

STAR TREK: *Endeavour: "Grendel"*

by Rigil Kent

Genre: Action/Adventure, Drama

Rated: PG-13 ... harsh language, space combat (so violence is a given), and adult situations.

Summary: Sequel to *Endeavour: Acheron*. As Starfleet reels from their crippling defeat at Acheron, the war comes to Sol...

Disclaimer: "I only own these two hands. I will die a pauper..."

Author's Note:

Major thanks to both **Quinn** and **TJinLOCA** for being awesome betas. An immense thank you to **Chris1033** for his fantastic "covers" for the previous fics and of course, for this one as well. I'd be remiss if I failed to thank **Kevin Thomas Riley** for giving me astounding assistance throughout the creative process.

The revised look of the *Endeavour* was originally developed by Mark Ward for the NX Class Mod Pack for *Bridge Commander*, although it was credited as the NCC-05 *Atlantis*. Mr. Ward has graciously given me permission to use this "skin" for the look of *Endeavour* – if I had discovered this thing *before* writing *Vigrid*, the -06 would have looked like this all along.

This is the sequel to *Endeavour: Acheron*. It'll be a little difficult to follow without reading that first. Like my previous fics, I'm writing this as prose and using the basic screenplay format (Teaser + 5 acts).

DRAMATIS PERSONAE – UES ENDEAVOUR (NC-06)

Commanding Officer (CO): *Charles Tucker, III* - Captain (CPT)

Executive Officer (XO): *T'Pol* - also Senior Science/Sensor Officer (SCI) - Commander (CDR)

Chief Tactical Officer (TAC): *Heinrich ("Rick") Eisler*, 3IC - Lieutenant Commander (LCDR)

Chief of Engineering (ENG or ChEng): *Anna Hess*, 4IC - Lieutenant Commander (LCDR)

Senior Helmsman/Navigator (NAV): *Selina ("Lina") Mayweather*, Lieutenant (LT)

Senior Communications/Linguistics Officer (COM): *Marie Devereux*, Lieutenant (LT)

Weapons System Officer: *Nathaniel Hayes* – also Roughneck 6 (OIC) - Lieutenant Junior Grade (LT JG)

Chief Medical Officer (CMO): *Phlox*, equivalent rank of LTCDR

Chief of the Boat (COB): *Colin Mackenzie*, Master Chief Petty Officer (MCPO), senior enlisted man.

STARFLEET COMMAND

Vice Chief of Naval Operations (V-CNO): *Jonathan Archer* – Rear Admiral (RADM)

Commander, Communications Supplementary Activity (CSA): *Hoshi Sato-Reed* – Lieutenant Commander (LCDR)

TEASER

With a flash, the ECS *Daremo* slowed from warp speed.

Seated behind the helm of his pride and joy, Takeshi Watanabe breathed a sigh of relief. In his twenty years behind the controls of the *Daremo*, he had discovered that the only time the venerable craft gave him problems was when he was reverting to sublight speeds. Five years earlier, during a routine cargo run to Tau Ceti, the controls had shorted out at the very moment the warp drive disengaged, causing him to miss the deadline for the shipment because of the flight control failure. It had taken nearly another year to get the stench of spoiled Rigellian foodstuffs out of his cargo hold.

Glancing over his sensor display, he spent a long moment worrying. Since the war with the Romulans began, Starfleet had intensified the security of the Sol System, making it quite difficult to gain access to Earth's lucrative markets without the proper clearances or codes. Active sensor nets made sneaking into the system a risky proposition at best, especially when one factored in the many heavily armed starships prowling the system. What had once been a fifteen hour transit from arrival to landing had stretched out to thirty or forty hours. Homeworld defense was the excuse given for the many delays that honest cargo runners received.

Not that Takeshi was particularly honest...

Satisfied that he had not been detected by the sensor network, Watanabe began inputting commands into the helm. With a subtle shudder that ran through the length of the ship, *Daremo's* warp core began to shut down. Impulse would still be available, but deactivating the core would reduce the sensor signature the old ship presented to any of the trigger-happy Starfleet ships in the immediate area, and, with his cargo, he couldn't afford to be boarded for the usual cargo inspection.

After all, Earth still looked down upon drug smugglers.

Leaning back in his comfortable seat, Takeshi yawned as he studied the data that crawled across his screen. Most of it was automated shipping instructions relayed from the countless stationary buoys scattered throughout the system, similar in many ways to planetary traffic bulletins. He winced at the projected ninety-seven hour delay for "non-essential" ships; in the moment that he wondered what could possibly cause such a delay, an emergency bulletin appeared on his screen.

"Crippling defeat at Acheron!" the bulletin declared loudly, before beginning a long recitation of the list of ships lost in the engagement. After the seventh ship name, Takeshi deactivated the sound, shaking his head in sadness and disgust. A veteran of Thor's Cradle, he'd witnessed many of his fellow Boomers abandon all common sense and join Starfleet. He wondered idly how many of them had perished at Zeta Reticuli.

A chirp sounded from his master controls, announcing the detection of an approaching warp signature. Instantly, worry began churning in his stomach, and he keyed in a rapid command; unless interrupted by another instruction, this command would activate the incinerators within the cargo bay, utterly obliterating the contents within seconds. Without any sort of proof that he was transporting illicit hallucinogenic plants grown on one of the Centauri moons, Starfleet couldn't charge him with any crime.

Or so he hoped.

Frowning, he studied the warp signature with confusion. It wasn't like anything he had seen before. A flash of light announced the ship's arrival some seventy thousand kilometers off of his port side. He glanced out of the viewport, squinting as he did, but the target was far too distant to see. With a second beep, *Daremo's* onboard computer finally made its decision and pronounced the ship's identity. Takeshi's blood ran cold.

It was a Romulan bird of prey.

