect from her. Were she not so essential for the mission, Archer would have seriously considered leaving her in command instead of Reed. So he let her rant.

"Are you done?" Jon asked as the door to the launch bay slid open. They both knew he would exercise his authority as captain, would overrule her objections with a direct order. It was the *only* way he had ever won an argument with her but he took great pride in knowing that no one ever did. Except Trip. And that irked Archer more than he cared to admit.

She paused ever so briefly and rolled her tongue against the inside of her cheek as she considered. Jon blinked in surprise; it was a trademark Tucker expression, one Trip used when he was uncomfortable or was thinking about how to best tell someone they were being really stupid, and T'Pol had used it as if she had been doing so all her life. He doubted she had even been aware of doing so and, not for the first time, he wondered what *exactly* was going on between the two. On the heels of this, however, came the realization that he really didn't want to know. It might hurt too much.

That the two were a couple was pretty much an open secret on *Enterprise*; the question that remained on everyone's mind was how serious it was. As the captain, he knew that he should discourage it, given Starfleet's official position on fraternization, but, like pretty much every other senior officer, he instead looked the other way. As long as they didn't let their relationship affect the job, he'd say nothing. And it didn't. Despite the almost common knowledge that the first officer and the chief engineer were ... well, dating, there were no visible changes. No one found them making out in the mess hall or having sex on the warp reactor or some of the other crazy things couples did. Not that Jon expected that from them. So he continued looking the other way.

If he had to be entirely honest, Archer would also admit to a small bit of jealousy, an emotion that embarrassed the living hell out of him. In the year before the Expanse mission, he had found himself nursing a serious attraction for T'Pol, one that he had nearly convinced himself was reciprocated. It'd become pretty clear to him that the attraction was mostly one-sided though - the horrifically awkward episode in Sickbay always seemed to spring to mind - so he stepped back, disappointed to be sure but firmly convinced that a Human-Vulcan relationship couldn't really happen. Once he had stepped back, he gradually recognized the tension between T'Pol and Trip for what it was, a mutual attraction that had been there from nearly the beginning. He still wasn't entirely sure exactly when he realized Trip and T'Pol had actually moved past the 'just friends' stage; his best guess put it at about a week or two before the incident with the second *Enterprise*. And T'Pol's reaction to Lorian's genetic ancestry had been all the proof Jon needed that his assumptions were right. She'd been surprised, yes, but there was clearly more discomfort than surprise; if he hadn't been so obsessed with the Xindi, he might have found it amusing. And then, after the Expanse, Trip and T'Pol danced around one another for months.

Up until baby Elizabeth. Their awkwardness seemed to vanish overnight as they grieved together. It was a Vulcan thing, Jon had later learned from - of all people! - Ambassador Soval; T'Pol had psychically bonded with their child and, since Trip was the genetic father, had linked him with the baby as well. The pain of losing the infant was nearly overwhelming for an unprepared Vulcan and Archer found himself glad Trip was there to help. Visibly, Tucker was the most torn up about Elizabeth's death but anyone who really knew her could look and see how close T'Pol was to emotional collapse. They grieved together and then moved forward. Together.

"Yes sir," T'Pol replied to his initial question with that maddeningly Vulcan calm. Jon noticed her eyes flicker away from him for a heartbeat and her entire stance seemed to calm, to soften. It remained unnerving no matter how many times he saw it; Vulcans weren't supposed to be ... soft.

"She convince you to stay yet, Cap'n?" Trip grinned as he stepped up beside Archer, his arms clasped together at the small of his back. The engineer had adopted the stance recently and yet seemed completely unaware of it. Just like T'Pol and her tongue rolling. Sometimes - quite a lot of times, actually - these two gave him a headache.

"She's explained her position," Jon replied slowly with an answering smile. "Since you seem to be the only one who can talk any sense into her, care to help me out?"

"Hey, don't look at me," Trip shot back, raising his hands in mock surrender. "I agree with her. You really should stay on the ship." Archer gave him a half-hearted glare although he wasn't really surprised. Trip and T'Pol argued constantly with one another but when it came right down to it, they nearly *always* sided with each other. Like any good married couple. And what part of his subconscious that thought had come from, Jon didn't want to know.

"Traitor," Archer groused as Trip sidled over to stand by T'Pol; he was fractionally too close to her to be 100% professional but Jon said nothing, pretended to not even notice that the Vulcan accepted Tucker's violation of her personal space without a thought or complaint. "I am leading this mission, *Commanders*," he finally declared, emphasizing their ranks. They said nothing, merely exchanged a brief look that was indecipherable to him yet clearly spoke volumes to each other. He hated when they did that, hated how they could finish each other's sentences because it reminded him so damned much of his parents, and was about to tell them so when the comm chirped.

"Bridge to Captain Archer," Lieutenant Commander Reed's clipped voice echoed around the launch bay and, with another sour look at his two senior officers, Jon walked to the nearest comm box. As he hit the transmit button, he couldn't help but notice how Trip inched even closer to T'Pol. Or maybe it was the other way around.

"Archer here," he responded curtly. "What is it, Malcolm?" His so-called "friends" were talking softly to each other now, whispering actually, and Jon wondered if they were coming up with a new battle plan to keep him on the ship.

"Sir, we're receiving a transmission from Starfleet. Admiral Gardner wants to talk to you immediately." Jon nearly sighed. The universe was well and truly against him.

"I'll be right up. Archer out." He hesitated for a moment before moving to rejoin his two senior officers.

"We had plomeek last night," Trip was griping as he approached. "It's my turn to pick the food." T'Pol glanced up at Archer's approach before responding.

"You did not find the plomeek agreeable?" she asked. Jon's almost grinned; they were arguing about food. At least they weren't trying to figure out how to keep him on the ship. Unless it was code...

"It needed pepper," Tucker replied. "Lots and lots of pepper. What's up, Cap'n?"

"Message from Starfleet." Jon barely paused, knowing one of them - probably T'Pol - would interrupt to gloat. The Vulcan had picked up far too many of Trip's bad habits. "All right, T'Pol, you win. I'll be on the bridge; report back as soon as you can." The Vulcan inclined her head slightly in a nod as Trip shot Jon a grin that said *I knew you'd lose the argument*. "And Commander T'Pol?" She looked back, waiting. "Look after *your* Chief Engineer." If she caught the inference, she gave him no clue aside from the raised eyebrow.

"Three MACOs should be sufficient to keep Mister Tucker out of trouble," was her reply as she turned back to the shuttle.

"What the hell's that supposed to mean?" Trip asked as he followed her toward the shuttle. He shot Jon a flat look that revealed he had definitely got the joke. Archer grinned right back

at him and his expression had a meaning too: *take that, buddy!* Sometimes it was good to be the captain.

"You have the worst away mission record on *Enterprise*, Commander." She paused as she lifted her gear. "You have been stabbed, shot, abducted, cloned, blown up, seduced ..." She spoke the last word with distaste and, despite her Vulcan control, Archer knew she wasn't entirely happy about that. He couldn't help himself. The opportunity was just too ... good and he hadn't been able to rib Trip in far too long.

"Don't forget pregnant!" Jon shouted from the doorway. He ducked through it before Trip could retaliate, already starting to chuckle. It wasn't often that he got the last word.

The day was turning out to be okay after all.



It was turning out to be a pretty piss poor day.

Lieutenant Travis Mayweather leaned back in his chair, trying his best to ignore the strained atmosphere on the bridge. He knew his thoughts should be on his duties, on the job in front of him, but his mind kept drifting to the two letters in his quarters. One ... maybe good, the other maybe ... not so good.

He had no idea what to do.

Travis had been born in space and knew, somehow, that he would die in space. He didn't know what to do with himself when planetside for longer than a week. And now, Starfleet wanted to ground him. Permanently.

They didn't see it that way, of course. What Starfleet saw was opportunity: *come teach our cadets how to fly and we'll promote you!* It was a measure of how valuable he was on *Enterprise* that Starfleet even gave him the opportunity to decide his fate; usually, they just cut orders and demanded it. Instead, they gave him the option. Promotion and grounding or continue to fly.

And then, there was the other letter. The one from Gannet. The one in which she promised to wait for him and even hinted at a future together. On *Enterprise*. It bothered him a lot that he wasn't entirely sure which one was good news.

It just wasn't fair.

Normally, Travis would ask Hoshi what she thought and get her opinion. She was pretty much his best friend on the ship, despite their complete lack of mutual interests. She had an uncanny ability to see right through his bullshit - even when he couldn't - and identify the real

core of his problem; more than once, her advice had allowed him to maintain his sanity, especially during the Expanse mission. But lately she was ... distracted. He glanced at Lieutenant Commander Reed, noted the intensity in which the senior tactical officer studied his board and hid a smile; he wondered if the commander was using the tactical board to avoid looking at Hoshi. They'd argued last night and, though Mayweather didn't know the specifics, he had a pretty good guess what it was about. Hoshi had been dating Malcolm for a while, started maybe a week after her promotion to lieutenant, but his recent increase in rank had caused some serious problems between them. Travis suspected that Hoshi still wanted to continue their relationship but Malcolm - proper, stuffy, British Malcolm - balked at the idea of having relations with someone he outranked. It was that, or she was pregnant but Travis doubted they were that dumb. Or sloppy. Either way, she had no time for his problems.

He'd considered visiting Phlox but quickly decided against it; the Denobulan was brilliant and had more degrees than anyone really needed but Mayweather still couldn't quite forgive him for the whole Sim incident. That thought led him directly to Commander Tucker and he crossed the engineer off of his list simply due to T'Pol; he had no desire whatsoever for the Vulcan first officer to learn that he was having problems making these sort of decisions since she'd probably make a note of it in the official record: *demonstrated inability to make prompt decisions regarding personal career*. Yeah, that'd go over well for future promotions. Sure, Trip might not intend to mention it but T'Pol had a way of finding things out. It wasn't that Travis was intimidated by the Vulcan or anything ... well, actually he kind of was but that wasn't the point. He almost sighed.

He really wished he could talk to Hoshi.

A beep from her console drew his (and everyone else's) attention; she tapped some keys, listened to something and then spoke.

"It's Commander Tucker, sir." Her eyes came up and she locked gazes with Commander Reed's; Travis could almost feel the tension, could feel the frustration and emotion. He glanced back down to his board.

"Onscreen," Reed ordered.

Suddenly looming before them on the immense viewscreen was Commander Tucker; he was half turned toward T'Pol, his face scrunched up in either annoyance or confusion. With those two, Travis considered, who could tell? Maybe it was both. Tucker glanced back to the screen.

"Yeah, oh hey, Mal." That was clearly not appropriate communications etiquette and Trip didn't seem to care. How the engineer got through the Starfleet Training completely eluded Mayweather. "We should be reachin' planetside in about 10 minutes. We'll comm you when we get visual." Reed opened his mouth to respond but T'Pol interrupted first.

"Nine point seven minutes, Commander." Tucker shot her a look that could have meant anything from *I'm going to shoot you* to *Let's make babies*. Travis leaned toward it meaning

the latter.

"Like I said, 'bout ten minutes."

"Copy that, Commander," Reed interjected quickly; his eyes never left his board. Neither seemed to notice.

"Your estimate was inaccurate; I was merely attempting to correct it."

"That's 'cause it was an estimate! Catch you later, Mal. Estimate's aren't supposed to-" The screen blanked out mid-sentence, returning to an image of the planet they orbited, and Travis found himself shaking his head. Silence reigned for a long moment but, from past experience, Mayweather knew it wouldn't last.

"They really do argue about everything, don't they?" It was Ensign O'Connor at the Science Board; he'd been aboard for less than a week. *The new guys always notice that first*, Travis grinned to himself. From the Engineering console, Rostov snickered. Several others chuckled at the question but not, Mayweather noted, Mister Reed. Either he actually was focused on his board or he was *really* trying to ignore Hoshi.

Dammit, he really wished he could talk to her.



Talking to her wasn't working so Malcolm threw himself into his work.

It was his way of coping with difficult situations, a technique he had inherited from his father. His Father ... How was he going to explain this?

He'd only recently reconnected with his parents. It had been ... difficult but his father had grudgingly admitted that Malcolm's decision to join Starfleet had merit. His old man was suitably impressed by the declassified reports of the Expanse mission and the way Starfleet had lauded the crew of the NX-01 as heroes without compare after their return, clinging to the "Reeds are always Navy" just didn't make sense anymore. And, from a couple of comments made by his mother, Malcolm suspected that Father was starting to look at Starfleet as the Navy. A space navy, sure, but a navy nonetheless. It was good to be part of the family again.

His console beeped at him and Reed input additional commands that sent a request to the Science Board for extra scanning resources. Twice now he had detected some unusual readings from the polar regions of New Elysium, readings he couldn't quite explain. Or identify. He hated mysteries.

Though he was not looking at her, he was aware of Hoshi shifting in her seat. For the briefest of moments, Malcolm squeezed his fingers into a fist, a fist so tight he felt tingles run through

his hand. They'd been so damned careful...

She wasn't even talking to him right now and Reed blamed himself for that. His recent promotion to lieutenant commander had thrown their relationship into a bloody mess; it was fine when both of them were lieutenants but now that he outranked her, he hesitated. It wasn't that he didn't care for her, it was just that it was so ... improper. And now she was pregnant.

Malcolm still didn't know how that happened. Well, actually he did, having been rather intimately involved. All the appropriate precautions had been taken and yet, here they were. He'd proposed at once; it seemed like the right thing to do and the thought of spending the rest of his life with Hoshi was actually one he'd entertained often. But she hesitated. And his heart broke.

The turbolift door slid open and Captain Archer stepped onto the bridge; Malcolm gave him a quick glance before returning his attention to his board. The results of the scan he requested were starting to come in.

"All right, Hoshi," the captain said cheerfully, oddly exuberant for having been convinced to stay onboard. *He must have gotten Trip good*, Malcolm thought to himself as he studied the scan results. "Let's see what Starfleet wants. I'll take it in my ready room."

"Aye sir." Malcolm almost winced at the flatness of her voice; she sounded terrible. He hoped the captain didn't notice. Glancing up, he realized that Archer was looking at Hoshi with ... something in his eyes; he'd clearly noticed her somber mood. He said nothing though as he turned toward the door but Archer's eyes promised that he would later.

"Commander Reed, you have the bridge," he said unnecessarily. Malcolm nodded briefly as he studied the odd results of his scans. He heard the hiss of the door as Captain Archer departed.

"Ensign O'Connor," Reed said suddenly. The young science officer snapped his eyes toward the Tactical board. "I want a full spectrum analysis on the pole regions. All bands."

"Aye sir."

"Find something, sir?" Travis asked, twisting in his seat to look at Malcolm.

"I don't know," Reed replied sharply. His tone said everything. Something wasn't right.

The door to the captain's ready room hissed open and Archer reappeared, a bemused look on his face. The expression faded fairly quickly as he took in Malcolm's tense posture.

"Hoshi," Archer said as he strode forward. "The connection was scrambled; see if you can get it back." She nodded once to him, began working her board as Archer turned to Malcolm.

"Status?"

"Scanner distortions, sir," Malcolm replied. He knew that he didn't sound particularly confident. "Atmospheric anomalies are playing havoc and we're reading multiple sensor ghosts." Reed's neck began to itch as the data from O'Connor's scans began pouring in; there was something ... familiar about these readings, something he had seen before. "Recommend we recall the shuttlepod, sir." Archer's eyes narrowed at that.

"Hostiles?" He didn't like the idea.

"No way to tell yet, sir." Malcolm let loose a mildly frustrated sigh; he decided right then that he hated this planet. "We can't get a good sensor reading." Captain Archer frowned then, glanced at the image of New Elysium.

"All right. Hoshi, contact the shuttlepod and recall them." He didn't sound happy. Malcolm's console beeped and his stomach turned to ice.

"Tactical alert!" Reed abruptly shouted, slapping his hand down on the key that brought the hull plating online and activated the newly installed shield generators. Archer spun toward him as the alarm began to sound, his face demanding an explanation.

Malcolm hoped he was wrong.



There was something wrong.

T'Pol wasn't entirely sure how she knew this, only that an intuition of danger, a "sixth sense" as Trip would say, was screaming at her that she and her mate were in terrible peril. The scanners on the shuttlepod - limited though they were - remained clear and T'Pol trusted Ensign O'Connor to note any planetary discrepancies from *Enterprise* in time to warn her; for a Human, he was quite efficient. A third look over the external sensors revealed nothing amiss, nor did a rapid scan of the internal sensors. As far as she could tell, all systems were fully functional. There appeared to be nothing wrong. And yet, she could not shake a sense of impending danger.

Trip felt her unease through their bond and slipped instantly into a more cautious frame of mind, what T'Pol unconsciously thought of as his Expanse mindset. Wary, his eyes traveled over the console's data displays, double and triple-checking everything. In nearly mid-sentence, their bickering about Trip's lack of accuracy simply ceased and their professional masks slid into place. She could tell that the passengers - Lieutenant Reyes from Medical and the three MACOs - noted the abrupt shift in the two senior officers, saw their unspoken communications, and automatically went into combat mode. Veterans all, they recognized imminent danger, even if it was unseen.

"Strap in," Trip ordered the four sharply. Gone was the extroverted engineer from Florida; a cool, collected combat veteran had taken his place. Though he had seen nothing amiss on his displays, he took T'Pol's unease absolutely seriously and she felt a surge of affection for her mate, one that she easily kept shielded. They were on duty, after all. "I've got nothin'," he stated calmly as the shuttle passed into the stratosphere. "Sensors?"

"Are negative," she replied. "As are communication frequencies." He rolled his tongue around in his mouth, eyes darting from one display to another. A thought occurred to her; whether it was his or hers was irrelevant as it was an extremely wise suggestion, and she began powering up the shuttle's weapons systems - they were admittedly minor but were much better than nothing at all. She continued to cycle through the comm frequencies quickly as Trip fed additional power to the maneuvering jets; they passed into the troposphere and were immediately buffeted by winds. Four point seven minutes remained before they would arrive at their destination. Perhaps her intuition was in error, she reflected uneasily. Another thought came to her and she transferred additional power to the sensors, effectively trebling their intensity; the cloud cover would still cause nearly ninety three point four percent of the sensor waves to be reflected but it couldn't hurt. Better safe than sorry. She frowned; that was most assuredly Trip's thought leaking into her own.

The strength of their bond continued to be a source of amazement to her, one that was as equally troubling as it was comforting. Both Ambassador Soval and Minister T'Pol had expressed cautious surprise at its intensity given that humans had never before displayed telepathic ability; it was one of the mysteries of her relationship with Trip that continued to defy explanation. There had been - and still were - Vulcan-Human couples who had formed a mating bond but in each case, direct telepathic communication required tactile contact. Not so with Trip. He had demonstrated a skill that was completely unheard of in non-Vulcans or, for that matter, many Vulcans themselves; Soval had even admitted that his own bond had never been this strong. No one could explain it.

She had some theories though. Something had happened to Charles Tucker when he nearly died of the silicate virus two years ago, something that she could not explain or understand. T'Pol knew Phlox suspected something as well; the Denobulan kept a discreet eye on Trip and Hoshi alike but had been unable to detect anything thus far.

"Adjust heading to..."

"Got it," Trip muttered softly, unconsciously accepting the new heading before she could say it out loud.

T'Pol returned her focus to the sensor board, adjusted the scanning bands. A discrepancy caught her eye and she blinked. Was that...?

"Shit!" Trip exclaimed, picking up her sudden flare of recognition. His fingers flew across the pilot's console and the whine of the engine spiked as he slewed the shuttlepod hard to

starboard; the startled exclamation from Lieutenant Reyes was immediately followed by a crash - the lieutenant had clearly not been buckled in properly. A streak of ... something loomed by the viewport, incredibly massive and moving at escape velocity. T'Pol barely had time to register it as a starship when an explosion rocked the pod. Alarms shrieked and she heard the sound of tearing metal; a rapid glance to the rear of the shuttle verified her worst fears as Corporal Styles was forcibly torn from his seat and disappeared through the gaping hole that had not been there moments ago. He didn't even have time to scream.

She could hear Trip's curses as he fought with the controls of the pod, oblivious to the howl of oxygen being ripped from the pod. They were in a rapidly deteriorating freefall, the shuttle tumbling end over end and now with significant, possibly crippling, structural damage. Less than five seconds had elapsed since the unexpected attack and T'Pol could already feel the pod's inertial dampeners beginning to fail under the strain. She could hear the engine suddenly misfiring, knew that it had been damaged. Fear suddenly pulsed through her but she pushed it away, suppressed it, all the time wondering if it was hers or his. It didn't matter. She wasn't as skilled a pilot as her mate but she had discovered an unexpected advantage of her bond with Trip; without speaking, she began aiding him, borrowing of the knowledge he freely offered while barely understanding exactly what it was that she was doing. Transfer power from sensors to life support like that. Cycle through the engine re-ignition sequence thus. Reroute power from communications. Maneuvering jets fired just so. Working in complete silence and seemingly without fear, they struggled with the pod's controls, fought the planetary gravity, hoping it was enough but knowing it wasn't.

They fell through the dense cloud cover, slowing the uncontrolled tumble with seemingly random bursts from the maneuvering jets but not stopping it completely. Gravity pushed them back in their seats, an implacable yet invisible hand that kept them rooted in place. Through the viewport, she could see mountains and woodland valleys racing to meet them. Trip's anger at the pod, his terror - not for him, she realized, but for her - filled the bond and T'Pol reached out, grasping his hand with hers. She felt his surprise that she had initiated the contact, followed almost immediately by his despair that she would die. The bond reflected her own fears but, in this moment, she was grateful that she would not die alone, that Trip would be here with her. Forever. They would part but never be parted. As it should be. The ground loomed...

And then everything went black.

ACT TWO

Jonathan Archer seethed.

Mere seconds had elapsed since the shuttlepod had disappeared into the obscuring planetary atmosphere, victims of an unexpected attack, and the image of it tumbling out of control, smoke and debris trailing from a gaping hole in its superstructure, was seared in his mind. A wave of grief washed through him but was almost immediately swept aside by a fury the likes of which Jon had never felt before. How dare they! He glared at the image of the four smaller craft approaching from the planet in what could only be an attack vector for two full seconds before his command reflexes finally kicked in.

Light from the local main sequence star played across their silver-gray hulls, glittering brightly in the blackness. Aesthetically, they were undeniably beautiful, all smooth curves and flowing lines. Embossed upon their hulls were stylized representations of a winged creature; scarlet in color, the image brought to mind an alien phoenix, or hawk, or eagle.

A bird of prey.

Less than half the size of the NX-01, they raced through the void with a grace and speed that *Enterprise* could not match, metal sharks in the endless sea of space. Disruptor cannons hung low along their outer surfaces and the unmistakable ports that could only be missile tubes dotted the hulls, lending them a sinister aspect that marked them immediately as ships of war. Jon recognized them at once.

Romulans.

Little was known of the mysterious race aside from their name and their clear expansionist plans; even the Vulcans claimed to have minimal intelligence regarding them aside from knowledge of an aggressive nature matched only by Klingons. For the last three years, there had been rumors and hints of Romulan activity along this entire corridor of space, from the drone incident of two years past to the steady if sporadic assaults on the shipping lanes. Concerned at this growing threat, Starfleet had accelerated their construction of new NX craft to the point that three others had joined *Columbia* and *Enterprise* in operation and the NX-06 - *Endeavour* - was scheduled to enter service within the year. Just in time it seemed.

"Travis," he ordered, his voice much calmer than he felt. The memory of the Romulan craft roaring up out of the atmosphere and firing upon the shuttlepod would not go away. "Set course one-eight-zero mark zero, full impulse. Malcolm, target lead ship and hit them with *everything* we have." Archer paused ever so briefly and when he spoke again, his voice was bleak, cold, angry. "I want him out of my sky." He knew that the anger was dangerous, inappropriate, but couldn't find it in himself to care. "Mister Rostov, inform Commander Kelby to have damage control parties standing by." As his crew acknowledged the instructions, he dropped into his command chair, primed the ship's log for emergency ejection. Just in case.

Under Mayweather's expert hand, *Enterprise* ... danced. Accelerating into a wide turn, she raced to meet the enemy head on, as if alive and eager to avenge her fallen crew. Phase cannon blasts lanced out, searing through the lead Romulan craft's hull plating in angry exclamations; a full spread of torpedoes slammed home, detonating with flashes of atomic fire that ravaged the craft, ripping apart the superstructure to expose the delicate inner hull to yet another burst of phase cannon fire. Unable to withstand the withering assault, the ship shuddered, venting plasma and atmosphere before falling planetside, already captured by New Elysium's gravity, already breaking apart. There would be no survivors.

The cold part of Archer that had driven him so hard in the Expanse, the part that he had thought - and prayed! - was gone forever surged back to the forefront and, for thinking that such a cruel death was fitting for Trip's murderers, for T'Pol's murderers, Jon hated himself a little.

But only a little.

The remaining three Romulan craft broke their formation, diving or climbing away from *Enterprise* with deadly agility even as they unleashed a brutal retaliative barrage. Disruptor fire and photonic torpedoes flashed toward *Enterprise* and she was wreathed in sudden flame. Warheads that missed, either jammed by Hoshi's skill or eluded by Travis' touch, streaked on into the night before finally detonating, filling the void with brilliant bursts of incandescence; those that found their target exploded against the invisible force screen that surrounded the flagship of Starfleet, momentarily sketching an outline of the shield. *Enterprise* twisted into a diving spin, phase cannons still spitting steady streams, before straightening, accelerating away from the planet, away from the gravity silhouette that hampered her maneuverability.

"Damage report!" Archer ordered, his eyes jumping to his tactical officer. Already, the smell of smoke and burnt plastic was in the air. It was a stench Jon had gotten all too accustomed to smelling. He hated that, missed *Enterprise* being a science ship, missed being an explorer and not a soldier.

"Shields down to 35%, hull plating down to 95%." Reed was frowning, frustrated that the shields had been drained so quickly; it was to be expected, though - experimental systems were rarely as good as advertised, even when installed by a miracle worker. He glanced up, meeting Archer's eyes. "Sir, we can't go toe-to-toe with them, not all three of them at once."

"Put some distance between us," Jon said, dropping his hand onto Mayweather's shoulder. "Full evasive."

"Aye sir," Travis replied, his face set in a grim line. His fingers played across his console, moving to an unseen beat.

Once more, *Enterprise* maneuvered like a ship half her size, slipping and spinning in completely random patterns that turned her into an elusive target. Nipping at her heels like

wolves pursuing prey, the three Romulan craft spat disruptor fire and torpedoes as they pursued. But this prey was armed. And angry.

They dueled in the dark, a violent ballet in a symphony of destruction. Light flashed between them, tongues of red and green that caressed with a burning touch or exploded in flashes of frozen fire. Had it not been so lethal, so destructive, so ... final, it would have been beautiful to behold.

The part of Jonathan Archer that hadn't been tainted by his time in the Expanse, the part that loved Charles Tucker like a brother, railed at the injustice of it, screamed at the unfairness of being forced to abandon the shuttlepod, to abandon Trip. He and T'Pol could be alive, could be injured and in desperate need of medical attention right now, could be waiting for rescue at this very moment. It hurt like hell, having to leave them behind, but he had ninety-one other lives to worry about, ninety-one men and women whose lives were his responsibility. Unexpectedly, a Vulcan saying crept into his head, a memory from the brief time Surak's *katra* had resided within him: The needs of the many...

It didn't make the pain any more bearable.



The pain was no longer bearable.

Intermittent flashes of near-consciousness warred with the dull fog of an injury-induced coma. She was aware only of pain, a sharp stab of white-hot fire that ebbed and flowed with each labored breath that she took. Awareness washed over her like the gentle waves upon a beach, rolling in for heartbeats but receding into the oblivion of unconsciousness milliseconds before she could wake. She measured her existence by the spikes of pain between each drawn breath. Time held no real meaning to her; an eternity passed between breaths, a timeless span that could have been hours, or days, or just seconds. She drifted, a piece of flotsam upon an endless gray ocean.

What began as a whisper - faint, indecipherable, but oh so familiar - steadily grew in strength and volume. It tickled the edge of her mind, at times incessant and jarring, but more often a soothing balm to the searing fire that washed through her with each breath. The soundless voice coaxed her toward consciousness, pulled her from the grayness. It was a life preserver for a drowning woman and she clung to it, bending her mind, her heart, her *katra* toward it. Toward her mate. Toward Trip.

It was an effort to open her eyes. She struggled against her body, against the instinct to continue swimming in oblivion, against the urge to give up and let nature take its course. She forced her scattered thoughts into coherence, demanded order from the chaos, *required* consciousness.

T'Pol of Vulcan woke.

She found herself lying on her side, still strapped into the now broken co-pilot's chair, which had been knocked loose by the crash. Her leg, trapped under the emergency tool kit, throbbed in time with her pulse and she could smell blood - Human and Vulcan - in the air, mixing with the stench of seared metal. T'Pol shifted, reached up to unsecure her restraints and gasped as agony screamed through her torso; tears of pain filled her eyes and she grimaced with the effort it took to avoid crying out. It required all of her willpower, every single gram of her discipline to push the pain down, to lock it away. Long moments passed in which she did nothing more than breathe and tried to ignore the nausea that hammered through her.

A wet cough drew her back to the present and she struggled to her feet with barely a hint of the pain she felt on her face; the steady throb in her leg made it clear that it was broken and T'Pol leaned heavily to one side, keeping as much weight off of the fractured limb as possible. Her eyes sought and found Trip at once; he was unconscious, still secured in the pilot's chair, his face a mask of blood, but he breathed evenly. The despair that had been seeking to overwhelm her eased as she checked his pulse and found it to be strong and normal. He had been the soundless voice that had brought her back and, once again, she was amazed, humbled even, by the strength of their bond, of his regard for her, of his ... love; even unconscious, he had sought her out. T'Pol's fingers itched to caress his face, to draw out the smile that affected her so, but her control, her innate sense of decorum prevented her from acting on the impulse. He stirred, groaned in pain, and she realized that he was feeling her own discomfort; without hesitation, she closed down that part of the bond, cut him off from her. It was like ripping off her arm but he instantly relaxed, no longer suffering from the overwhelming agony that stabbed through her abdomen. Another rasping cough emerged from the rear of the shuttle and she chastised herself for focusing so exclusively on Trip.

At a glance, she could tell that they were in trouble. The gaping wound in the shuttle's hull was significant, perhaps a meter and a half in total diameter; from the scorched area around it, she hypothesized that weapons fire had been responsible. Both the arms locker and medical locker had been knocked free during the crash, and the heavier arms locker had fallen across an unmoving Lieutenant Reyes, the source of the cough. Sergeant Reynolds, the ranking MACO, was already climbing to his feet, his right arm held at an awkward angle; T'Pol could not see Corporal El-Hamadi.

"T'Pol?" Trip's voice was confused, groggy, and she turned her eyes to him. He was rubbing his face and wincing ever so slightly.

"I am here, Commander," she responded quickly, dropping her hand onto his shoulder; the logical part of her insisted it was because Trip would take comfort in her touch, that she was not doing so to reassure herself. It was a good lie; she almost believed it. He shook his head to clear it, then began unstrapping his seat restraints.

"Well," he commented as he glanced back at the mess in the rear. "I've had better landin's." His ability to find humor in any situation astounded her.

"Indeed," she replied, amused despite herself. He glanced at her and his eyes - always keener than she liked - zeroed in on her awkward stance, the reliance on her good leg.

"Your leg?"

"Is broken." Trip shot up out of the chair, concern on his face, and immediately began steering her toward it. T'Pol gave him a look that was equal parts frustration and gratitude even as she sat. He noticed the wince so she spoke first. "I also suspect that I have a number of broken ribs." She said nothing about the other pain in her abdomen but he frowned, studied her with narrowed eyes; T'Pol could feel him actively seeking her out through the bond and kept her block in place.

"Are you blockin' me out?" His voice was soft, meant for her ears alone.

"Not intentionally," she lied. "One or both of us may be suffering from a minor concussion." Another deliberate side step of the truth. Inwardly, she cringed at deceiving her mate but determined it was for the best. If he knew how badly she suspected her injury actually was, Trip would be distracted and unable to conduct any repairs. She was Vulcan, after all; she would persevere. He frowned at her, his features betraying his suspicion. "Trip," she said softly, hating herself for lying. "If I was badly injured, you would know it."

"I guess," he replied slowly, still not entirely convinced. "Sergeant Reynolds, how are we back there?"

"Not good, sir." Reynolds stood up from where he knelt, his broken arm hanging limply at his side. "Both the ell-tee and Corporal El-Hamadi are pretty messed up, sir; I think Lieutenant Reyes may have a broken back."

"Damn." Trip ran his hand through his hair as he thought; T'Pol could almost feel his synapses firing. "We'll patch them up the best we can and then I'll look at gettin' us flyin' again."