His fingers were already inputting new commands into his controls, and the engines growled in response, slowly reorienting the ship away from the newly arrived craft. Sluggishly, the old ship began to maneuver, even as the sensor board revealed that the Romulan ship had altered its heading and was now moving to intercept. Panic turned Takeshi's bowels to water, and he slammed his hand down on the transmit button of the communications system.

"Mayday!" he screamed, staring in horror as his sensors detected an energy spike from the Romulan that could only be weapons charging up. "I need immediate assistance! There's a Romulan attacking me!"

Alarms from the sensors suddenly shrieked their warnings as the Romulan ship fired.

"Oh God," Watanabe whispered in horror.

Seconds later, the incoming torpedo impacted.

ACT ONE

The crash of waves against the rocks wasn't as soothing as he'd hoped.

Hands in his jacket's pockets, Rear Admiral Jonathan Archer stared at the rolling surf without expression. He had hoped that coming to this place would allow him to grieve in privacy, away from the knowing looks and words of condolences that he kept receiving at Starfleet Command. Clearly, his relationship with Erika hadn't been as secret as either of them had thought.

To his surprise, though, he found himself emotionally numb. The tears that he needed to shed would not come; instead, all he felt was a rising anger, a fury that trembled on the edge of being homicidal. Hands clenched tightly in fists, he closed his eyes and focused on the lingering presence of Surak in his mind. Now, more than ever, he needed that control. It was one of the universe's greatest ironies, he thought, that *he* would seek *Vulcan* attributes in this most personal loss.

"Hello, Jonathan."

His anger intensified at the too-familiar voice, and he turned slowly to focus his glare on the features of the time agent, Daniels. To his surprise, however, the temporal operative was wearing normal-looking civilian clothes, appearing to be nothing more than another visitor to this secluded Washington beach. Gone was the absurd-looking outfit that he had so often appeared in.

"Go away," Jon snapped, fighting the urge to lash out physically. "I'm done with you." Daniels frowned slightly as he gave the mostly unoccupied beach a quick look.

"My condolences for your loss, Commodore." The agent shifted awkwardly where he stood, but did not make eye contact. Inexplicably, that infuriated Archer even more.

"You could have saved her," he accused Daniels, knowing it was true. How many times had the man pulled Jon's ass out of the fire when he should have died?

"No," Daniels replied, finally meeting Archer's eyes. "I couldn't. History records that Captain Hernandez died at Acheron."

"Screw your history," Jon snarled. The anger was surging through his veins, and that tentative control learned from Surak suddenly wasn't enough. "You could have done *something!*"

"I am doing something." Daniels drew himself upright as he glanced at his chronometer. "This is part of my job, Jonathan. I don't have to like it." He started to back away.

Jon was faster.

His fist flashed out, catching the temporal agent squarely on the jaw with a loud *crack*. Caught unprepared, Daniels staggered backwards, tripping over his own feet as he brought his hands up to defend himself. He collapsed onto the sand with a loud grunt, before looking up at Archer with narrowed eyes.

"I deserved that," the agent conceded softly as Jon loomed over him. "I'm sorry."

"Sorry doesn't bring her back," Archer snapped. For a moment, the fury made it difficult to think, and Jon fought the urge to hit Daniels again. An admiral wasn't supposed to behave this way, he reminded himself darkly. "I've ignored you before, and the timeline wasn't shot to hell." Daniels looked away for a moment as he climbed to his feet; he refused to make eye contact, once more glancing at the chronometer that encircled his left wrist, and Jon felt his stomach lurch. "You knew I'd ignore you those times," he realized.

"Yes." Daniels seemed intent on keeping a full meter of distance between them, and Archer nearly laughed at the absurdity of that. Here was a man who could manipulate and reshape time, yet was afraid of getting punched. "Your profile indicated that you didn't like being told what to do, and reverse psychology was more effective than honesty." The temporal agent offered an embarrassed shrug. "History has always recorded that you went onto the Xindi weapon. By urging you to send someone else, I made sure that you would go."

"You used me."

"I did," Daniels replied with a nod. "That's my job, Jonathan. I didn't have to like it." It was too much to handle, knowing that he had been successfully manipulated by the temporal agent. Even more galling was the realization that he had been controlled so easily.

"Go to hell," Archer snapped as he turned away.

"Hell?" For the first time in Jon's memory, the temporal agent sounded angry. "You want to see hell?"

In an instant, everything around them changed. The once clear blue skies were now red and scorched. The distant buildings of Port Angeles were gone, shattered beyond repair. Nothing moved. It was infinitely worse than the previous time that the temporal agent had pulled Jon forward in time.

"*This* is Earth of my time if you lose this war," Daniels continued darkly. "After they spend hundreds of years trying and failing to subjugate humanity, the Romulans finally decided that it was too much trouble to even try." His expression soured. "For a full day, their entire fleet conducts an orbital bombardment that results in this." He gestured expansively. "Humanity is virtually extinct."

"Then give me intelligence, not cryptic warnings," Archer growled. He crossed his arms and glared. "I'm done playing your damned game, Daniels. You want something from me, I expect payment in kind. *Quid pro quo.*"

The temporal agent was silent for a moment before sighing deeply. Around them, the image of a shattered Earth faded back to normal, prompting Jon to wonder if it was just some sort of holographic illusion. Was Daniels playing him again? Archer frowned.

"I don't have time for this," Daniels muttered as he checked the time once more. Louder, he continued, speaking quickly. "I can't give you specifics, Jonathan," he said. "But I *can* give you some intelligence that might help." Daniels' eyes narrowed as he studied Archer's jacket. "You've been promoted," he declared with some surprise before turning his attention to a PADD-like device.

"After Acheron," Jon stated. The chirps and beeps emerging from Daniels' device were oddly familiar, the agent's smack on the uncooperative PADD even more so.

"Earlier than in the official timeline," Daniels said before glancing up. "But not worth the headache to fix." His smile looked forced, and faded quickly when Jon didn't return it. A moment passed in silence as the temporal agent manipulated his data device rapidly; the sense of urgency that he conveyed simply with his body language was slightly worrying. The PADD that Archer carried in his jacket suddenly vibrated, an indication of incoming data. Jon gave the agent a disbelieving look, not quite ready to believe that the other man had actually provided information after years of dissembling.

"As I said," Daniels stated, returning his data device to a pocket. "There are no specifics there. Only generalities." He frowned as he checked the time once more. "Most of the records we had about this war were lost." He narrowed his eyes slightly. "There is one other thing that most historians agree upon, Admiral," Daniels continued, speaking more rapidly. Archer drew in a breath to steady himself; never before had the temporal agent volunteered so much information. It was an indication of how dire the situation was. "You have a traitor in Starfleet Command."

"Who?" Jon demanded hotly. The idea that a human could have been responsible for Erika's death sent a surge of fury pulsing through his body.

"That's unknown." The temporal agent held up his hands to ward off Archer's next question. "The only real reference to the traitor is from your personal memoirs written about thirty years from now. You evidently concealed the identity for reasons we don't entirely comprehend." Daniels glanced at the chronometer he was wearing and frowned. "This will be our last interaction, Jonathan. There is a natural phenomenon that blocks travel to or even observation of the next seventy years." He smiled slightly. "That's why the last few years were so important."

"The Suliban's benefactor was Romulan, wasn't he?" Archer asked without thinking. It was a theory that had been bothering Jon ever since the war began; everything that the mysterious figure had done seemed designed to weaken Earth. And, if intelligence estimates were correct, the dissolution of the Expanse had only accelerated the Romulan's timetable; prior to that point, there was only a single recorded encounter with a Romulan craft of any sort. Afterwards, they had been crawling all over the quadrant. Daniels gave him a surprised look before nodding; from his expression, the temporal operative had been taken off balance by Jon's accurate guess.

"Yes." He gave his chronometer another glance. "He's no longer a threat." Another sigh escaped the agent. "Before he was ... contained, he provided the Romulans with some technological advances that they didn't have previously." Daniels smiled slightly, nodding at the PADD that Jon was now holding. "That should even the playing field somewhat." A shrill tone emerged from the temporal agent's chronometer, and his expression darkened as he consulted the time. When he spoke again, it was in a rapid rush. "But most importantly, you *must* stop the Romulans from acquiring-!"

With an abrupt flash, Daniels vanished in mid-sentence, his cryptic warning unfinished. Before Archer could react, his communicator began beeping rapidly. He frowned in recognition of the emergency alert code and reached for the device. A concerned look on his face, Jon flipped the communicator open.

"This is Archer."

"Priority Alpha recall!" The young man on the other end of the comm-line sounded panicked. "Stand by for transport!" Even before the sentence was finished, Jon could feel the distinct tingling of a transporter stream surrounding him. He closed his eyes as the sensation of being in two places at once

caused him to reel, and the feeling of being drenched with freezing water caused his hands to tremble. Before he could catch his breath, it began again. He understood instantly, of course. From Port Angeles, Washington, he had been beamed to an orbital station, where he was promptly returned to Earth, this time to Starfleet Command in California.

"Sir!" A petty officer darted forward, pushing a computerized clipboard into Jon's hand before he even had time to step off of the transport pad. "Romulan power signature detected near Neptune!"

"Where's Gardner?" Archer demanded as he pushed by the enlisted yeoman. He was rapidly scanning the data with growing worry; this data was nearly an hour old!

"Briefing the president, sir!" The petty officer fell into step beside him. "You're in command, sir!"

"I want all ships in the fleet to go to tactical alert." Jon glared at the door to the turbolift that was taking too long to respond to his summons. He did a quick mental inventory of the ships that were available and still battle ready. There was really only one ship that leaped to mind. "And get me *Endeavour*."



Endeavour was beautiful.

As she leaned over the pilot's shoulder to get a better look at the pride of Starfleet, Lieutenant Commander Hoshi Sato-Reed felt her breath catch at the sight before her. Captured within Jupiter Station and swarming with activity, *Endeavour* was brightly illuminated by the drydock's many lamps. The graceful lines and smooth curves of the NC-06 were things of beauty, and Hoshi smiled at the familiar-looking saucer section. Memories of her time aboard *Enterprise* trickled across her mind's eye, forcing her to push back a lump in her throat. There were so many good times aboard that ship, so many pleasant memories of days long past that it was easy to overlook the bad times.

"Ma'am," the pilot said abruptly, an uncomfortable look on his face. "We'll be landing soon, so I'll need you to strap in."

"Understood, Ensign," Hoshi replied with a friendly smile. "I just wanted a look at her."

As she reclaimed her seat, she took a moment to study her team. There were four of them, all newly graduated from Starfleet Training and ridiculously eager to prove themselves. If the fleet engineers weren't already stretched thin with repairing the battle damage, Hoshi doubted that her team would have ever been given a job like this. As it was, when Sato saw the opportunity to pay *Endeavour* a visit, she'd volunteered instantly. It would be, she realized sadly, the first time since Malcolm's funeral that she had seen Trip or T'Pol. Phlox, on the other hand, corresponded with her regularly, and always had interesting stories to tell.

"Jupiter Station," the pilot said into his comm system, "this is ST-321. Code clearance blue. We're starting our approach." A crackle of static was the immediate response, followed by an authoritative female voice.

"Our ALS is currently offline," the stern-sounding woman stated. "You have a hands on approach."

Another crackle of static filled the commline for a moment. "Permission to land on platform three two seven."

The 'pod banked slowly as the pilot oriented it toward the looming station, which reminded Hoshi of a massive spider. Gleaming brightly, the massive gas giant that was the solar system's largest planet backlit the repair station, making it seem tiny in comparison. The great storm, still red and furious, raged across the surface of Jupiter with an intensity that had not abated in the hundreds of years since humans first looked upon the face of the planet.