"No," T'Pol said calmly. Tucker gave her an odd look as she continued. "Sergeant Reynolds and I will 'patch them up' while you attend to the shuttlepod. We don't..."

"...want to be here if they come back," Trip finished the thought, nodding; sometimes, it was unnerving how well he knew her, even without the bond. "Sounds like a plan." He gave her another once over, still frowning. "You sure you're okay?" T'Pol rolled her eyes at his over protectiveness; it was a trait that she found simultaneously annoying and compelling.

"I'm fine, Commander. The shuttlepod won't repair itself." He gave her a slight grin, more at her eye roll than her words, and turned away. His eyes were already studying the damage.



The damage wasn't as extensive as he had feared.

There were fires on all decks, the port nacelle was leaking plasma, and the shield generators had all but failed yet there was not a single place in the entire galaxy that Lieutenant Commander David Kelby would rather be. *Enterprise* was home.

It had taken nearly a year for Kelby to earn back the respect of the Engineering department, a year of strict obedience to an unspoken motto: *keep your head down, your mouth shut, and bust your ass*. He accepted the crap jobs without complaint, volunteered for Gamma shifts, and did his best to make sure no one important noticed him. If Tucker said to jump, he did so, asking how high only once he was in the air. He owed him that much.

Enterprise was his last chance.

"Burke!" he bellowed from his vantage point overlooking the warp reactor; it was the best spot for him, with an expansive view of the whole of engineering and access to the primary damage control console. The lieutenant in question looked up from her console and Kelby pointed to a small electrical fire; it wasn't yet dangerous but its proximity to the fuel cells made it a priority. He barely noticed Burke giving him a thumbs up and moving toward the fire - he was already again focusing on directing the damage control teams.

He'd been furious when Tucker returned to *Enterprise* and Kelby's own unexpected transfer to *Columbia* came through; whether it was intentional or not, the implied slight in his engineering skills had enraged him and the anger affected his job. He should have been happy on *Columbia*; the engineering staff there had not adopted the 'Commander Tucker is God' mentality that everyone - including the freaking Vulcan! - on *Enterprise* had. But his temper got him into trouble. Bad, bad trouble.

A shower of sparks and a strangled scream from one of the monitoring stations demanded his attention and he was moving toward it before his brain had fully registered the sounds for what they were. Ensign Beckham, a relative newcomer to the crew, was crumpled in a heap, her uniform still smoking even as the console spewed flames. Kelby didn't hesitate as he sprang forward, ignoring the growing fire that surrounded her. Seizing her by the arms, he dragged her free even as he heard Burke rushing forward with the extinguisher.

"Medic!" he shouted. Beckham was bad off: her face was horribly burned and she wasn't breathing. He was about to start CPR when the medic slid beside him, pushing him away.

"I've got her, sir!" He gave the medic a glance before nodding and standing up; he hid the wince as he realized one of his hands had been burned. It wasn't important. *Enterprise* needed him.

That didn't stop him from wishing Tucker was here.

It was weird even thinking that; at first, he'd blamed the commander for his situation. If it hadn't been for Tucker returning to *Enterprise* and taking *his* job away from him, Kelby wouldn't have been so pissed off, wouldn't have lost his temper on *Columbia* and physically struck a fellow officer during a stupid argument over something totally inconsequential, wouldn't have had to face the horrifying inquest that resulted in his demotion to lieutenant commander. The weeks after the demotion were the hardest to deal with; no one in Starfleet seemed interested in him, no one wanted to take the risk, to bring him on board anywhere. He was damaged goods. His career was circling the drain and he had seriously considered suicide more than once. Things couldn't get any worse.

And then, Charles Tucker the Third knocked on his door.

"Starfleet's givin' Hess the chief engineer slot on *Columbia*," Tucker had said without preamble and Kelby recalled the spike of pain he felt. His job. "Bumpin' her up to lieutenant commander and puttin' her on the fast track for full commander."

"She'll do a good job," Kelby recalled mumbling, all the while wondering why Tucker was here. Was he rubbing this in? Did Tucker take some sort of perverse pleasure in seeing his pain?

"Which leaves me without a rankin' second." The shock was absolute; was he saying what it sounded like he was saying? "This is a one time offer, Kelby; come to *Enterprise* and work for me. We'll start over, wipe the slate clean." He remembered standing there in stunned disbelief as Tucker offered his hand.

"Why?" The question seemed like a good one.

"Cause I need an XO and, despite our differences, you've got the skills. I need a good number two and you ... you need a second chance. What d'ya say?"

He's said yes, of course, as if there had ever been any doubt. To his surprise, Tucker had been as good as his word; the *Enterprise* chief engineer treated him exactly as if they had never met, as if they hadn't exchanged blows while Kelby was under the influence of an Orion female, as if Kelby hadn't nearly thrown his career down the tubes because of his anger at Tucker. They weren't friends exactly, but had reached a mutual understanding that allowed them to not only work together but to work *well* together; it was only a little surprising for Kelby to realize that Tucker was as good as his reputation. David had learned a lot in the past year, had even made a couple of friends.

Enterprise shook *hard* and the floor seemed to roll under Kelby's feet. He threw his hands out to steady himself, grabbing the nearby rail in the seconds before he fell, even as distinctive-sounding alarms began echoing throughout the ship. His blood ran cold. No crewman or officer serving aboard a Starfleet vessel could fail to recognize the alert for what it was.

Hull breach.

Kelby ran his eyes over the master damage control console before triggering the comm; when he spoke, he sounded a lot calmer than he felt. A whole hell of a lot calmer.

"Breach on C-Deck; emergency bulkheads holding. I need all available DC crews there ASAP." He barely heard Rostov's acknowledgment before another shudder ran through *Enterprise*. Sparks rained down around him as an EPS junction blew overhead. He barely reacted as he noted a different sort of alert signal begin flashing. Why now? "Burke!" he shouted again. "Get everyone in rad suits!" Another EPS junction exploded and he jumped as the burning sparks hit his exposed skin.

This was getting frustrating.



It was more than just frustration that was driving Hoshi Sato insane.

Splitting her attention between jamming incoming missiles and trying to decipher how the Romulans were communicating with each other was bad enough; adding in the extra complication of being within minutes of possible death while only mere meters from Malcolm just made things worse. Captain Archer's constant pacing - despite the fact that *Enterprise* shook and lurched like a spastic jackrabbit on a caffeine high - was the icing on the cake. She wished he would just sit down and issue orders from the command chair like T'Pol did.

"Hull breach on C-Deck!" Chief Petty Officer Rostov announced from the Engineering station and Hoshi sensed rather than saw Captain Archer shoot the CPO a questioning glance. As the captain pressed for further details, her attention was elsewhere; three more warheads were en route and she had mere seconds to analyze their targeting frequencies, calculate the best way to disable them, and then implement the plan.

She wished T'Pol were here. The Vulcan could do all of that while calculating π to the thousandth place and flirting with Commander Tucker at the same time.

Hoshi's fingers flew across the Science console, striking keys in rapid succession, and she focused a concentrated microwave pulse at the torpedoes, frying their onboard computers with the burst. She didn't even have to let Travis know that the incoming warheads were now little more than dumb-fire missiles; the Boomer helmsman seemed to instinctively be able to tell which torpedoes were active threats and which ones were so much stellar debris to be dodged or eluded. *Enterprise* rolled and the warheads streaked by, exploding in the distance. The moment they flashed by, Hoshi renewed her frequency hunt; through trial-and-error, she'd discovered a forty-two second gap between the next wave of missile attacks. It was *always* forty-two seconds which seemed to indicate an autoloader of some kind; such a thing

would never have occurred to her four years ago and now she factored it into her job without even thinking about it. Malcolm, she decided abruptly, would be proud.

Under normal circumstances, this wouldn't even be her job - she was a trained linguist, not a scientist or sensor operator - but O'Connor's injury from an exploding junction box had left the sensors unmanned and, in a space battle, that was suicide. And now, O'Connor's relief was stranded in the nonfunctional turbolift...

"Hull plating down to 70%," Malcolm declared in the same tone he used when ordering that disgusting tea he drank and she felt herself unaccountably cheered over that fact. Despite the fact that they could be facing imminent death, she wondered if he was actually enjoying himself. How she ever fell in love with such a dour and seemingly unemotional man continued to elude her. Love was truly blind. Or stupid, she wasn't quite sure which yet.

"Hoshi, I need that frequency!" Captain Archer urged and she fought the urge to shoot him a glare. Thirty-five. Thirty-six. Thirty-seven.

"Little busy, sir," she almost snapped, her eyes riveted to the board in front of her. If T'Pol were here, Hoshi would already have the damned frequency. If there even was one. For all she knew, these Romulans could be telepathic and coordinating their attacks with sheer brainpower. Thirty-nine. Forty. *There's something I'm missing!* Forty-two. She set aside the thought, concentrated on the incoming torpedoes.

They came from different angles this time, as the Romulans split apart and assaulted from unique vectors, maximizing the possibility of at least one torpedo getting through. One was fired at the saucer section, a second at the aft of the ship and clearly targeting the already damaged port nacelle, the third aimed amidships. It was perfect placement, forcing Hoshi to deal with each warhead individually. Another focused microwave burst fried the nacelle threat first but only barely in time; it wobbled on by the nacelle, would have still struck it if Travis hadn't applied a burst from the maneuvering jets at just the right moment. The amidships torpedo was the next target and she spent precious seconds struggling to track the fast-moving object; less than fifty meters from the hull, it suddenly careened off into the darkness.

She couldn't find the third torpedo.

Panic nearly set in for the extended heartbeat it took for her to realize that Travis had somehow managed to dodge it when he had fired the jets to avoid the nacelle threat; it was unnatural, his skill at the helm, and she doubted anyone - even Captain Archer who had something of a reputation as a pilot - could have convinced *Enterprise* to move like Travis did.

"Hoshi!" The captain's voice was strained and this time, she did shoot him a glare. More than anything, she wanted to remind him that she wasn't even officially trained to operate this board, that, if she hadn't expressed an interest in it to Commander T'Pol during a particularly boring midshift a couple of months ago, she would be completely lost.

"I'm not detecting any sort of subspace communication between them," she replied instead. Her tone bordered on insubordination and she knew it but doubted he would say anything. The captain would put it down as combat-related stress. At least she hoped he would.

"Sir, they might be using less advanced technology," Malcolm commented from his board. He didn't even look up and she could hear - no, she could feel the steady hum of discharging phase cannons. The Romulans pulled back, regrouped. They hovered just outside of effective weapons range; knowing from the opening salvos that *Enterprise* outgunned them, they seemed to prefer hit-and-fade attacks. It had to be frustrating the hell out of Reed; he so preferred a 'stand-up' fight.

"Like what?" Captain Archer asked, still frowning. All at once, Hoshi knew: Malcolm was right!

"Tightbeams!" she interjected excitedly, quickly warming to the subject. "Laser, neutrino, something like that! We can't detect those unless we're in the way of the beam!" She grinned at Malcolm and, even though his eyes remained glued on his board, he returned her smile. Gone was the tenseness between them - at least temporarily. *Why didn't I say yes?* she asked herself in that moment. It wasn't that she didn't love him, she had figured out her feelings for Malcolm long before they officially began dating. When Phlox told her of the pregnancy, though, she panicked; she knew that Malcolm, who considered himself a proper English gentleman, would feel pressured into proposing and she didn't want to marry him if he didn't actually want it himself. It would only eventually destroy them; she'd seen too many marriages - including her parents, she glumly admitted - break apart because one party was pressured into it. Despite that, the memory of the pain that flashed across face when she hesitated still caused her stomach to contract. Maybe he had been thinking about it all along. That thought caused her no small amount of consternation. *We'll clear this up later*, she promised herself.

"Then they need line-of-sight," Archer mused aloud. He glanced at Malcolm again. "We'll need a way to fight that."

"Asteroid belt, sir," Travis piped up and both senior officers shot him an approving look. Hoshi grinned; Mayweather couldn't even see it. Captain Archer nodded, once more dropped his hand onto Travis' shoulder. His face was set, grim, and Hoshi knew he was worried about Trip and T'Pol.

"Take us in, Travis."

ACT THREE

For what seemed like the millionth time, Sergeant Scott Reynolds wondered why he ever joined the MACOs.

He flexed the fingers of his right hand, feeling only a minor twinge of pain shoot through the broken arm; the auto-splint that Commander T'Pol had attached was doing its job well, immobilizing the fractured bones while injecting a trace painkiller at necessary intervals. What should have been a lancing fire through his arm was little more than a dull ache, easily ignored if circumstances demanded it; Scott only wished he could say the same for Corporal El-Hamadi or Lieutenant Reyes. Both were sedated, sleeping the sleep of the heavily medicated, and had been moved - albeit carefully - to the pull-down casualty beds that had been recently installed in the shuttlepod. El-Hamadi wasn't in any real serious danger - both legs broken, a broken pelvis and a moderate concussion - but Reyes was not in good shape at all; suffering from multiple spinal fractures, she had extensive internal damage, damage that was well beyond Commander T'Pol's skill to deal with. The Vulcan herself was dealing with broken ribs, a broken leg, and a mild concussion, though one could hardly tell from her outward reaction.

Despite their grim situation, it *was* a little amusing that Commander Tucker was suffering from nothing more than a mild headache.

Tucker's bad luck on away missions was fast becoming legendary - Sergeant Cole called it the 'Tucker Syndrome' - and had become a running joke among the MACOs and Security personnel alike on *Enterprise*; it was not uncommon for anyone assigned to such a duty with the chief engineer to officially request hazardous duty pay before heading out. Reynolds himself had made a joke to Styles about updating their wills once Lieutenant Mackenzie assigned them to this mission. At the time, it had been pretty funny; the entire team had shared a good laugh.

Scott wasn't laughing any more.

Instead, he found himself wondering why he'd ever signed up in the first place. He'd never wanted to be a soldier while growing up, never wanted to learn a dozen ways to kill a man with a spork or a hundred ways to disarm a pissed-off Klingon without getting your head ripped off in the process. The idea of firing a rifle with intent to kill had been repugnant to him and was at complete odds with everything his mom had ever taught him. He'd wanted nothing more than to get his doctorate in History - with a focus on the Eugenics Wars and how they still influenced Terran politics and Human relations with galactic neighbors - before maybe accepting a teaching position. Nothing had prepared him for the blind rage he'd experienced when Florida was hit, when his best friends were incinerated while on vacation in the Keys. A vacation he was supposed to be on.

So he signed up.

A month later, he came out of his mental fog and realized where he was and what he had done. He had no idea how MACO HQ had failed to notice his Masters in Terran History or the fact that he was fluent in both Andorian and Vulcan when they assigned him to the infantry; although he knew it sounded arrogant, him as a ground pounder just seemed like a waste. How he'd gotten himself assigned to *Enterprise* despite having just graduated Boot had been a complete mystery, one that bothered him until Major Hayes informed him that he'd personally requested him; the major, he learned, had served with Dwight Reynolds and had been personally asked to look out for him. Scott hadn't even known his dad had been in the military.

The clank of boots on metal drew his attention away from El-Hamadi's vitals as Commander Tucker stomped in, his jumpsuit streaked with grease and other filth that could only come from an engine. His face was creased in a frown but he gave Scott a cautious guy nod - little more than a sharp incline of the head - as he made his way to where Commander T'Pol sat; she didn't even wrinkle her nose at his approach, which, to Reynold's mind, was more than a little surprising - everyone knew about the nose of female Vulcans.

"Engine's fine; just needed to clear a fuel misfeed," Tucker announced as he ran his fingers through his hair, leaving strands of it sticking up in odd ways. He shot a grim look at the structural damage. "That damned hole is gonna cause some problems, though."

"In what way?" the Vulcan science officer asked, studying the engineer with a cool expression. She was a picture of unmoving poise.

"It's a meter-six wide, meter-two tall and we don't have the supplies to patch it up properly." Tucker rubbed his right temple, leaving behind a smear of grease; for a moment, it looked like T'Pol was going to reach out and wipe the mess away. "I might be able to salvage enough spare junk for a temporary fix, enough to get us back into space but I don't trust..." He trailed off, frowning at the hole. For long seconds, he said nothing, chewing on his lip in an expression that was clearly one of thought.

"Commander?" T'Pol's voice was soft, totally at odds with her usual no-nonsense manner. When Tucker failed to respond, she tried again. "Trip?" Reynolds blinked in surprise at her use of the commander's nickname.

"Huh? Oh, sorry. I was thinkin'."

"Be careful," T'Pol said with the closest thing to a smile that Scott had ever seen on her face. "You are currently uninjured; we would not wish to change that." Reynolds shook his head in absolute surprise; a Vulcan *teasing* someone; if he hadn't seen it himself, he would have doubted it possible. Commander Tucker gave her a grin.

"That concussion is sure improvin' your sense of humor, darlin'," he drawled as he nodded toward the damage. "I was thinkin' I could rig up one of those force screens you and Malcolm have been goin' on about, maybe use it to increase the integrity of the patch."

"Then we should get to work." She shifted in her seat, clearly intent on standing and joining him.

"Oh, no you don't," Commander Tucker responded sharply, his head snapping around so he could give the Vulcan a flat stare. "You're stayin' in here, in that chair, until we break orbit." Commander T'Pol's expression became, if possible, even blanker than ever before but Scott could recognize annoyance when he saw it.

"The repairs will go quicker with my aid," she told the engineer but he frowned, crossed his arms. There was a hint of steel in his stance, a resolute quality that made it clear he would not be swayed. Reynolds concentrated on stillness, wondered if they were even still aware of his presence. He doubted it. It wasn't like they gave him any chance to make a discreet exit.

"Not if I'm worried about you," Tucker replied. "And not if your broken ribs puncture a lung or something. I can have the Professor give me a hand while you concentrate on gettin' the comms back up." Scott felt a flash of surprise; he hadn't expected the Commander to be aware of the stupid nickname the MACOs on *Enterprise* had given him. The Vulcan rolled her eyes - a Human expression that seemed out of place on her normally stoic face - and started to argue the point but Tucker interrupted. "Please, T'Pol. For me." He made a discreet hand gesture, one that Scott knew he wasn't meant to see.

Or recognize.

T'Pol said nothing for a long moment, merely studied him with an unblinking gaze that revealed no hint of her thoughts. Finally, she responded, reaching out and touching Tucker's fingers with her own. Reynolds turned away and busied himself with checking Lieutenant Reyes' condition, partly out of respect for the intimate gesture but primarily to conceal his shock. He knew more about Vulcan customs than most Humans; his favorite instructor at the University of Oklahoma had been a visiting Vulcan named T'Run and she had responded to his absolute fascination with her culture by explaining many things. He'd even seen her initiate the finger caress with her mate and had eventually worked up the courage to ask them about it.

Armed with that sort of knowledge, he'd taken the gossip about the two Commanders for what it was: rumor and innuendo. It made a sad sort of sense that everyone would be so interested in the nature of their relationship; T'Pol was ... well, she was an alien and simply because of that became a source of endless speculation. Sure, she and Tucker were nearly always in each other's company and obviously worked well together but that was hardly a basis for romantic involvement. And besides, T'Run's explanation of Vulcan physiology made casual relationships simply unfeasible. He had simply thought theirs was a complicated friendship, the nature of which no one really understood but them. Boy, had he been wrong.

"As you wish, beloved," T'Pol responded softly in her native tongue. The acoustics on the shuttlepod were amazing; despite his attempt to *not* eavesdrop, the words drifted right to him.

"I would not wish to be ... distracting to you." Now that he knew what to listen for, Scott could hear the smile in her voice.

"Too late for that," Tucker grinned back at her, also in Vulcan; it was interesting to hear, Vulcan spoken with a southern twang. He spoke again, louder this time and in English. "Hey Professor, you know how to weld?"

"Not really, sir," Reynolds replied. He wondered if he should reveal his knowledge; it wasn't much of a surprise that neither of them would think he understood Vulcan. He was, after all, just a glorified grunt and T'Pol's native tongue was a difficult one to master. "Never had a reason to learn." The engineer gave him an amused look.

"No time like the present. Grab the gear and we'll get to work." Tucker started toward the rear of the shuttlepod, pausing only long enough to glance back at T'Pol. "Now remember, no distractions." She gave him another unreadable look complete with raised eyebrow and, as he led Scott out of the shuttlepod, Tucker was grinning. The sound of a woman's wet cough followed them from the shuttlepod and Reynolds glumly concluded that Lieutenant Reyes, who he had thought didn't have the strength to cough, must be getting worse.

They were running out of time.



Time had run out.

Radiological alarms were sounding throughout the ship, there were reports of hull breaches on nearly every deck, and Lieutenant Commander Kelby was fighting a losing battle in Engineering. *Enterprise* was dying.

And it was all Commander Tucker's fault.

From the damage control station on the bridge, Chief Petty Officer Mikhail Rostov had a bird's eye view of the ship's impending demise. In the minutes before they entered the asteroid belt, the Romulans had unleashed an unprecedented assault, blasting away with their disruptor cannons and staggering their torpedo runs so it seemed that there was always an incoming warhead. Lieutenants Mayweather and Sato did the best they could, dodging or jamming the torps, even as Lieutenant Commander Reed tried to keep the Romulans off of them with weapons fire. So far, it had worked.

So far.

But it was still Tucker's fault they were all going to die.

Logically, Rostov knew it didn't make any sense to blame someone who wasn't even aboard -

let alone someone who may or may not be dead - but the superstitious Russian in him insisted on pointing to the two hundred plus years of family precedence. An immutable law had been passed down through the generations since the first Rostov sailor shipped off to the Russo-Sino War: *no one is safe if the engineer is absent.*

It sounded like a bunch of nonsense to those who had not grown up with the stories, those that didn't know about the Rostov who survived the destruction of the *Krazny Oktyabr* because the engineer sacrificed himself, or the Rostov who perished with all hands aboard the *Alexsandr Kerensky* because the engineer was summoned to Moscow, or the Rostov who narrowly survived when Khan Noonian Singh seized the *Botany Bay*, again thanks to the efforts of the engineer. Anna had laughed at him when he tried to explain it to her years ago, had told him to stop being such a gloomy Russian pessimist, and he'd dropped it for her sake. Hess still teased him about it in their infrequent correspondence even though he hadn't mentioned it for a very long time.

That didn't stop him from believing it.

"Evasive pattern delta!" Captain Archer snapped and Michael - he preferred that to his birth name - felt the deck shift under him; *Enterprise* began spinning along its horizontal axis as she dove deeper into the field. The hollow clang of small rocks impacting along the hull rang throughout the ship and something - a torpedo, it looked like - streaked past the saucer section, smashing into a large asteroid with a titanic explosion that shattered the stellar rock. Impossibly, Mayweather aimed *Enterprise* at that very spot; only a completely insane pilot - or a Boomer, which was to same the same thing - would even try to squeeze a ship the size of *Enterprise* through such a tiny (in a galactic sense) space. Rostov felt himself tensing for the inevitable crunch of metal against rock, waited for the sudden hiss that would precede explosive decompression.

"*Chyort voz'mi,*" he muttered in his native tongue, wincing as *Enterprise* slipped between the cracks of the fracturing stellar rock. Collision alarms didn't sound, the hull didn't snap under the pressure, Mayweather didn't even scrape the paint - what little of it remained. They were alive.

For now.

He knew that he should be amazed at his complete lack of fear, his lack of concern about the miserable death that was sure to come, but something he had heard once kept drifting into his memory: "*Fear accompanies the possibility of death; calm shepherds its certainty.*" And Michael was certain that he was going to die.

Because the damned Chief Engineer wasn't aboard.

"Got you!" Commander Reed suddenly snarled and stabbed his finger at his console. Rostov felt *Enterprise* shudder with the distinctive feel of torpedoes being launched. On the viewscreen, he could see the result of the British tactical officer's shot: the torpedoes flashed

into the asteroid field, seemingly aimed at nothing, until one of the Romulan ships suddenly appeared from behind a hulking asteroid, clearly maneuvering to flank *Enterprise*. The first of the torps was a direct hit, smashing into what appeared to be a nacelle with a fierce flash that shredded armor and power plant alike; the second warhead hammered into the asteroid itself, detonating with horrific force. Huge chunks of debris were sent flying into the already wounded craft, punching into the hull and sending the smaller craft tumbling into another of the immense rocks. It was instantly consumed by a brilliant fireball.

Michael drew a deep breath and waited for the other shoe to drop.

The other two Romulan ships retaliated almost at once, diving forward with disruptor cannons barking fire before again slipping behind cover. With jarring force, the attacks slammed into the hull plating of the saucer section, melting through the protective armor and puncturing the superstructure. Even as the hull breach alarms were sounding yet again and Rostov was calmly directing damage control parties to the appropriate locations, he heard a sound on the bridge that was out of place. It was a hum that was rapidly growing louder, an electrical hum that sounded suspiciously like...

Captain Archer moved before Michael had fully comprehended what the sound was, lunging across the bridge in three rapid leaping steps to seize the oblivious Lieutenant Sato and pull her from the Science board; completely focused on her sensor viewfinder, she momentarily resisted, startled at his unexpected action.

A fraction of a second after the captain grabbed her, the panels behind the Science board exploded.

It threw them both across the bridge: Archer hit the rail behind his command chair with bone crushing force, knocking it free from the deck with his impact, even as Sato was sent spinning over the Science board itself. Both crumpled into unmoving heaps and for a single, extended moment, silence reigned over the bridge.

The other shoe had officially dropped.

Lieutenant Mayweather had already started to move from his console when Reed's voice cracked over him like a whip, froze him in place.

"Stop!" Mayweather shot him a stunned look. "Stay at your station, Lieutenant!" The tactical officer's voice was stern, demanding absolute obedience.

"But sir-

"Full evasive; take us deeper into the field!" Reed's eyes touched the unmoving bodies of the two officers for the briefest of seconds and Rostov could almost see the hint of regret lurking there before his officer's mask of absolute control fell into place. "You have your orders, Lieutenant!" With the flick of his wrist, Michael changed the frequency of his board's comm

from Damage Control to Sickbay.

"Medical emergency on the bridge." The comm chirped, indicating Phlox's acknowledgment of the summons and Commander Reed gave Rostov a tight smile, his eyes never wavering from his board even as he triggered another burst of phase cannon fire. It was a perfectly placed shot, missing the Romulan craft by mere meters but burning into a nearby asteroid with impressively subtle results; debris exploded outward and the ship went into a steep dive to avoid the sudden danger of tumbling rocks.

The Romulan didn't see the torpedo before smashed into its aft.

It was a thing of sublime beauty, like making an impossible quadruple bank shot that culminated in sinking the eight ball in the corner pocket. The fire that bloomed around the engine of the Romulan craft was immediately gratifying, a sudden eruption of flame and atmosphere that sent the smaller ship reeling away from *Enterprise*.

As the wounded craft began limping away - on maneuvering thrusters alone it appeared - the fourth Romulan roared back into view. Dipping up and over an immense asteroid pockmarked with impact craters, it spat fire; sizzling streams of pure energy lanced out, carving a jagged scar across *Enterprise's* hull. Each blast was precisely aimed, slashing through phase cannon ports or searing into missile tubes; explosions ravaged *Enterprise* as a torpedo - loaded and armed - prematurely detonated, its warhead ignited by the scorching heat of the disruptor beams. Like a wounded bird, the Starfleet vessel shuddered and spiraled deeper into the field; damaged maneuvering jets functioned erratically or not at all as Lieutenant Mayweather struggled with his console, fought to regain control. Sensing their distress, the Romulan once more abandoned cover long enough to fire another photonic torpedo. The warhead streaked through the asteroid belt toward *Enterprise* and Rostov knew it wouldn't miss; from Commander Reed's shout into the intraship comms, he knew it too.

"Brace for impact!"

Unerringly accurate, the incoming torpedo smashed into the already damaged port nacelle. It exploded instantly, a violent eruption of searing fire that ignited the already leaking warp plasma and tore the nacelle apart with an even brighter detonation. Huge chunks of polarized metal were sent spinning off into the darkness, some still alight and burning as they tumbled into the stellar rock of the asteroid belt or into *Enterprise* herself. Mayweather snarled a curse as the already difficult task of regaining control became a nearly impossible one. The bridge was suddenly alight with alarms and explosions and fires as systems failed catastrophically.

A flashed blinded Rostov and something suddenly crashed against him, hammering into his body like the fist of God itself and hurling him backwards. He felt himself hit something *hard* and the bridge tilted around wildly, as if it were spinning like a merry-go-round or one of those Ferris wheels that Hess liked so much. His vision swam out of focus as he felt the impact of hitting the deck; oblivion surged up around him but he tried to fight it, struggled to

cling to consciousness even as he felt himself sliding away. *This is all Tucker's fault*, a strangely lucid part of his mind whispered as he fell into darkness.

In that hazy moment before he lost all reason, he wondered if he would ever wake.



Someone was trying to wake him up.

It was clearly a female someone because no man, regardless of his orientation, had skin that soft. Or smelled that good. Or had breath that sweet. At first, his muddled brain thought that it was perhaps his mom and that he had overslept again, but that thought was quickly brushed aside when he realized that whoever She was, She was crying and sounded like She was in pain. Kelby thought of himself as something of an old-fashioned type of guy and stirred, pushing himself toward consciousness. A hollow thud echoed through his skull, beating time with his pulse, and his arm hurt - no, it screamed with pain. Something sticky was on his head, something wet and sticky. Smoke was heavy in the air and it smelled of burnt electrical wire, warp coolant and ... flesh?

His eyes snapped open then, and he found himself face to face with Lieutenant Hailey Burke.

Under normal circumstances, waking to discover a pretty woman's face mere centimeters from his own would have made his day, even if it was streaked with engine grime and sweat. Maybe especially if it was streaked with engine grime and sweat. These were far from normal circumstances.

"Hello, Hailey," he croaked. He hoped his voice didn't sound as bad to her as it did to him.

"I thought you were dead!" she exclaimed, her eyes widened with what could only be fear. He frowned at that; he'd never known Lieutenant Burke to act this way in the eight months he'd known her. She was one of the strongest women he knew, could give most - if not all - of the men aboard lessons on toughness. He wondered what could rattle her and tried to focus his hazy brain. Memory remained elusive; he recalled an explosion. Alarms. Bracing for impact. Another explosion and then blackness. Everything fell into place and he tried to push himself up, to get a better look around at what remained of Engineering.

That, as it turned out, was something of a mistake.

Fire shot through his left arm, a white-hot spike of pain so intense he could not help but to gasp in shock. His vision swam again and he clenched his eyes together, tried to block out the molten lava that seemed to race through his veins. He felt her hands on his neck, keeping him from crashing back to the floor. *She's got nice hands*, a part of his brain told him.

"Your arm is broken," Burke told him unnecessarily. "In two or three places." His arm agreed

with her assessment and he gritted his teeth together, tried to ignore the pain as she fit an auto-splint onto the mostly useless limb. *Probably a concussion too*, he thought angrily to himself. As if he needed a concussion now.

"What's our status?" he asked, his eyes still tightly shut. He was still the acting-Chief Engineer, regardless of his injuries. His people were relying on him and he would *not* let them down.

"We lost the nacelle." She drew a deep breath, held it for less than a heartbeat, then exhaled. He was astounded at how calm she became in the space of that single breath. "And there's a delta leak we can't lock down." That was bad; the rad suits were fine as stopgap measures but if that leak wasn't plugged, a lot of people were going to die. He'd seen crewmen who had died of delta radiation poisoning; no one deserved that. Kelby opened his eyes and locked gazes with her; the concern he saw there warmed him just a bit. She smiled shyly and he realized that he was looking at yet another missed opportunity. *This planet sucks*, he grumbled to himself.

"Help me up," he said quietly. To anyone else in Engineering at that moment, it would have been an order, a command to be obeyed instantly. Without question. To Hailey, it was a request.

Standing up may have also been a mistake. He swayed on unsteady feet, felt his legs buckle and quickly latched onto Burke for support. She shot him a look - one of those indecipherable expressions that only a woman could make or understand for that matter - and pressed a hypospray to his neck; he blinked, finally noticing the medkit she had strapped to her side. The hypo hissed and he immediately felt better. Pain receded to a manageable level and he found his thoughts clearer than they had been for a long time. Before he could say anything to thank her, a new alarm began sounding and Kelby felt his heart drop into his stomach.

Core breach.

The alarm was almost instantly joined by an automated verbal announcement. Recently installed by Tucker himself, the computerized voice sounded exactly like the ship's first officer. In honor of the ground collision avoidance systems in ancient fixed-wing jets (the so-called 'bitching Betty' as it had been called), Tucker had unofficially christened the alert voice his 'bitchin' Polly'; Commander T'Pol had been far from amused but, despite numerous attempts both blatant and covert, had been unable to alter the voice. Her efforts - whether intentional or not - had spawned a good-natured interdepartmental battle, with the Science division trying to crack Tucker's code while the Engineering crew opposed them.