Amusement washed over Hoshi as she saw two of her team cling to their restraints with white-knuckled grips. It didn't seem like that long ago since *she* had been the person worried about flying. Now, all of this seemed so routine that she had slept during most of the four hour transit. She shook her head in silent amazement.

A gentle bump announced the shuttlepod's smooth landing, and Hoshi was already beginning to undo the restraints when the ensign at the pilot's station gave her the all clear. With a nod, she hefted her tool kit and stepped toward the shuttlepod's hatch. Once more, she had to fight back a smile once more when she realized that, against all odds, she'd become a technician.

Jupiter Station was buzzing with activity as she led her team toward the nearest wall computer. The slidewalks were swarming with repair crews, most carrying parts or tools. Alongside the moving walkway was an even wider flat deck occupied by slow-moving forklifts or ground transports, all bearing important loads too heavy to be carried by hand. Overhead, the transparent roof offered a stunning view of the Jovian gas giant that was occasionally blocked by the fast-moving maglev train carrying personnel and parts to distant points on the mammoth station.

"Wow," Crewman Parham muttered, reminding Hoshi that he had never before been off of Earth, even during training. He stood there and gawked for a long moment, jumping slightly when a harried-looking technician accidentally backed into him.

The wall computer responded to Hoshi's query almost instantly, and she downloaded the station layout to her PADD before gesturing toward a nearby slidewalk. Without question, the four crewmen obeyed her unspoken order and stepped onto the moving walkway; she was inexplicably reminded of her brief time as a teacher.

"Must be their first time on the Station," a grizzled senior chief said softly as he stepped onto the slidewalk behind Hoshi. She gave him an amused nod, before sobering quickly at sight of the duty patch he wore.

"Was *Hyperion* badly damaged?" she asked, and he responded with a heavy sigh.

"Yes, ma'am." The slidewalk jerked abruptly, causing them to stumble. "We lost most of our command crew to a Romulan drone." He spoke in a no-nonsense manner. "If it hadn't been for Commander Hsiao, I think we'd have all died during Black's Bungle." Hoshi pursed her lips slightly at the expression, but made no further comment. As word had spread throughout Starfleet about the catastrophe at Acheron, the expression had entered the lexicon almost overnight. No one was exactly sure who had started it, and attempts to quell use of "Black's Bungle" to describe the crippling defeat failed miserably. Even the news media had picked it up and began using it in their various reports.

The admiral's subsequent suicide only intensified the scorn that most members of Starfleet now held for the man.

Stepping off the slidewalk, Hoshi started to point in the direction her team needed to go, but sighed and took the lead instead. Like obedient puppies, the four crewmen fell into step behind her, still distracted by the magnificent view of Jupiter. She should have been annoyed at their lack of focus, but couldn't bring herself to do so.

"I don't want them on my damned ship!"

The familiar voice caused her to slow her pace and glance in the direction from which it originated. A smile crossed her face at the image of an irate Trip Tucker arguing with a commander wearing a Jupiter Station duty patch on her uniform. At Tucker's side, Lieutenant Commander Hess was glaring at the station commander, an odd glove on the engineer's right hand.

"Captain," the frazzled-looking commander replied, temper making her words harsh, "Starfleet regulations require that my people to install these new regulators on your ship."

"They don't work on *Endeavour*," Hess interjected. "Not with the new warp core."

"That's not my problem," the commander retorted sharply. "I have my orders, and I *will* follow them. Take it up with Starfleet Command if you don't like it."

"Fine," Trip said, his expression dangerously calm. "You go ahead and install those regulators." He gave the commander a nod of dismissal, before turning to Hess. "Yank 'em as soon as the repair crews are done putting them in. Maybe they'll make good spare parts for the ones that actually work."

"I see some things haven't changed," Hoshi said with a smile, her voice attracting Tucker's attention immediately. He smiled broadly and took three rapid steps toward her, engulfing her in a most undignified hug.

"Hoshi!" he exclaimed loudly before returning her to her feet. "What the hell are you doing on the Station?"

"Nice to see you too, sir," she retorted. "We're here to install the latest upgrades to the UT on *Endeavour*." With a sweep of her hand, she included the four wide-eyed crewmen. Too late, she remembered Trip's growing reputation as a miracle captain. According to the gossip she'd heard at STC during her last visit there, it was common knowledge that *Endeavour* was the one assignment that every officer or enlisted crewman wanted. At least, as long as Trip Tucker and his Vulcan first mate were in command.

Hoshi smiled inwardly at that choice of words.

"Well, come on," Tucker said, gesturing at a nearby airlock; he took the toolbox from her in a gentlemanly gesture that seemed instinctive. "I'll even throw in a free tour of my ship!"

"I'll get these kids started," Hess stated the moment they stepped through the airlock. "Good seeing you again, Hoshi," she smiled before heading off in the direction of the computer core, the four crewmen at her heels.

"How's T'Pol?" Hoshi asked once the five were out of earshot, and Trip gave her a sidelong look.

"Frustrated," he smiled as they continued down the corridor. "The repair crews don't want to follow a Vulcan schedule." He grew more serious. "How's Junior?"

"Trying to walk," she replied. The turbolift doors slid open, and they entered as she continued. "You won't believe how big he's getting!" Reaching into her jacket pocket, she started to extract a photo of her son. "I've got a picture..." Suddenly, she hesitated as she remembered how badly he took the loss of his own daughter.

Before he could respond, a klaxon began sounding. Hoshi hadn't heard that sound in a very long time, and it caused her to jump in slight surprise. Trip, however, reacted instantly.

"Command override," he snapped. "Tucker alpha seven echo. D deck." The lift lurched as it changed directions abruptly, and Hoshi gave him a confused look. He should be going to the bridge, not D deck. Engineering was on D deck. On the top of that, however, she suddenly remembered that, despite any outer similarities, *Endeavour's* configuration was different from *Enterprise*.