"Warning," the disembodied voice announced. "Containment field has been compromised. Core breach in three hundred and sixty seconds." Almost at once, Kelby realized what must have happened: the destruction of the nacelle had caused a massive power surge, one that had overloaded the circuits in the containment field surrounding the warp core itself. It could be slowed - possibly - but not prevented. Not now.

"Get everybody out, Hailey." She gave his hand a quick squeeze and turned away, already shouting orders. Kelby reached over to the comm panel, triggered it even as the 'bitchin' Polly' continued to count down.

"Engineering to Bridge!" He had to shout to make himself heard over the alarms.

"Bridge." Short and succinct; it occurred to Kelby that if Lieutenant Commander Reed was answering, something had happened to Captain Archer. This day just kept getting better and better.

"Core breach in under five minutes!" Burke's efforts were paying off as the Engineering staff streamed past him through the door, most under their own power but far too many needed help.

"Can you prevent it?" Reed was angry, no doubt thinking that if Commander Tucker were here, he'd be able to stop it. Kelby was having the same thought.

"Negative!" There was a fractional pause as the acting-captain considered his options; when he spoke again, he was grim, implacable.

"I need ten minutes, Kelby. To get clear of the field." That made sense; escape pods would have no hope of surviving intact while in the belt - there were too many random variables to calculate, too much stellar debris to evade. And pods had never been designed with maneuverability in mind. Kelby looked back at the warp drive, his mind feverishly turning over options. Only one leaped out at him as having any chance of success, slim though it may be. With a resigned sigh, he realized what he had to do.

"You'll get them. Kelby out." He released the transmit button, turned to meet Burke's eyes. They were too knowing, too ... wise.

"Planning to stay, sir?" She didn't sound surprised.

"Yes," he replied, jerking his head toward the door. "Get clear, Lieutenant."

"No sir. You'll need a hand rigging the core for ejection." Kelby frowned; she clearly knew him better than he expected but there was no way he was going to have her death on his hands. Not if there was something he could do about it. She had far too much to live for. Forcing his expression into one of grudging acceptance, he nodded and she relaxed, glanced away.

And he punched her in the face.

Lieutenant Burke staggered back, blood streaming from her broken nose, and wobbled on her feet, surprise writ on her face; without hesitation, David hit her again, this time in the solar

plexus and she folded over, gasping for air. He shoved her through the doorway and into the hands of a visibly stunned Crewman Rowe.

"Get her out of here," Kelby snapped before hitting the door release, sealing himself inside. No one could enter now. *Time to earn my pay*, he thought grimly to himself as he turned toward the warp core. An ancient quote drifted came to mind, one that he had heard recently during Movie Night in a film about the early pioneers of space travel. He thought it appropriate: *Dear Lord, please don't let me fuck up.*

He couldn't help but to smile.



He could not remember the last time he had smiled.

Nor could he recall when last he was this angry. There had been times in the past when the fury surged through his veins, a blistering white-hot wrath that tried to sweep away all rationality, to burn away his innate sense of caution. Each time before, he had sought solace in training, focusing the anger into something constructive, whether it be new hand-to-hand techniques or more work with blades or target practice with phase pistols or disruptors or even archaic slugthrowers. Not this time, though. This time, there was no time to seek inner balance, no time to storm from his station and let the emotions out in a single explosive burst. Too many lives depended on his actions, his commands, his control. So he did the only thing he could with his anger.

He suppressed it.

A small part of him reveled in the fact that so few could see the cold fury simmering within him. It helped him maintain his facade of professionalism when all he wanted to do was to cast aside self-control, to kill the bloody bastards responsible. Every sodding last one of them. But the mask of absolute calm was in place and he had no doubt that the mastery of his raging emotions would have impressed even T'Pol.

Control was all that Malcolm Reed had.

He glanced around the shattered bridge and what he saw infuriated him. No console appeared to have escaped damage and several were still sparking wildly. A few minor fires were still smoldering and some of the internal structure had collapsed inward; one such column of metal had knocked the command chair free from the deck, upending it and leaving it on its side. Captain Archer and Hoshi - Lieutenant Sato, he told himself, she had to be *just* Lieutenant Sato right now or his control would fracture - were still unmoving were they had fallen; both appeared to be breathing but he could not risk the time to check. CPO Rostov was sprawled out behind the Engineering station, blood pouring from his burnt face; the engineer hadn't even made a sound when his board blew up in his face. Three other crewmen had been

on the bridge; three other crewmen were now still and silent on the deck. The core breach alarm continued to echo loudly throughout the ship.

"Get us clear of the field, Travis," Malcolm ordered. "Best speed." The Boomer pilot gave him an abbreviated nod and Reed turned his attention back to his board to continue directing the damage control teams. It was, after all, the only thing he could do that would help. He had minimal weapons control - only a single phase cannon was operating! - barely any sensors, and even fewer options. Unless Kelby could prevent it, the core would explode in under three minutes and everyone aboard *Enterprise* would die. Including Hoshi.

Malcolm had to hand it to the Romulans; this had been a brilliantly executed plan of attack even if it had been costly. Escape was already out of the question when they struck; no one would have risked going to warp within a star system which left fighting as the only option. *Enterprise* had become a flying Thermopylae, outnumbered yet stubbornly holding on to the last. "*Come home with your shield or on it,*" Reed grimly quoted to himself; he had a fairly good idea which it would be.

The turbolift door slid open - damage control had only gotten it functional again minutes earlier - and a battered Doctor Phlox stumbled onto the bridge, followed almost immediately by a female MACO. Smoke rolled out of the turbolift as Phlox quickly moved toward Archer's side; he said nothing as he went to work and, for that, Reed was thankful. The MACO - Sergeant Cole, Reed realized - attended the Denobulan much in the same manner a nurse would. Cross-training the MACOs for shipboard duties had been an idea proposed by Lieutenant Mackenzie, one that Malcolm had eagerly supported; most of them were attached to the Armory, aiding the loading crews but three of them - Cole, Styles and Mackenzie herself - had been tasked to Phlox for combat lifesaver courses.

"Sir, I need grapples control," Travis said suddenly, his voice calm, and Malcolm didn't hesitate, transferring control of the docking grapples directly to the helm station. As he did, he could see the Romulan sliding behind *Enterprise*, clearly lining up for another deadly torpedo run. It figured that the only functional cannon didn't face aft...

"Hostile at one-nine-seven mark two-five," he announced and Travis nodded, waited, his eye on the sensor feed. An immense asteroid loomed before them, larger than any they'd seen before, larger than some European nations, but Mayweather kept his course steady for long moments. Taking no fire, the Romulan grew bolder, accelerated and began lashing out with his disruptor cannons; *Enterprise* rocked under the assault and, even as the hostile was firing a torpedo, Travis was triggering the grapples.

They shot out and anchored firmly in another asteroid that, while not as large as the one they bore down upon, was still at least three times their size. The lines grew taut, altering *Enterprise's* velocity ever so slightly, and Travis cut them loose before they could be torn free even as he fired a burst from the port-side maneuvering thrusters, sending the starship into a slow but controlled roll. Impossibly, it was enough and *Enterprise* skimmed the cratered surface of the France-sized asteroid with meters to spare. The torpedo was not as agile and

impacted upon the giant rock, exploding in a plume of rock and debris. Malcolm exhaled, suddenly aware that he had been holding his breath.

"Commander Reed," Phlox said, looking up from where he knelt by Hoshi; his expression was bleak. "I need to get Captain Archer and Lieutenant Sato to sickbay at once."

"We have a possible core breach in under two minutes, doctor." The Denobulan didn't blink, merely waited. "I'd advise you to get to the bridge lifeboat instead."

"Not without my patients," Phlox insisted, his expression unyielding. He gestured to the Engineering station. "I've yet to examine Mister Rostov." Anger flared, hot and overwhelming, and Malcolm struggled to control it as he glared at his Chief Medical Officer.

"Did you not hear me?" he almost snarled. "The core. Is going. To breach."

"Then it does not matter if I am here or in a lifeboat, does it, Commander?" Despite their dire straits, the Denobulan gave Malcolm a hearty smile and moved to check on Rostov, followed closely by Cole. She gave Reed an apologetic look but said nothing.

"Kelby to the bridge!" The hail drew Reed's attention immediately and he hit the receive button, noting that Travis was *again* planning an impossible maneuver. He didn't want to watch so he looked back at the feed to monitor the hostile's flight path.

"Reed."

"You've got six and a half minutes, sir!" Alarms were making it difficult to make out Kelby's voice and, with a mild jolt of surprise, Malcolm realized the man was still in Engineering. A quick glance to his console revealed that Engineering had been sealed; no one could enter. Or exit. "Containment is holding but I can't give you more time than that! I'm also rigging the core for ejection!" Reed couldn't keep the surprise, the ... awe out of his voice when he responded; he'd read Trip's proposal for such a procedure and it had sounded ... risky.

"Acknowledged, Commander. And ... thank you." He didn't have to say for what.

"Kelby out." Malcolm looked up as the comm crackled out, met Phlox's eyes and frowned. Nothing needed to be said. Reed looked away, glanced at the sensor feed, a trickle of a plan starting to form. If they ejected the core at the right moment...

"We're coming to the edge of the field, sir," Travis declared, his fingers still flying across his controls; he appeared oblivious to the conversation that had just taken place although Malcolm knew he had heard everything. "Five minutes until we're clear." Reed gave a sharp nod in acknowledgment, belatedly realizing that Mayweather couldn't see him. He checked the feed once more, noted that the Romulan had fallen back, unable - or unwilling - to match the insane twists and climbs of *Enterprise*. It was time, Malcolm realized. He keyed the intraship comms and spoke words he never wanted to hear, let alone speak.

"All hands, prepare to abandon ship."

ACT FOUR

Captain Archer was dying.

His heart had stopped twice in the two minutes since Phlox had managed to wedge him into the cramped lifeboat, once more while the doctor was working to fix the damage, and had entered a state of ventricular tachycardia for the last thirty seconds. The reason was obvious: feedback from the exploding Science board had given the captain a massive electrical shock, short-circuiting his heart's electrical conduction systems and causing an immediate and life-threatening series of cardiac arrhythmias. To further complicate matters, numerous pieces of shrapnel had lodged themselves dangerously close to the aorta, forcing Phlox to open the captain's chest and remove them before he could turn to normalizing Archer's cardiac rhythm. The cardiac arrhythmias were the most urgent problem, but the difficulty of Phlox's task was compounded by Archer's skeletal injuries: multiple crushed ribs, a broken clavicle and a skull fracture. Armed with little more than a laser scalpel, a hand-held surgical kit and rapidly dwindling positive thoughts, the doctor grimly bent his efforts to saving Archer's life.

He just wished *Enterprise* would stop shaking.

At his side, Sergeant Amanda Cole was feverishly trying to reinflate Lieutenant Sato's left lung with the minimal supplies they had, grumbling under her breath the entire time about being a soldier and not a medic. Cool and efficient, she had become Phlox's favorite assistant (MACO or otherwise) and had displayed a singular talent with her fingers that the Denobulan could not help but to admire; on numerous occasions, he had admitted to himself that he even preferred her company over that of Lieutenant Reyes, who *was* a trained physician. In his opinion, Amanda was completely wasted as a MACO; she had the hands of a surgeon and the temperament of a healer even if she tried to hide it behind a gruff soldier's exterior. Phlox had already tempted fate by forwarding a polite but strong recommendation to MACO Headquarters regarding Sergeant Cole's future without addressing it with her; as a favor, Archer had personally delivered the official letter to General Raleigh, the MACO Chief of Staff, at their last stop on Earth.

"All hands, proceed to lifeboats immediately." Lieutenant Commander Reed's voice echoed throughout the ship, strong and confident, and Phlox was momentarily amazed at the human ability to compartmentalize; he knew of the relationship between Reed and Lieutenant Sato, knew the sort of mental anguish Reed had to be going through at this very moment, not knowing if the mother of his unborn child was living or dead. And yet, just from listening, he could not tell if Reed was even concerned or worried; sometimes the dour tactical officer was better than T'Pol at concealing his emotions. "Four minutes to core ejection." *Enterprise* shuddered again, the hollow clang of weapons fire against the hull echoing throughout the vessel. His balance abruptly lost, Phlox's hand slipped ever so slightly.

The laser sliced cleanly through one of the coronary arteries.

Cole heard his gasp of dismay, glanced over at him even as bright red arterial blood shot from

the incision, splattering his face and chest. He reacted quickly, setting aside the scalpel and grabbing the resealer from the surgical kit; reprogramming it with one thumb, he set about repairing the damage wrought by the errant cut. He wondered what Doctor Lucas would say when he told him about this: emergency heart surgery on the captain in a lifepod beside a reluctant MACO medic who was clearly gifted with a healer's hands. It sounded suspiciously like the plot of one of the films that Commander Tucker would play on Movie Night; of course, if this were one of those ancient films, the dramatic music would swell at any moment and the scene would fade to black.

That almost brought a smile to his face.

"Use the tri-laser connector," he said abruptly, noting that Cole was pulling a sonic separator from the surgical kit; she glanced briefly at him but obeyed his suggestion. His eyes returned to his own patient, realizing the repairs were going to be more difficult than he expected - the shrapnel had proved to be elusive to locate and even the use of the magnetic extractor had not prevented additional damage from occurring. He frowned; it was an expression that appeared out of place on his normally jovial face. It appeared that *he* would need the TL connector as well.

"Need this?" Amanda asked, handing him the connector before he could ask for it. He gave her a grin as he reconnected the severed artery but the smile barely touched his eyes; there had been too much death today, too many young men and women who were gone because he couldn't save them. Like Chief Rostov or Lieutenant Mackenzie or Petty Officer Novakovich.

Phlox realized that he was tired. Tired of serving on a starship. Tired of seeing so many youngsters lost because he was slowing down. He missed research for the sheer love of it, missed the sheer wonder of discovery.

He felt old.

Amanda's grumbles were starting to die off and Phlox risked a glance at her work, noting with significant pride that she had restored Sato's breathing and was even now sealing up the incision. He could not have done a better job.

"Doctor?" Cole's voice was soft, hesitant; from her tone, he knew what she was going to say. "I couldn't help but to notice that Lieutenant Sato is..."

"Pregnant," Phlox finished as he used the cardiostimulator to restart Archer's heart a fourth time. "I'm impressed, Amanda. She's barely six weeks along and most *medics* would not have noticed that." Out of the corner of his eye, he could see her blush. He always found it amusing that she was so embarrassed by his praise; it made him wonder what sort of household she had grown up in and if that had influenced her decision to join the MACOs.

"Three minutes to core ejection." Archer's heart began working again and Phlox quickly used a hypo of cordrazine on the man; it would stabilize his blood pressure and hopefully keep

him from going into arrest again until there was time to do more than just 'patch' work. At the same time, he made a mental note to speak with the captain about his diet later - he had detected hints of atherosclerosis of the coronary arteries during his earliest scan of the captain, clearly from consumption of too much animal fat and far too few vegetables. It was a conversation he was looking forward to having, the doctor realized; the expression on the captain's face when he was *ordered* to eat salad would be priceless. That thought cheered him more than he would have thought possible.

"It was on the scanner, sir." The Denobulan almost smiled; yes, her pregnancy had been on the diagnostic scanner but the fetus was hardly of any size to warrant notice. Except to healers. Or MACOs who should be healers.

"Indeed it was," he replied as he began closing up his incision; as long as he didn't suffer any more massive electrical shocks, Archer should be fine. For now. *Enterprise* shook again, the force of the shudder knocking the emergency kit to the floor of the lifeboat with a loud crash; neither of them even reacted. "Did the fetus sustain any damage?" He prayed that it hadn't; no parent should ever lose a child. That line of thinking immediately brought Commanders T'Pol and Tucker to mind and he found himself hoping they were safe; with Tucker's record, however...

"Not that I could see, sir." She began shifting the unconscious Sato, strapping her into the acceleration couch of the lifepod. "Does she know?"

"Lieutenant Sato is aware of her condition." The incision was sealed. He already knew where Amanda's thoughts were going; *Enterprise* had been in deep space for the last two months, after all.

"Is Commander Reed?" That was brazen of her, guessing the identity of the father, but Phlox could not help but to smile. They were remarkably alike, he mused. Perhaps that was why his alternate on Lorian's *Enterprise* had married her.