With a hiss, the door opened, and Trip darted out of the turbolift. Hoshi hesitated for the briefest of seconds before following him. To her surprise, he seemed intent on heading toward where engineering used to be. They rounded a corner, and Hoshi blinked in mild astonishment at the pair of armed security troopers standing in front of an otherwise nondescript door. At Tucker's sharp nod, one of them hit the door annunciator; the door slid open, and she followed him in,

Just beyond the door's threshold, she paused in abject amazement at the presence of the various command stations that she recognized from the bridge of *Enterprise*. Commander T'Pol was rising from the captain's chair as they entered, and quirked an eyebrow at Hoshi's presence, but displayed no other reaction. On the main viewscreen, an image of Admiral Archer stared out at the command staff.

"Sensors have detected a Romulan power signature near Neptune," Archer said without preamble. His words caused Hoshi's breath to catch, and she swallowed. "I've ordered all ships in the system to go to high alert, Trip," the admiral continued grimly, "but I want *Endeavour* to take the lead."

"Aye, sir." Tucker glanced in T'Pol's direction, nodding slightly at something that she had clearly brought to his attention through that wondrous bond of theirs. "Sir, my senior communications officer is at Starfleet Medical."

"I'm here," Hoshi volunteered without thinking. She hesitated when several sets of eyes glanced in her direction, but she plunged forward anyway. If a Romulan ship was in system, she would do whatever it took to protect her son. "I've got all the security clearances," she started to defend her presence, but the admiral waved it off.

"Considered yourself temporarily assigned to *Endeavour*, Hoshi," Archer stated with a forced smile. "I'll contact Maddie personally," he continued. Off her nod, he turned his eyes back to Trip. "Good hunting," the admiral wished before the screen blanked out.

"Release all moorings," Trip said without hesitation. "All stations prepare for immediate departure." He pointed out the location of the communications station, and Hoshi gave him a thankful nod. "T'Pol,

find us a target."

Seconds later, *Endeavour* was underway.



Nearly an hour had passed since they disembarked.

From where he stood near the entrance to the command center, Master Chief Petty Officer Colin Mackenzie shifted slightly. It was his usual position during these sorts of meetings, selected not out of any sort of discomfort around the senior officers, but because it gave him a clear view of the entire bridge staff. It also enabled him to be the first one out of the command center once the briefing was complete so he could begin disseminating the information his enlisted crewmembers needed.

As he glanced over the assembled officers, Mac wasn't particularly surprised to see Hess standing next to Lieutenant Commander Eisler. If he didn't know better, the master chief would believe some of the wilder rumors that were circulating around the ship about the two sharing a bed. Off duty, they would inevitably be found together, whether it was in the mess hall or the gym. Hess had even dragged the TAC to a movie night some weeks back to watch a recent Hollywood action adventure. It had been quite amusing to hear Eisler's contemptuous recitation of the many errors made by the ostensible hero of the piece once the movie had ended.

The new flight operations officer stood slightly apart from the other officers, emphasizing the fact that she hadn't fully integrated herself into the command structure yet. Under normal circumstances, Mac would consider Lieutenant Selina Mayweather an attractive woman, but her perpetual scowl and standoffish behavior made it difficult to recognize her as such. From his admittedly brief interactions with the new helmsman, the master chief had learned that she was one of the many Boomers who had joined Starfleet following the disaster at Thor's Cradle. Unlike most of them, however, she had not actually been at the Cradle.

Thoughts of the Cradle immediately brought to mind Allison, and Mac bit back the ever-present anger and despair that accompanied those memories. There were so many things that he wished he had done differently, so many things he wished he had said to her before she died. He had once heard that regret was useless, but found that it was slowly eating him up inside. A part of him was worried that the bottle of Beefeater Gin in his cabin was becoming a crutch for dealing with his problems, but it was a very small part. He had everything under control.

Lieutenant Commander Sato was standing next to T'Pol as the first officer manipulated the controls of the master display. It was an indication of how much the Vulcan trusted the lieutenant commander that T'Pol allowed Sato to stand quite as close as she did. Since he had been assigned to *Endeavour*, Mac had learned that the Vulcan had a distinct sense of personal space; he had seen her allow only three people to violate that space – the captain, Phlox, and Admiral Archer. It was understandable that Sato was allowed into that select group, of course, given her history with the commander.

"What do we have, T'Pol?" the captain asked as he entered the command center, late for the briefing as usual. As Tucker took his place by the Vulcan's side, there was no indication that they were more than officers and friends, although Mac knew better. Like most officers, Commander Hess had seemed to assume that when she ordered the three crewmen who had helped her install the door linking the

captain's cabin to the XO's to be discreet, she would be obeyed without question, as if those instructions were being issued on stone tablets by God himself. Within ten minutes of the work being completed, however, Mac was aware of the installation.

Consulting him was an act of self-defense by the three crewmen; in the event that the captain and first officer were disciplined by Starfleet Command for their discreet relationship, punishment would also likely be meted out to any members of *Endeavour's* crew who facilitated that very relationship. After making sure that there was no mention of the identities of the three, Mackenzie had repeated Hess' order for them to keep their mouths shut.

Unlike the chief engineer, however, when the COB made a decree, wise crewmen obeyed.

"Starfleet's initial analysis was inaccurate," the Vulcan commander replied as she manipulated the controls on the master display. "I have reviewed their scans and determined that the mass displacement is not sufficient for a Romulan warbird."

"So is it a bird of prey or one of the warp-capable drones?" Tucker's hands went behind his back where he clasped them together in a stance that was eerily similar to the T'Pol's posture. Out of the corner of his eye, Mac saw Lieutenant Commander Sato-Reed hide a smile for some reason.

"Warp-capable drones?" Lieutenant Commander Eisler interjected before the Vulcan could reply, causing the captain to give him a nod.

"The Romulans deployed one a couple of years ago," Tucker stated flatly. "They were using an abducted telepath to control it."

"I have not detected any indication that a telepresence unit is being used," T'Pol declared. She gestured briefly to the system overview on the master display. "The target's impulse wake vanishes at this point, approximately seven hundred twenty-three thousand, two hundred forty-one kilometers from Neptune."

"Approximately, huh?" The captain gave his first officer an amused look that she returned without expression.

"Yes." T'Pol input an additional command into the computer; instantly, the location of every Starfleet ship and sensor buoy appeared on the solar system overview. "I am coordinating active sensor sweeps with the ships listed here, but the target has not yet reappeared on any of our scans."

"So," Commander Hess guessed, "it's on a reconnaissance mission?"

"Not necessarily," Eisler replied. "He's running silent, so it could be a stealth attack mission, like a ballistic submarine from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries."

"It's not a submarine," Hess retorted immediately.

"But the analogy is still apt," the tactical officer argued.

"It is illogical to speculate on this craft's mission without additional data," T'Pol pointed out abruptly, apparently tiring of the discussion. She returned her attention to the captain. "With your permission, I would like Lieutenant Commander Sato to assist me in tracking the target."

"Granted." Tucker gave the mentioned officer a slightly amused look. "Bet you've missed this sort of thing."

"Not really, sir," Sato replied with a smile. "I was getting used to having afternoons off." The captain almost laughed before quickly sobering.

"Coordinate your departments with T'Pol," he ordered. "Rick, I want weapons standing by for immediate action." The tactical officer nodded. "Anna, we may need warp speed on very short notice."

"On it," the chief engineer replied.

"I'll need you," Tucker said to Lieutenant Mayweather, "at the helm. If you're half as good as Travis said you were, then we're going to need your touch."

"Aye, sir," Mayweather responded stiffly.

"When we encounter the Grendel, what is the objective, sir?" Eisler asked. "Are we wasting our time trying to disable it, or-"

"What the hell is a Grendel?" Hess interrupted, frowning at the unfamiliar term.

"During the early parts of the Eugenics Wars," Mac offered softly, "European military forces called an unidentified hostile in friendly waters with an unknown intent a Grendel." He spoke only as a reminder that he was present; from the reactions of both Hess and Mayweather, they had forgotten he was there. He suspected that the ability to be almost invisible in staff briefings like this was one of the reasons Lieutenant Hayes had recruited him for Intelligence.

"It's from the poem *Beowulf*," Eisler elaborated. Commander Hess smiled.

"I didn't know you could read, Rick," she smirked.

"Starfleet Command," Captain Tucker announced, speaking slightly louder than normal in what was clearly an attempt to focus his chief engineer's attention away from harassing Commander Eisler, "has issued a shoot on sight order. Unless they're here to defect, we don't care why they're in the system." He frowned. "If there's nothing else, then brief your departments." Tucker gave them a nod. "Dismissed."

As Mac turned toward the door, the master display abruptly began beeping rapidly, drawing everyone's attention. Mac froze, hand poised above the door release, and glanced back. T'Pol's fingers were flying over the controls, inputting commands with a quickness that was nothing short of astonishing.

"What is it?" the captain asked. The Vulcan raised an eyebrow as she responded.

"I am detecting an impulse wake," she said. The image on the screen flashed as she highlighted the location of the newly located target. According to the sensors, it was nearly an astronomical unit away.

"Battle stations," Tucker declared, turning away from the screen. Mac pressed the release, and the door

slid open without a sound.



The door opened with a heavy screech.

His face betraying none of his anxiety, Commander D'deridex i-Mheissan tr'Irrhaimehn stepped into the wide hall. He was wearing his ceremonial uniform, complete with the knee-length scarlet drape over his right shoulder that identified him as a command officer. The drape mostly concealed the sheathed *dathe'anofv-sen* at his side, but kept his left hand free to draw the Honor Blade if necessary. In his right hand, he gripped the wrapped gift for *Ael'Riov* Chulak.

He doubted that this particular gift would be well received.

With a frown, he took in the expansive room, noting the hurried attempt to conceal the human construction with traditional Rihansu banners and accoutrements. Once, this had been a dining facility for the Terran miners stationed at this colony, but had been quickly transformed into a hall that would serve for the Convocation. The quickness of the work showed, however, and left a jarring visual impression to the commanders uncomfortable with Terran aesthetics.

Conversations ceased as D'deridex stepped forward, and he could feel the eyes of the assembled officers. Many, if not most, clearly disapproved of his presence, but he ignored any discomfort that he experienced. With a casualness that he did not entirely feel, he shifted the drape, pushing it back over the Honor Blade at his side to reveal the weapon's distinctive appearance. There was no mistaking the surprise on many faces.

He was still not entirely comfortable bearing Valdore's *dathe'anofv-sen* in public, no matter his legitimate right. By tradition, an Honor Blade of this pedigree should have passed on to the admiral's firstborn son or daughter, or, failing that, a member of Valdore's House whom the admiral had deemed worthy. When he had contacted *ch'Rihan* to arrange for the Blade's safe passage back, D'deridex had been stunned to learn that Valdore had already declared D'deridex as his heir. It made sense, in a way: there were no offspring to receive the weapon since Valdore's only son had died in the opening days of the war, killed by the human ship *Enterprise*, and the members of Valdore's House had a reputation for depravity and failure. Bequeathing the *dathe'anofv-sen* to D'deridex was tantamount to adopting him, and according to the Rihansu legal code, made the young commander the head of House Irrhaimehn, despite his birth.

It also served to create additional enemies for D'deridex, a fact that he remained very cognizant of.

The other commanders, contempt etched upon many of their faces, stepped out of his way as he strode toward the center of the room and he returned their looks with an impassive glower. Nearly all of them were twice his age or more, with silver and white being the most common color of hair. He recognized each of them by appearance, having committed their identities to memory the night before when he conceived this mad scheme. Inwardly, he sighed at the danger he was courting. S'enrae was right: he was a fool to walk into this nest of *dhivaels*.