"Help me get Captain Archer strapped in," was his only reply.

"Two minutes to core ejection," Commander Reed announced and Phlox drew a deep breath, his eyes locked on Archer and his mind on his handiwork.

He hoped it was enough.



It would have to be enough.

Muttering soft curses under his breath, Charles Tucker rose to his feet, the now-spent welding torch held lightly in his hands. He studied his handiwork with a practiced eye, noting the

various weaknesses and intuitively recognizing what would need the most reinforcement. It would hold.

He hoped.

At his side, Sergeant Reynolds waited patiently. The MACO had turned out to be pretty much useless when it came to this kind of work and both had come to the grudging realization that he was only helpful as an extra arm or some muscle. They'd exchanged only a few words, working mostly in silence. At least it was a comfortable silence, unlike any of the times Trip had to work alongside Amanda Cole these days. He almost sighed.

"So you and Commander T'Pol are pretty close, huh sir?" Reynolds asked out of the blue. Trip did sigh then; he'd been expecting this line of questioning from the MACO for quite a while now and had actually hoped that Reynolds would be different. He'd heard a variation of it every single time he and any MACO or Starfleet crewmen were alone. Except Sergeant Cole. She just gave him the hairy eyeball, like he'd done something wrong or pissed her off somehow though he had no idea what or how. *Women*, he grumbled to himself.

"Yeah," Trip replied as he studied the welding job with the hand-held scanner; it *seemed* pretty solid. "She's one of my best friends." He rattled off the answer by rote, wishing all along that he didn't need to lie. To be perfectly honest, he didn't want to hide their relationship, didn't want to conceal that they were pretty much married. Who cared if they were a couple any damned way?

The scorched features of Ensign Masaro leaped into his memory, answering that question like it always did. Terra Prime. Those xenophobic terrorists were a chapter of his life he wished he could close permanently. Just thinking of them reminded him of little Lizzie...

"Hmph," Reynolds said as Trip began gathering the tools into the tool bag. Tucker glanced up at him, hiding his concern behind a practiced expression of disinterest - his own personal Vulcan mask: that had sounded entirely too knowing.

"What?" he asked with no hint of the annoyance he was feeling. The MACO had the decency to look embarrassed when he responded.

"Just that *ashayam* is quite a bit different from *t'hai'la*." Reynolds hesitated, took in Tucker's blank yet shocked expression. "Sir."

"You speak Vulcan." It wasn't a question; the accent had been perfect, better than Trip's.

"Not according to my MACO records, sir." Reynolds gave him a tight smile; at least Trip understood the Professor nickname now. "Your secret's safe, Commander. We Florida boys have to stick together."

"I thought you went to OU," Tucker muttered; his brain was straining to find a believable

excuse for why T'Pol would call him 'beloved' in her native tongue. Pretty much everything that was springing to mind was ... well ... stupid.

"Born in Ocala, sir. Grew up in Gainesville; we moved to Oklahoma when I was twelve." Trip still had nothing. *Stall!* his brain told him. *You can make something up!* Maybe he did have a concussion; that would explain why he felt like he was thinking through mud.

"Really? I'm from Quincy. Loved goin' down to the Swamp to watch the Gators-"

He broke off in mid-sentence as a wave of agony washed through him. It felt like someone had hammered a spike of molten fire into his abdomen and then, just for spite, wiggled it around a bit. His every breath was torture, as if he were inhaling fire itself. Searing lava churned in his stomach, burning its way to his groin and back again. Acid seared through his veins, through his kidneys, through his intestines.

And just like that, the pain was gone.

Gasping with remembered shock, Trip found himself face down in the dirt, with Reynolds gripping his shoulder and calling his name. He drew in a ragged breath that sounded more like a gasp. *What the hell was that?*

"I'm okay," he muttered as he - unsteadily - climbed back to his feet with Reynolds' help. Understanding dawned almost instantly, framed by a lightning quick anger. "I'm okay," Trip repeated, his face reflecting a myriad of emotions all at the same time: anger, concern, fear, shock. He shoved the tool bag into Reynold's hands and fixed the MACO with an unblinking look. "Stay here," he commanded, the tone of his voice brooking no dissent. Reynolds reacted instinctively and very nearly snapped to attention, years of MACO discipline recognizing the absolute authority in the voice.

Breathing deeply and slowly, Trip lessened his presence in the bond, a skill that T'Pol had taken great pains to teach him out of concern that his more volatile emotions would upset her often delicate balance; he had taken to it like a fish to water, once again amazing his Vulcan mate. It had served him well in the past when he tried to spring surprises on her, like the shore leave he finagled out of the captain on Risa for the two of them a couple of months ago or the pajamas he picked up for her most recent birthday - although that really had been more for him than for her and he'd been right: she *did* look good in Triaxian silk; this time, it allowed him to step inside the shuttle before she could sense him.

At a glance - and that was all she gave him - Trip could tell something was wrong. Still seated in the pilot's chair, T'Pol was hunched over, her normally stiff posture abandoned as she leaned forward over the console. The moment his boots touched the pod's deck, she straightened, once more an image of perfect poise.

He didn't buy it for a minute.

Kneeling down by the medkit, Tucker extracted a specific hypospray and slid it up his sleeve before standing and walking in her direction. It was an effort but he kept himself under control, maintained the distance between him and the emotions swirling in his gut. He'd learned a lot of things from her.

"Are the repairs complete?" she asked without glancing back as Trip strode up to stand behind her.

"Mostly," Trip replied, eying her handiwork on the comm system. Frankly, he wasn't impressed; as far as he could tell, she hadn't accomplished a damned thing. *Probably meditating to control the pain*, he thought angrily to himself.

"I have been unable to restore communications," she informed him, icily precise. Her formality only served to worry him more; with her sense of smell and hearing, T'Pol had to know they were the only ones on the pod. The only conscious ones anyway.

"Don't worry about it," Trip said flatly. He saw her register his tone and tense ever so slightly. "You lied to me, darlin'," he said softly as he leaned over her shoulder, his mouth mere centimeters from her ear. She turned to face him, their noses nearly touching, and raised her perfect eyebrow.

"How have I deceived you?" She sounded entirely too innocent and he frowned, his eyes narrowing.

"You said you were fine. Aside from the broken ribs and your leg." Anger was starting to leak into his voice.

"I *am* fine." Now, T'Pol was frowning.

"Then why the hell does my stomach hurt?" Trip almost snapped, his unblinking gaze boring into her. She blinked, her eyes darting away almost furtively; he'd seen that only once before, the morning after they had sex for the first time when she had lied about what it meant to her. Now, many years later, he knew her well enough to read what she was trying to keep concealed from him: T'Pol was uncomfortable - she had been caught in a lie and knew it. "It's not my pain I'm feelin', is it?" he asked, and she swallowed, a visible indication of her state of mind.

"A minor injury. It's nothing for you to be concerned about." Once more, the anger swelled; how could a woman this brilliant be so ... so mind-numbingly stupid at times?

"Bullshit." She blinked at his language; Trip was rarely that vulgar around her, knowing that she didn't appreciate it. Especially after that conversation she had with his mom. "If I can feel it, then it sure as hell isn't minor!" With a guilty look in her eyes, she glanced away and, the moment her eyes broke contact, he acted, letting the hypo slide into his palm so he could press it against her exposed neck. Almost instantly, her head snapped around, eyes narrowed

in something reasonably close to fury. "It's a painkiller, T'Pol."

"It was unnecessary, Commander," she nearly spat. Trip didn't blink, didn't look away as he replied.

"Then why do I feel better?" he asked, sounding vindicated. "Why do *you* feel better?" She looked away again, a light green flush spreading across her neck. He frowned again; she *never* blushed. It must be worse than he thought. "T'Pol, you're injured. You need to rest so I'm reliev'in' you of command." As he spoke, he dropped his hand on her shoulder like she had done to him so many times before.

"You do not have that authority, Mister Tucker," she returned as she stood. This close to her, he could see the effort it took her and that decided it for him; she was going to fight him the entire way, refuse to accept *real* medical attention and struggle on despite her obvious pain. Like a good trooper. Like a good Vulcan.

Like hell.

"You are my *mate*," Trip said firmly, emphasizing the Vulcan term; he was surprised to realize that they had slipped into her native tongue and he hadn't even realized it. "And I love you more than anything." She gave him a surprised look, not at the depth of his regard for her – she already knew that – but that he would say so out loud in the presence of other Starfleet or MACO personnel. Even unconscious ones. Her eyes darted away, looking to find Sergeant Reynolds and Trip smiled as he inched his hand closer to his target. "But I won't let you die, darlin'." He squeezed the bundle of nerves.

Too late, T'Pol understood what he had done; her gaze snapped to his and he felt her surprised outrage through the suddenly active bond in that moment of realization. Her expression had a clear meaning: *I can't believe you just did that!* Without a sound, though, her eyes rolled back and she slumped forward into his arms, completely oblivious to the world. Trip blinked as he held onto her.

"Well, I'll be damned," he muttered. "It worked!"



It just wasn't working.

Travis had spent the last five minutes trying desperately to focus exclusively on his board, to block out any fears about impending death, to pretend that he was indifferent about his fate but it wasn't working. In that short span of time, he had learned many things about himself, things that he hadn't really thought about before. He didn't want to die and more than anything else, he wanted to see Gannet again.

And yet, he found himself completely calm, despite knowing what was to come. It was really weird.

Under his direction, *Enterprise* crept from the asteroid belt at just over one-eighth impulse, trailing debris and warp plasma; he couldn't risk anything faster, what with the continual alerts he was receiving from the impulse drive. Not to mention, it was exceedingly stupid to fly really fast in an asteroid belt.

Actually, he reflected, it was pretty stupid to fly in an asteroid belt at all.

The bridge had been quiet since Phlox and Cole carried the captain and Hoshi to the lifeboat and Travis couldn't help but think how odd it was to be one of only two people on the command deck. Two living people anyway.

"Get to the lifeboat, Travis," Reed instructed calmly but Mayweather said nothing, kept his eyes on his board. He could almost feel Commander Reed's surprise at his unspoken refusal to obey. "That is an order, Lieutenant."

"You need a pilot, sir. The longer I'm here, the more people we can get to safety." He did look at Reed this time, speared the acting-captain with an unblinking expression. Mayweather's features were hard, resolute, unyielding. "I'm staying, Commander." Malcolm gave him a tight nod, his expression approving yet impossibly sad at the same time. "Once more unto the breach and all that, sir," Travis offered with a smile, exhausting his supply of the Bard and then only because Tucker had gotten on a Shakespeare kick for Movie Night a couple of weeks earlier. Reed returned the smile with one of his own.

"We band of brothers..." Malcolm quoted softly, his mask of professionalism cracking ever so slightly for the briefest of moments; he gave Travis a nod and keyed the intraship comm. "All hands, brace for impact. Core ejection in forty seconds. Do not launch lifeboats until core detonation." He paused for a moment. "Good luck." *Enterprise* rocked suddenly as the Romulan began accelerating from the asteroid belt, disruptor bursts reaching out to slash through what little hull plating remained. Alarms begin flashing on Mayweather's board.

"He's going for the impulse manifold," Travis realized.

"I know." Reed was a rock as he studied the sensor feed at his station, speaking with a Vulcan's indifference. "Come about to heading ... two-five mark zero, best speed."

Like a crippled bird, *Enterprise* sluggishly responded to Mayweather's touch, maneuvering thrusters firing to alter their trajectory. The Romulan ship took the bait, sliding into a trailing position that was almost directly aft of *Enterprise's* impulse drive. A soft beeping began sounding from the tactical board; the Romulan was acquiring a torpedo lock.

"*Ave imperator, morituri te salutant,*" Reed muttered. It sounded like he was quoting something but Travis didn't have a clue what it was or what it meant. Given what he knew of

the tactical officer, it was probably some ancient battle cry, a 'come get some' sort of thing. If the situation was any less grim, Mayweather would have smiled and teased him about it; Malcolm Reed did *not* quote dead languages. Clearly Hoshi's love of language had rubbed off on the dour Brit whether he knew it or not. "Bridge to Engineering."

"Kel ... by..." It hurt just listening to the engineer and Travis couldn't imagine the pain he was in; stabs of guilt surged through him once more and he felt like crap for ever doubting Kelby.

"Eject the core," Malcolm ordered without any hint of regret at the engineer's loss. His mask was back in place.

Kelby gave no acknowledgment that he actually heard the command but *Enterprise* shuddered, lurching forward as she spat the warp core free. Even as he coaxed more speed out of the battered Starfleet vessel, Travis reflected on his lack of knowledge; he hadn't even known you *could* eject a breached warp core, had always assumed that a ship was lost if the containment field was compromised.

The core tumbled end over end in the hard vacuum, deceptively fragile-looking for such a powerful object. No longer surrounded by the containment field, its collapse accelerated at an exponentially increasing rate. Too late, the Romulan craft recognized its danger. Too late, it twisted into a dive, engines screaming in a frenzied attempt to get clear. Too late, it began targeting its weapons.

Too late.

With a blinding flash that could be seen at the very outskirts of the system, the breached core detonated. Shockwaves of raw concussive force radiated outward from the explosion, slamming into the Romulan ship with hull-crushing power. Its nacelles smashed or torn free, the small warship was sent reeling.

Back into the asteroid field.

It bounced off of several shuttlepod-sized rocks, each impact only serving to accelerate its mad spin into the field. Huge chunks of metal were torn free as the ship began to break apart and still it spun uncontrollably. Moving at slightly less than one-quarter impulse, it struck a Texas-sized asteroid and vanished in a flash of fire.

Exactly two point three seconds later, the shockwave reached *Enterprise*.



"*Enterprise*, do you copy? This is Shuttlepod One."

Silence answered his hails, a hush so complete that Trip couldn't help but to fear the worst.

Even if she had been on the periphery of the system, *Enterprise* should have been able to respond, should have been able to detect the shuttle's departure from New Elysium.

If she was able.

Trip reached down, popped open the comm access panel and began studying the circuits within. He was confident that his earlier repairs had been sufficient, was positive that everything was functional, but it never hurt to double-check. Or, in this case, quadruple-check. Standing at his back, Sergeant Reynolds shifted awkwardly. Little had been said since Trip had "relieved" T'Pol, little needed to be said. Reynolds had seen Tucker's face when the engineer finished the med-scan on the Vulcan, had witnessed the soul-wrenching terror in Trip's expression, had understood their sudden urgency.

A crackle of static emerged from the comm speakers and Trip looked up, glanced at the board once more. Everything was functioning properly. His face remained creased in a frown as he hit the transmit button again.

"*Enterprise*, this is Commander Tucker. Medical emergency, repeat medical emergency. Please respond."

A distant flash abruptly filled the viewport and Trip felt his stomach lurch as he recognized it at once. He immediately began mental calculations: yield of the explosion determined from the size of the detonation, distance to the epicenter, estimated time to that point at their maximum speed. Anyone who knew him just as the 'good ole boy' engineer who seemed to run his department by the seat of his pants would have been stunned at the analytical nature of his thoughts, the almost Vulcan-like precision he applied to his thought processes.

T'Pol hadn't been surprised in the slightest.

"What was that?" Reynolds asked.

"Breached warp core gone critical," Trip replied softly. His fingers danced over the sensor board; they weren't much, especially after the crash, but might give him an idea of what had happened.

"Does that mean-?" The MACO did a good job of keeping his sudden fear reined in but Tucker could still hear it. Trip wished that he could share it but his thoughts, his fears were elsewhere, somewhere ... closer.

"No way to tell," he said, his tone composed and even. By Tucker's estimation, the core had been ejected before it exploded - the detonation was simply too visible for it to have occurred on-ship. The sensor board beeped as it detected a profile matching the one he was looking for. Tension drained from him faster than when *his* Vulcan applied neuropressure and he felt years younger. There was still time.

Enterprise was still there.

"Strap in," Trip ordered as he set a course. There was still time. *Hold on, T'Pol. Just a little longer.* There was no response, no hint that she had heard the mental plea, no clue that she was even aware of his presence. He could feel only one thing through the bond, a singular sensation that seemed to radiate from her, that threatened to crush his self-control and send him spiraling into despair.

He felt pain.



Pain hammered through him, a liquid fire that burned through his lower extremities, searing away feeling, scorching away hope. A bleak numbness had set in, blanketing his mind with a dull fog that made thinking hard and acting harder.

Malcolm Reed was dying.

He floated in a hazy twilight of near consciousness, that half-awake, half-asleep state where dreams and lucidity warred with one another. A part of him knew how badly he was injured, knew that the twenty centimeter long piece of shrapnel in his lower ribcage was slowly killing him, knew that blood loss and shock were setting in, but he couldn't find the strength to care. The end was near.