"You dare to show your face here," one of the commanders abruptly snarled. She was old, perhaps three times D'deridex's age. Eyes flashing, the old female put herself squarely in front of him, crossing

her arms as she did. "You, who are nothing save for the final decision of a dying fool, should not be here."

"I *am* here," D'deridex responded coldly, his eyes narrowed, "by right of rank and of station." He curled his lip in contempt as he continued. "If you wish to challenge my presence, I will meet you in the Circle to defend this right." At his words, the female blinked in hesitation, giving him a weighing look as she attempted to determine if he was bluffing.

He was not.

The Circle was an ancient tradition, one rooted in the Great Exodus that carried the Rihanssu through the stars. No one was entirely sure how it began, or if the stories that S'Task himself had participated in the ritual were true, but it had become an integral part of the Rihanssu culture throughout the centuries. In recent decades, it had fallen into disuse, as disputes were more often settled by assassination and poison, but defending one's honor and station within a Circle was still an accepted practice.

With a nervous frown, the old female backed away, evidently recognizing that D'deridex was more than willing to kill her to prove his right to be at the Convocation. By backing down in such a visible way, her own reputation was stained as all present could see that she treasured her life more than her honor. Not even the contemptuous snort she gave him could mitigate that fact. D'deridex doubted that she worried much over such a thing; from the files he had memorized, she was entirely Chulak's creature.

Conversations resumed, albeit in a more hushed manner, and D'deridex fought to conceal his fury. He recognized a test when he saw one, and everything about this brief encounter felt pre-arranged. It had been designed, he presumed, for Chulak to determine whether D'deridex was to be considered an enemy or an officer whose allegiance could be purchased.

As he approached *Ael'Riov* Chulak, D'deridex felt his pulse accelerating and forced himself to calm down. Everything depended on the next few moments. If he was to accomplish the goals that Valdore had placed before him, his words would need to be chosen carefully. After all, one could accomplish nothing from the grave.

"*Jolan'tru, Daise'Erei'Riov*," Chulak said in greeting. He was resplendent in his ceremonial garb. The scarlet drape that he wore was bordered with gold trim, and his boots had been buffed to an almost mirror-like shine. His hair was streaked with silver, yet retained much of its original dark color, prompting D'deridex to suspect that it too was an intentional decision, as it conveyed the image of both the vitality of youth tempered by the wisdom of age.

"*Jolan'tru, Ael'Riov*," D'deridex replied. He offered no salute as was customary when greeting a superior officer, and Chulak's eyes narrowed fractionally at the calculated insult. The smile that the older male offered was positively feral.

"You handled that well," he stated, nodding slightly toward the now isolated female commander. "Few officers your age would have had the wisdom to act in the way you did." The smile began to fade. "I suspect that you have impressed many within the Convocation."

"I was unaware that you already spoke for the fleet," D'deridex interjected. Once more, Chulak's eyes

narrowed, and D'deridex could see that the captain was taken slightly off-balance by the words. Only a fool would speak so aggressively in the face of his superiors, and D'deridex had already proven that he was no fool. That could only mean that he was intentionally being foolish, which likely concealed a plan. It was almost amusing to see Chulak's expression shift as he re-evaluated D'deridex and sought to discern the direction that this conversation was heading.

"I don't," *Ael'Riov* Chulak admitted before smiling again. His eyes were unblinking as he watched D'deridex. "But I will."

"You seem certain." Around them, conversations had slowed, and D'deridex was aware that they had become the center of attention. Those who opposed Chulak in his bid to be named fleet commander were watching for weaknesses, while those who supported him were waiting to see how he would deal with an upstart officer who had no business being here.

"I am." Chulak smirked and spoke louder, this time ensuring that his words reached the ears of others. "On my command, the *Hnoiyika* has taken the war to the Terrans." Many of the assembled officers nodded approvingly, and Chulak continued. "They will rain down fire and death upon our enemies, breaking their spirits and their will to fight."

"The Terrans may surprise you with their resilience," D'deridex said, prompting the captain to frown. Chulak's disdainful opinion of the humans was well known. "But I wish the *Hnoiyika* good hunting." It was another calculated statement, bordering on the edge of insult. By wishing the absent ship crew good fortune, but not the mastermind behind the hunt, D'deridex made it plain that he doubted its success. Before Chulak could respond, D'deridex offered the gift that he was carrying. "I believe that this belongs to you," he said calmly.

For a heartbeat, concern and curiosity warred on Chulak's face. D'deridex's hidden hostility toward him had not gone unnoticed, and it was not completely unheard of for an assassination attempt to be made during a battlefield Convocation such as this. That the young commander had observed all of the proprieties had also been noticed, though, and curiosity ultimately won. Chulak accepted the folded cloth and began to slowly unwrap it. Suddenly unbalanced, the wrap fell open, spilling the contents to the floor.

The ring of metal upon metal drew everyone's attention.

It was impossible to not recognize the shattered remnants of three Honor Blades as they struck the ground. All three were plain and mostly devoid of decoration, an indication that the warriors who had wielded them had been of low birth. One of the blades still had dried streaks of blood on its surface.

"These do not belong to me," Chulak said calmly.

"But they *were* yours," D'deridex responded coldly. To anyone who was listening, it was obvious that he was not talking about the *dathe'anofv-sens* on the floor. Chulak smiled at the double meaning.

"I underestimated you," he said softly.

"You did," D'deridex acknowledged grimly.

"I won't do that again." Chulak frowned slightly. "You have been given a command?"

"I have been awarded the *Vastagor*." Shifting slightly, D'deridex waited for a heartbeat before continuing. "It is a worthy ship with a storied history. Entirely acceptable for one of my talents." Ael'Riov Chulak stiffened slightly, evidently hearing something that he did not appear to like.

Which was exactly as D'deridex had intended.