Blaring alarms continued to echo around him, oddly muted, as if originating from an impossibly vast distance. He felt something wet on his face and, for a moment, thought it was blood; the hiss of the fire suppression system finally penetrated his mental fog and, had he the strength, he would have chastised himself for jumping to conclusions. Smoke was heavy in the air - burnt plastic and fried circuits - making it difficult to breath. Oxygen reclamators - those that weren't damaged - struggled to filter out the smoke but he could tell it was a losing battle.

"Get on your feet, boy."

It was a voice that should not, *could not* be here, a voice that rang with authority and tolerated no insolence. Logically, Malcolm knew Stuart Reed wasn't here, knew that he *couldn't* be here, but that didn't stop him from feeling the Old Man's presence. *It must be the shock,* he told himself, darkly amused that now, at the moment of his death, he heard his father.

"Pain is just weakness leaving the body, boy. Life is pain. You're a Reed and Reeds die on their feet, not on their backs like some bloody frog so get up!" Malcolm stirred, flailed about for a grip before sinking back down into his misery, his agony. The shade, the memory, the hallucination wasn't impressed: "GET UP!"

Malcolm got up.

He swayed on his feet, gripping the edge of the tactical board with a death grip to keep from falling back on his arse. Long minutes passed as he fought the blackness that sought to overwhelm him, fought the desire to vomit up every meal he had ever eaten, fought the urge to give up and die. His heart thudded in his ears, loud and fast, and he dimly realized that he had no feeling in his feet. Blood ran down his leg but he ignored the pain, pushed it away. He could not falter; he was the captain now.

So he struggled on.

If the bridge had been bad off before, it was a bloody catastrophe now; the damage wrought by the shockwave was incalculable. Alarms shrieked incessantly. Fires raged unchecked. The viewscreen was a shattered mess. Mayweather was down.

Travis.

Malcolm half-staggered, half-fell to the Helm station, his heart rate accelerating even faster, already knowing it was too late. He was a private man, one who had erected walls of aloofness around himself to avoid getting too close to anyone for fear of losing them. There were a select few who had breached that wall, who he could truly call 'friend': Trip Tucker and Hoshi Sato were two such people.

Travis Mayweather was another.

Malcolm fell into a kneeling position beside the Boomer's still body and felt hot tears well up in his eyes. Glass and metal from the destroyed viewscreen had torn into the young lieutenant, had ripped through skin and flesh and bone, but Travis had an expression of peace on his face, a look of contented serenity that shattered Malcolm's resolve. He wanted to rage against the heavens, to cry out and scream, to grieve in a way that Travis deserved, but he couldn't find the strength, couldn't find the will, couldn't find the tears.

"... *terprise* ... nder Tucker. Medical emer ... eat med ... gency. Please respo ..." The comm crackled to life and the sound of Trip's voice thundered through him, igniting hope once more. Trip was alive.

So he struggled on.

Malcolm pulled himself into the Helm seat, barely noticing the crimson trail he left. A soft touch on the helm board revealed it to be mostly functional: internal sensors indicated that most of the lifeboats had launched; low impulse was available - one-eighth at best; maneuvering jets were ... erratic. The sensor feed was shaky, flickering in and out of focus, but he was able to detect the shuttlepod on approach vector. And then, something else.

A Romulan ship.

Confusion muddled his brain for long moments as he struggled to make sense of it. He had destroyed them all. Hadn't he? He frowned then, recalling the third ship, the damaged ship that had limped away. It was the same one, still limping at less than a sixteenth impulse.

And heading for the shuttlepod.

Malcolm didn't hesitate, keyed in an intercept course and demanded speed; he could hear the impulse drive whine in protest but ignored it. There were no phase cannons functional, no grapplers available, no torpedoes loaded, but he still had a weapon. A very large weapon.

The Romulan detected *Enterprise's* sudden acceleration and began maneuvering to bring its weapons to bear. Disruptor beams lanced out, caressing the already scarred hull of the Starfleet ship with its scorching touch but it was too little, too late. *Enterprise* smashed into the Romulan ship at nearly ten thousand kilometers per second.

Fire consumed them both.

ACT FIVE

Columbia wasn't moving fast enough.

Seated in her Command Chair, Erika Hernandez glared at the blank viewscreen as she silently urged her ship to go faster, to push the envelope a bit farther than they already were. For the briefest of moments, she contemplated giving the order to increase their current speed, to coax just a little more out of the already straining engines, but discarded the idea at once. They would be no help to *Enterprise* if she burned up their warp drive.

If there still *was* an *Enterprise*.

Nearly ten hours had passed since the sudden communique from Admiral Gardner, nine hours and fifty-three minutes since he had informed her that *Enterprise* may be walking into a Romulan ambush and that he could not regain communication with Archer, nine hours and fifty-two minutes since she ordered Hess to push the warp drive harder than it had been pushed before, harder than it was ever intended to be pushed. Official Starfleet specs stated *Columbia* could hold a maximum warp factor of 5.125 for just over an hour.

They'd been redlining at 5.5 for nine and a half.

"Six minutes," her XO announced from the TAC board and Erika felt the tension on the bridge spike. With a nod, she turned her attention to her communications officer.

"Anything, Pilar?" Hernandez asked, easily concealing her growing concern that they would arrive too late to help *Enterprise*, too late to help Jonathan. It was essential that she appeared calm, in control, rational.

Even if she was dying inside.

"No ma'am," Ensign Benitez responded and Erika frowned. At this range, they should be able to get something, some sort of outgoing signal, even if it was just a passive comm-link. Her eyes jumped to her XO once more.

"Tactical alert," she ordered and Commander Cross nodded in acknowledgment of the command. Around them, lights dimmed as the weapons systems and defensive suites sucked up energy. It might be overkill, going in loaded for bear when they didn't know what was going on, but Erika had learned since launching from Spacedock just how cold, how hostile the universe could be.

"Dropping out of warp," Ensign du Bois announced from the Helm station exactly six minutes after Cross had last spoken.

"Tac-Ops," Erika demanded as *Columbia* slowed to impulse. It was one of the idiosyncrasies that marked her as different from so many other starship captains, that she preferred to have

a tactical display of the immediate area surrounding her ship instead of a visual of the target zone. The last year had been a grim reality check, one that had transformed her from an explorer into a soldier. She hated that.

"I read ... one displacement, ma'am," Lieutenant Commander Jansen said from the science board, her voice smooth and clear. "Scanning ... hull composition matches ... it's *Enterprise*." Erika let loose a breath she had not known she was holding and, from the sound, she wasn't the only one. Jansen continued, her tone suddenly bleak. "I'm reading heavy damage on *Enterprise*, minimal power."

"Action stations," Hernandez barked, her eyes not leaving the Tac-Ops display on the main viewscreen; it was little more than a 2D representation of the immediate area - only about 25,000 kilometers total - but was better than going in blind. Already, she was formulating battle plans and possible escape routes. Alarms began sounding throughout *Columbia* as personnel not already on alert raced to their duty stations. "Life signs?" she asked the science officer.

"Indeterminate," Jansen replied, her eyes glued to the sensor feed. "We're not close enough, ma'am, and there's some serious interference."

"On screen," Erika ordered. The viewscreen flickered as the Tac-Ops display transformed to a distant shot of their sister vessel and someone gasped in shock; she wasn't entirely sure that it hadn't been her.

Enterprise was a wreck. It drifted without power in a massive debris field that could only have come from another starship. Nearly half of the saucer section was simply ... gone, missing as if some great stellar beast had taken a huge bite out of the prow of the starship, a bite that extended through five decks. The port nacelle had been completely destroyed and the starboard one was dark, leaking warp plasma even now; less than a quarter of the starboard pylon remained intact, damaged, no doubt, by the exploding nacelle on the port side. Gaping holes in the outer hull revealed massive internal damage and jagged scars had been carved across her surface.

And yet, swarming around the ravaged starship were dozens of lifeboats. Hernandez felt a surge of hope well up within her, felt it struggle with the rage that simmered there.

"Someone's alive," she declared with a tight smile. "XO, have emergency teams standing by." Erika didn't even try to hide the giddy relief in her voice as she blinked away tears. "Helm, set an intercept course, maximum impulse. Science, maintain sensor sweeps; I don't want anyone sneaking up on us." She paused. "Comm, get me Starfleet Command."

There was still hope.



There was no hope. Hope had died with Malcolm.

Hoshi Sato knelt on the deck plating, her eyes looking but not seeing, her heart fractured beyond repair, her mind numbed by grief. Around her, the sounds of repair crews hard at work echoed loudly but she did not hear them, was unaware of the sad looks she received as she caressed Malcolm's cold hand, didn't see the understanding on the faces of the *Columbia* crewmen assigned to the body collection detail. She wanted to cry...

But there were no tears left.

She wasn't even supposed to be here, in this temporary morgue, not with her injuries, but she couldn't find it in herself to actually care, couldn't dredge up any desire to be elsewhere. Her place was here. With Malcolm.

It wasn't really a morgue, just an empty cargo bay being used for that purpose, but she doubted that she would ever be able to look at a cargo bay in the same way. There had been no other choice in the matter; the medbay, damaged or not, had never been equipped to handle this many casualties.

And there had been so many casualties...

Hoshi knew that she was stronger than this, knew that she would survive and emerge stronger than before, but in this moment, she couldn't think of the future, couldn't imagine life without Malcolm. Unconsciously, she released his arm and splayed her hand across her stomach. Her child, their child would never know his or her father, would never see the glint of mischief in Malcolm's eyes when Trip convinced him to do something ... improper, would never hear Malcolm's laughter or see his smile or...

She drew in a deep breath and tried to focus on the PADD that Captain Tucker had given her. He wasn't actually a captain - not yet, anyway - but most of the surviving *Enterprise* crew had taken to addressing him like one after *Columbia* had arrived. Word that Starfleet planned to frock him and give him command of the NX-06 when they got back to Earth had made the rounds at faster than warp speed; she'd heard him complaining about that, wondering if there was some way to bottle the rumor mill and use it instead of a warp drive. Hoshi wanted to smile, knowing that Trip would make an excellent captain, knowing that T'Pol would go with him when she recovered, that together they would be greater than apart, but she couldn't find any strength.

She felt empty.

Her attention finally centered back on the PADD and she spent long minutes staring at it without comprehending what it actually said. It was a marriage certificate, signed by Acting-Captain Charles Tucker, witnessed by Doctor Phlox, Lieutenant Burke, and Sergeant Cole. A marriage certificate that stated she and Malcolm were newlyweds, that, by Starfleet law, she

was his next-of-kin and entitled to his belongings, to his name. Trip hadn't officially submitted it to *Enterprise's* computers but a subroutine written into the PADD would backdate it if she clicked the Submit button.

If.

"It's your decision, Hoshi," Trip had said when he gave her the PADD hours ago. "I know Mal wanted you to be his wife and not just 'cause you're pregnant." That had shocked her momentarily out of her grief; she didn't know that Malcolm had told anyone and Phlox wouldn't have. She had started to protest, to point out that Reed hadn't proposed until after she revealed her pregnancy but Tucker had smiled an impossibly sad smile and told her something that shook her world: "Hosh, he bought that ring six months ago."

Submit or Delete. In the end, it came down to those two words. She wished she knew what to do. She wished she knew why it was so hard to decide. She wished...

Another memory came to her, this time of Phlox as he cautioned Commander Tucker against stopping the crew from calling him 'captain.' Hoshi hadn't meant to eavesdrop but everyone always forgot that her hearing was nearly as acute as T'Pol's.

"Most sentients need to have hope, need to know that something good comes out of a tragedy," the Denobulan doctor had told Trip, giving him an annoyingly cheerful smile that looked - even to Hoshi's eyes - forced. "Let the crew see your impending promotion as one of those good things. Give them hope again."

Hope. She had none for herself anymore. Malcolm was gone. Forever.

Somehow, she had always known he would die in service, would be killed defending others, would come home on his shield instead of carrying it. His was a life of danger, the life of a soldier trained to kill with little more than his bare hands. Hands that had touched her and made her feel alive. She couldn't remember feeling anything anymore. She wanted to go home.

"Hosh, he bought that ring six months ago."

She stared at the screen for a very long time.



He had stared at the screen for far too long.

Phlox leaned back in the seat, relaxing for the first time in over twenty-three hours, and immediately felt a wave of fatigue wash over him. He was...nine? ten? hours into his scheduled sleep cycle and had been relying heavily on stimulants to keep himself awake and

alert for much of that time. His hesitation about using another was grounded in more than simple dislike for them though; Phlox had no desire for his reliance on stims to turn into a full blown case of addiction and he was already treading dangerously close to overuse. Rubbing the bridge of his nose in a curiously human manner, he studied *Columbia's* medbay.

They had transferred the most critical patients here as soon as *Columbia* arrived in-system; even with the transfer of the recovering patients, such as Lieutenant Sato, to the temporary recovery ward that had been the Mess Hall, space was at a premium. Simply put, there were too few beds and far too many patients.

He almost sighed.

The ping of a biobed alarm drew his immediate attention and he hurried to Captain Archer's bed; Commander Tucker had momentarily abandoned his vigil at T'Pol's side and stood cautiously at his friend's side, anxiously watching. Phlox gave him a reassuring smile as he studied the biobed's readout carefully: the Captain was waking up again.

"Trip?" Archer's voice was slurred and his eyes unfocused, an unfortunate but entirely expected side effect of the powerful painkillers he was on. That he was even aware of his friend's presence was astounding.

"Right here, sir," Tucker quickly responded, dropping his hand onto his captain's good shoulder. "How ya doin'?" he asked with a forced grin. "'Cause you look like crap." Archer gave him a weak smile.

"I feel okay ..." The captain's words trailed off and Phlox double-checked the biobed's readouts; Archer's vitals remained strong. "*Enterprise?*" Tucker visibly winced before replying and Phlox thought it a good thing that the captain was too out of it to notice.

"Don't worry about it, sir; I've got everything under control." He squeezed Archer's shoulder again, a gesture conveying his concern. "You just focus on gettin' better, okay?" The captain smiled again.

"Okay..." Unconsciousness rolled back over him and he slept once more. Tucker glanced up at Phlox, his face creased with concern.

"Is this normal? Him driftin' in and out like this?"

"Absolutely," Phlox nodded, noting the sheer exhaustion on Tucker's face. "When did you sleep last, Commander?" The engineer shrugged, his eyes drifting away from Archer and back to T'Pol's face. She was three beds away, silent and unmoving but still alive.

"Dunno," Tucker replied. "Too much to do." He frowned, his eyes locked on the Vulcan's sleeping form, and when he spoke, his words were soft, meant only for Phlox's ears. "And how can I sleep while she's hurt?" The pain in his voice cut like a laser.

"Please, Mister Tucker, you must remain calm."

"Calm?" He drew a ragged breath as tears sprang into his eyes and anger leaked into his voice. "How the hell am I supposed to be calm after you tell me she can't have kids?" Phlox opened his mouth to correct the engineer, to remind him that he had merely said he was *uncertain* if T'Pol could bear a child, that the fracture of her pelvic ring was extremely severe - not to mention the inherent difficulty in cross-species mating, but Tucker was oblivious, momentarily lost in his grief, grief that he had been keeping contained for far too long. "I've been sittin' in here for God knows how long, feelin' like absolute shit 'cause Malcolm...'cause some of my best damned friends just died and all I can think about is how much I wanted to see Lorian again and you want me to be calm?" A sudden whimper - a feminine whimper - snapped Tucker out of his growing tirade and he reacted even before Phlox had completely recognized the sound. Taking two long strides, Commander Tucker crossed the distance to T'Pol's biobed and reached out to touch her arm; she stilled almost immediately, soothed by more than just his mere physical presence. If Phlox hadn't already known about their bond from careful observation, her reaction would have confirmed any suspicions.

"For your *mate's* sake," Phlox whispered to him. "You must remain calm! Your emotional state affects hers as well!" The engineer gave him a wide-eyed stare, abruptly realizing he was ranting about private matters in a very public location. Phlox smiled comfortingly at him. "I must admit," the doctor said, "I'm a little surprised the two of you have discussed children already." Tucker smiled bitterly.

"Hell, doc," he replied, reaching out to stroke T'Pol's face; he caught himself before doing so, no doubt remembering that they were in public, and merely brushed some hair from her closed eyes. "We've been talkin' about kids since..." His words trailed off and another infinitely sad look flashed across his face. Phlox knew at once who he was thinking of.

"Elizabeth." Tucker nodded, lowering himself into the uncomfortable visiting chair.

"Yeah." He did stroke her face this time. "Guess it's just not meant to be," Trip muttered softly, sadly, and Phlox felt his heart break.

In that moment, he made a pact with himself, swearing to whatever higher powers there existed in this universe that he would dedicate the rest of his life if need be to see that this couple - his friends - could be parents. *Whatever it takes*, he promised as he patted Trip on the shoulder and moved away; there were other patients to check on.

Minutes - or perhaps it was hours; he had lost track of time once more - later, the door to the sickbay slid open, allowing Captain Hernandez entry, and Phlox forced a wan smile onto his face. She gave him a slight nod, taking in the vaguely funereal silence without comment; her eyes automatically sought out the unconscious Captain Archer and Phlox saw the unmistakable concern of a woman for her lover. *How interesting*, he thought to himself as she frowned.

"Hello, Captain," Phlox greeted her, not moving from where he monitored Petty Officer Fuller's erratic vital signs. He hoped that surgery would not again be necessary.

"Doctor," she said in response. Another frown came to her and Phlox couldn't help but note how...militaristic her bearing had become since he last interacted with her. The last year must have been hard on *Columbia*. "Doctor Hayes isn't here?" Her tone was tinged with annoyance; apparently, she expected *Columbia's* chief medical officer to be more than human.

"I sent her to her quarters," he replied with forced cheerfulness. "An exhausted doctor is a useless doctor," Phlox said, a rueful grin on his face. Hernandez gave him an appraising look. "Christine will relieve me in..." He glanced at the wall chronometer. "Three hours." The captain nodded.

"I'm looking for Commander Tucker," she said and Phlox gestured toward the engineer as he spoke, his eyes still riveted on Fuller's vitals.

"Can it wait, Captain? Mister Tucker has been awake for over forty hours and needs to rest." She started to reply but hesitated, blinked, and then offered a slight smile that softened her features. Phlox glanced at Tucker and fought his own grin. *It's about time!* he thought to himself.

Still seated in the visitor's chair, the engineer had finally dozed off, the accumulated stress and grief having taken its toll at long last. Instead of reclining in his seat, however, Tucker had leaned forward to rest his head on T'Pol's biobed; using his left forearm as a pillow, he breathed deeply and evenly, in perfect unison with the Vulcan, the doctor realized. Even though she was heavily sedated, T'Pol abruptly shifted closer to Trip, her left hand seeking his right, and her entire body seemed to soften toward him. Staring at their intertwined fingers, Phlox realized that, for the first time in far too long, both appeared to be completely at peace. A remarkable image, he thought to himself with a smile.

"Well," Hernandez muttered under her in breath, her comments not intended to be heard by Phlox. "That explains why he wanted to get back to *Enterprise*." She didn't sound annoyed or even particularly surprised and for that, Phlox was relieved. Glancing back at him, her expression became serious once more. "What's the butcher's bill, Doctor?" she asked and he nearly frowned; he'd heard that expression before and had hated it at once. In this one instance, however, it seemed absolutely appropriate.

"Thirty-nine." Hernandez almost winced and glanced away, no doubt thinking about the crew on her own ship and putting faces to that number. "There are still seventeen criticals and nearly everyone else is injured."

"How's Jon?" she asked softly.

"Captain Archer has suffered serious injuries that will take a considerable amount of time to

recover from." He gave her a smile to counterbalance this information. "But he *will* recover."

"And Commander Tucker?" The relief in her voice that Archer would make it was telling.

"Ah, Mister Tucker." Phlox smiled again, amused despite himself. "It appears that the commander has somehow miraculously escaped injury." He paused, then smiled again as he recalled the engineer's explanation. "I believe he referred to it as the law of averages working in *his* benefit for once." Hernandez shook her head in amusement.

"What about Commander T'Pol?" she asked curiously, her eyes drifting back to the unexpected scene of a Vulcan deriving comfort from the presence of a human. It was fortunate, Phlox mused, that she looked away when she did; it prevented her from noticing the brief expression of sadness that flashed over his face.

"Her injuries are not life threatening," he answered cryptically. Hernandez gave him a look. From her expression, she expected him to elaborate but he said nothing more, merely gave her a blank look that gave away nothing.

"Will she recover?" Hernandez pressed and he studied her for a moment.

"Time will tell, Captain." he told her, smiling his inhuman smile.



Smiling was too much effort.

Arms clasped at the small of his back, Trip Tucker stood before the viewport, jaw aching from the fierce grimace that he wore on his face. He stared at the image before him, unblinking and unmoving. A part of him was screaming to turn away, to close his eyes to the nightmarish scenario being played out in the hard vacuum of space, but doing so would have felt like betrayal.

Nacelles dark, *Enterprise* drifted. She was a shattered wreck now, incapable of supporting life for even a minute and hazardous even to the repair crews. In the three days since *Columbia's* arrival, four members of the salvage crew had been injured during rescue operations, forcing Captain Hernandez, as the ranking officer in-system, to order everyone from the NX-01.

Trip had been the last one to leave.

Even now, he felt anger warring with despair as he studied what remained of *Enterprise*. For nearly ten years, she had been his one true love, and the starship had been a jealous mistress. His relationship with Natalie had fallen apart because of his obsession, and, in his less rational moments, he had wondered if his relationship with T'Pol would suffer the same fate. Even before the first duranium bulkhead had been crafted, or the first seam welded, Tucker

had eaten, breathed and dreamed of *Enterprise*.

And now, she was gone.

The door annunciator chirped, and Trip scowled darkly before glancing toward the entrance.

"Enter," he snapped, even as his eyes returned to the unmoving husk of a ship.

"Shouldn't you be resting?" Captain Hernandez asked the moment she entered the cabin, and Trip grunted in response. Phlox had ordered him to quarters, going so far as to prescribe a sedative, but Tucker had insisted it wasn't necessary. That wasn't entirely a lie: Trip was so tired that he knew he'd fall asleep the minute his head hit the pillow, but he couldn't tear his attention from the ship he'd abandoned.

His ship.

"We've received word from Starfleet Command," Hernandez continued after a moment, evidently realizing that Trip wasn't going to reply. It was enough to draw his notice, and he shifted his attention to her reflection. "These ... Romulans nuked three other colonies," she revealed grimly. "As well as the Salem One station, Deep Space Two and Cold Station Five." She paused for a moment, visibly reigning in her anger. "The Vulcans have dispatched a ship to help tow *Enterprise* back to Earth. It should be here in seventy hours."

"Good." Trip couldn't manage more than that and his eyes drifted back to the dead ship beyond the viewport. He could sense Hernandez's study of him, but made no comment. Finally, she spoke.

"Jon is awake," she stated, and once more, he shifted his attention back to her reflection. "And I think he wants to talk to you." Grimacing slightly, Tucker turned slowly from the viewport, straightening his uniform as he did so. More than anywhere else, he didn't want to go to Sickbay right now.

It was ironic, he mused, that one of his best friends was a physician, yet Tucker couldn't stand the too familiar smell that seemed almost universal at every medical facility around the galaxy. Admittedly, he had far too many negative memories associated with sickbay to be entirely unbiased, whether it was the shock of learning that he was pregnant because of putting his fingers in a bowl of rocks, or discovering the hows and whys of Sim's short life, or watching an unexpected but not unwanted daughter slowly slip away and not being able to do anything about it. More recently, Phlox's pronouncement that T'Pol might not be able to have children only added to Trip's growing hatred of medical facilities.

Exhaling softly, Tucker forced a smile on his face as he tried to suppress the emotions that suddenly threatened to overwhelm him. T'Pol needed him to be positive right now, and Doctor Phlox had pointed out that he wouldn't know for certain until the Vulcan healed. Besides, as T'Pol had argued, they could always adopt when the time came, or use the same

process that had birthed Elizabeth. *Focus on the positive*, Trip ordered himself as Captain Hernandez preceded him out of the cabin.

His smile faltered slightly at the number of *Enterprise* personnel assembled in the medical bay, and Trip felt his mouth go dry. Every one of them was eyeing him, and more often than not weren't even trying to hide their smile. Phlox was standing before Hoshi Sato, currently seated in an uncomfortable-looking wheelchair. Jonathan Archer was lying still upon his biobed, dressed in an ugly one-piece hospital gown. Despite his apparent weakness – he *had* just undergone surgery, after all – Jon was grinning, and the smile was so bright it robbed him of several decades. For a few moments, the war weary veteran that Trip had served under for years now was gone, replaced by the eager commander who had wanted to prove to the galaxy that humanity *was* ready for the stars.

Trip gave his old friend a quick nod before turning his eyes to T'Pol. Stretched out atop her bed, she looked tired, but in otherwise good shape. Like Archer, she was wearing the hospital gown, but, in Trip's opinion, it looked *much* better on her than the captain. She gave him that not-there smile of hers as he approached, and Tucker returned it with a slight smile of his own.

"Couldn't convince them to let you out of bed, huh?" he asked flippantly. The Vulcan quirked an eyebrow in response.

"Obviously not," she retorted. Their fingers touched – discreetly, of course – and he felt the flood of her emotions swell through the bond. She was exhausted, he realized, and more annoyed about being ordered to remain in bed than she appeared. Her concern over his own tired appearance made him smile again.

"Commander Tucker," Jon said abruptly, speaking in a formal if somewhat raspy tone, and Trip felt his stomach twist slightly when he realized why Archer had wanted him present. After all of the missteps he'd taken in his career, Tucker had given up the distant dream of ever experiencing this, and now that it had come, he realized that he still wasn't ready for it. He shoved aside the butterflies that were playing football in his stomach, and walked the short distance to where Archer reclined. On the other side of the captain's bed, Hoshi straightened in her wheelchair and lifted a PADD. Without being told to, Trip assumed the position of attention before his commanding officer, and Jon nodded to Sato.

"Attention to Orders!" Hoshi said loudly. To Trip's mild embarrassment, the nurses and orderlies in sickbay snapped to attention with a loud *clack* of boots striking. Every one of the wounded officers and enlisted personnel who could walk did the same, and Tucker could feel his ears reddening. Even the bedridden crewmen straightened.

"The President of United Earth," Sato continued, "has reposed special trust and confidence in the patriotism, valor, and fidelity of Commander Charles Tucker the Third." As she paused, Archer smiled and reached into his hospital gown pocket, wincing with each movement. He removed a small box, and nodded discreetly to Hoshi. She continued. "In view of these

qualities," the lieutenant declared, "and his demonstrated potential for increased responsibility, he is, therefore, promoted to the rank of captain, effective 15 March 2156."

"Bend down here," Archer ordered with a broad grin. Trip knelt, feeling a rush of emotion that was not his. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see T'Pol watching from her bed, eyes glittering with pride. "These were mine," Archer revealed as he extracted the four pip rank insignia. "And I want you to have them."

"Thank you, sir," Trip whispered softly. His voice cracked slightly as he spoke, and his old friend grinned once more. Without further comment, Archer removed the commander's rank from Tucker's uniform and pinned on the four pips.

"Congratulations, *Captain* Tucker," Jon said loudly, offering his hand. The moment that Trip took it, the assembled patients and caregivers broke out into applause. Phlox was especially vocal, going so far as to attempt a whistle. The doctor quickly abandoned the attempt, however, when both T'Pol and Hoshi winced, and shot him identical looks of annoyance.

"Detachment, present arms!" a familiar voice shouted, and the ten MACOs present saluted crisply. From where she stood at their forefront, Sergeant Amanda Cole offered a tight smile. "Order arms!" she ordered, and the salutes were lowered just as sharply. Cole strode forward, offering her hand. In the back of his head, Trip felt T'Pol's irrational dislike of the sergeant, even though she knew that Amanda was hardly a threat.

It made him smile.

"Congratulations, Captain," Cole said. Her grip was slightly stronger than Trip's, and his smile faded slightly.

A dizzying number of *Enterprise* crewmembers wanted to offer their own congratulations, and every one of them asked if Trip had a place for them on *Endeavour* once the NX-06 launched. Every single one. It left him reeling in mild shock that they trusted him enough to ship out under his command. He lost track of how many times he shook hands with someone he barely knew, or promised that yes, there was a berth on *Endeavour* for them.

"You look shell shocked," Jon told him after things settled down, and Trip gave him a nod.

"That's 'cause I am," he replied. "Never would have expected all of them to want to go back out there," Tucker continued. "Not after what happened..."

"They trust you," T'Pol pointed out from her bed. Her mood had soured since the ceremony; Phlox had steadfastly refused to allow her to stand in order to offer her own congratulations, and had even threatened to have her sedated if she tried.

"I still don't see why they didn't promote you," Trip said. That wasn't entirely true, though. He did understand the reason behind that, even if he didn't agree with it. As a relative newcomer

to Starfleet, T'Pol didn't have the requisite time in service to be given her own command, even if she had more time in space than most of the admirals. There had nearly been a revolt in the officer corps when Admiral Forrest gave her a commission at the rank of commander, thus bumping her past many junior officers who had spent ten or fifteen years in service attempting to earn such a coveted rank. The truth was that Starfleet just wasn't ready for a Vulcan captain.

That Starfleet Command had deemed him worthy of a captaincy still puzzled him. When he had ordered *Enterprise* into Andorian space against orders, Trip had done so knowing that it would doom his career. Ultimately, it had worked out, and both Ambassador Soval and Minister T'Pol had written glowing commendations for his work in preventing a war, but there were too many flag officers who had hadn't forgotten that Tucker had ignored a direct command. Promotion had seemed unlikely at best.

The Romulan attack changed everything.

Overnight, Starfleet found itself involved in a war it didn't want and wasn't prepared for. Trip's mistakes suddenly seemed less important than the fact that, against all odds, he was an excellent combat commander.

Two hours later found him evicted from sickbay at Phlox's order. Though Trip wished he could visit longer, the doctor had been adamant that his patients needed their rest. Tucker couldn't really argue that, as Jon had already dozed off due to the painkillers he was on and T'Pol was doing a poor job of hiding her own discomfort. Realizing that he hadn't eaten in nearly two days, Trip made a beeline for the mess hall.

Once there though, Trip found himself standing before the viewport and staring at the endless blanket of night with a growing frown. Five years ago, he realized darkly, he would have looked at the twinkling stars with hope and eagerness. Five years ago, they held nothing but the promise of a better tomorrow, a chance to boldly go where no man had gone before, and to explore strange new worlds.

Now, they only seemed to represent death and destruction.

He had been an optimist when *Enterprise* launched, and now, so many years after that fact, looked back at how naïve he had been with the kind of mild scorn one generally held for their idiot cousin. How many more lives, he wondered, would be lost as mankind tried to find their place in the stars? How many more Malcolm Reeds, or Travis Mayweathers, or David Kelbys would die? Anger and grief pressed in on him, and Trip closed his eyes against the tears that wanted to flow. He couldn't afford to grieve, not yet. Not while the Romulans were out there, waging their war against humanity. Not while there were people relying on him.

Trip opened his eyes. There was work to do.



"Three years ago, Earth was viciously attacked without provocation by an alien species manipulated into thinking that humanity was their enemy. That date, March 24th, joined December 7th, September 11th, July 7th, and October 1st as a date that will forever be seared into our consciousness. Now, another date has joined them, and it too will live on in infamy.

"Yesterday, March 15th, 2156, four human colonies and three human space stations were suddenly and deliberately attacked by the forces of the Romulan Empire.

"We were not at war with this species, nor was Earth infringing upon their sovereign territory. At no time have we harbored any ill will toward these our brothers from the stars, and have even extended the hand of friendship to them in every way we can. And yet, despite our attempts, we have been rebuffed in the most savage way imaginable.

"It must be noted that the distance between the seven locations that were attacked, and the timing of these attacks makes it obvious that this was deliberately planned and cannot be construed as anything but an act of war. We do not have an accurate death toll yet, but early estimates place it in the hundreds of thousands, with as many as one and a half million possibly slain in an unprovoked attack.

"Therefore, as the commander in chief of United Earth forces, I have directed both Starfleet and the Military Assault Command Operations to take any and all measures for our defense. I have further asked that the Congress declare that a state of war now exist between the territories of Earth and the Romulan Empire.

"At 1700 Hours Zulu today, Congress has responded and passed a unanimous resolution that backs this request.

"As of this moment, Earth is at war.

"And may God have mercy on our souls."

*-Excerpts from UE President Anastasia Molyneux's speech before Congress,
March 16, 2156.*

-- END --