"Such ... *talents* cannot be allowed to wither," the captain said through clenched teeth. Anger was on his face, although he concealed it well. Inwardly, D'deridex smiled. His words had been chosen carefully; many had been the times that he had heard Valdore threaten to send Chulak to the Xin'di because, according to the now deceased admiral, it was a mission that was "entirely acceptable" for one of Chulak's "talents." It had been an empty threat, of course, as the Xin'di were too valuable an asset to waste on a fool like Chulak, but the admiral had known it would disgruntle the captain. If D'deridex had not miscalculated, he knew that Chulak would pull as many strings as he could to appoint Valdore's heir to a career ending mission to the Xin'di.

"*Jolan'tru, Ael'Riov*," D'deridex said, as if recognizing that he had been dismissed. No one stood in his path as he retraced his steps to the entrance, although he could feel eyes following him the entire time. As he expected, S'enrae was waiting outside, a pair of loyal Reman shocktroopers at her back. She frowned at his expression but said nothing as she fell into step with him.

"I am done here," he announced to the Remans. Gripping the hilt of the *dathe'anofv-sen*, he followed as the lead shocktrooper began leading him back toward the shuttle. *It has begun*, he told himself, hoping that he had not miscalculated.

He could not afford to make any mistakes.

ACT TWO

It had been a mistake to come here.

As he carefully picked his way across the packed streets of Coridan, Soval of Vulcan fought to contain a shiver. Dusk was approaching rapidly, and with it came a sharp wind that sliced through his thermal-weave clothes. One of the massive moons already loomed overhead, dominating the entire skyline with its rugged countenance. Light reflecting off of the satellite's surface bathed the entire valley with an incandescent brilliance that made Soval heave a sigh of relief. He had no desire to walk the remaining distance in the dark. With a disgruntled sigh, he began hiking forward once more, his every sense straining to locate any sound or movement that was out of place.

By all rights, he was supposed to be aboard a human ship creeping along toward Earth, not shivering on a planet many light years in the opposite direction. The muscles in his legs and back burned in protest as he traversed the poorly maintained road, but he paid them no mind. In the past fifty Standard days, Soval had become accustomed to discomfort.

Mere minutes after he departed the safe house, a team of armored assault troops stormed the shop, prompting Soval to abandon his plan to seek passage on the *Tesmur Sa-fu*. It was likely – probable, in fact – that a team would be waiting to seize him if he illogically showed up at the human ship when it was clear that they were onto his trail. He continued toward the starport, however, quickening his pace slightly even though he knew it would draw unwanted attention.

Another team of assault troops was waiting at the entrance to the starport, arguing with the local authorities about jurisdiction. Soval's name was never mentioned, but he knew that the "dangerous criminal" the armored troopers were pursuing was him. He frowned at the implication that T'Pau might be involved in this, and wondered briefly what exactly he had stumbled onto. Yuris had discovered something about the two children, something that could clearly shake the entire foundation of the Vulcan culture. Not since the revelation that V'Las had been behind the bombing of the human embassy had Soval been this troubled.

He narrowly avoided a third team of troops prowling the starport when he made a less than legal entrance through an unsecured side door. Donning the stolen uniform of a cargo inspection officer from a wall locker, he skirted the third team's notice and very nearly walked into the hands of a fourth. It was only by random happenstance that the trio of armored Vulcans missed him; a crate bearing bulky cargo passed between the two. It took Soval nearly six minutes to calm his heart rate after that narrow miss.

Escaping from the planet had actually been much easier than anticipated. A Coridan trader who recognized Soval from an ambassadorial conference quickly offered to transport him offworld. Within hours, they were racing away from Vulcan at warp six, and Soval finally let himself relax slightly. His worry returned when the Coridan trader revealed that Vulcan authorities had, in fact, warned him to be on the lookout for Soval. It was quite fortuitous that Soval's reputation among the Coridans was as positive as it was.

The whine of an aircar passing overhead nearly caused Soval to dive for cover; it was only his rigid self-control that allowed him to conceal his reaction. Nevertheless, he increased his pace slightly, barely hiding the grimace of pain that crossed his face as his muscles protested even more. No one appeared to give him a second thought as he strode through the streets, despite the fact that his clothes

clearly marked him as an offworlder.

After entirely too much physical contact with distracted and busy Coridanites, Soval reached his destination. An intricately carved door constructed of solid duranium was the only indication that he had arrived at the Coridan Central Library. There were no signs or markers displayed, and Soval sighed at the illogic of such a decision.

He applied only the lightest of pressure to the immense door, but it opened without a sound, prompting Soval to give the frail-looking hinges a look of surprised approval. Had he not witnessed it, he would have doubted that the decorated bands of metal could support such weight. It should not have been a surprise, though; the Coridanites had a reputation for creative engineering.

Once past the doorway, he paused in appreciation of the muted silence that hung over the library. The room was much larger than one would suspect, with high domed ceilings that accentuated the appealing architecture. Rows and rows of archaic books lent the chamber an air of timelessness that the suspended hover-lamps only enhanced.

Seated before an immense grimoire, supported by an equally large display stand, was the object of Soval's ill-advised expedition. Once, nearly a century earlier, they had served together in the Ministry of Intelligence, and Tavaris had earned Soval's respect and friendship many times over. A mnemonic virus engineered by one of Vulcan's many enemies had forced Tavaris to retire early from field work, and left him with a paralyzing mental addiction to learning itself. His every waking hour was spent feeding his voracious appetite for knowledge, and what had seemed to be a boon at first was quickly revealed to be a terrible curse. Unable to meditate to control the wildly intense emotions that were every Vulcan's burden, Tavaris had become unstable and unpredictable. Whether out of loyalty, affection, or some other undefinable reason, only his mate and daughter seemed capable of attending to his needs as he vacillated between one emotion to another.

At Soval's approach, Tavaris looked up from the oversized book. Instantly, a look of pleased surprise crossed his face, and he smiled slightly in recognition. A wave of discomfort washed through Soval at the visible display of emotion, but he ruthlessly suppressed it. It was hardly Tavaris' fault, after all.

"If I had known you were planning a visit," Tavaris said in their native tongue, his accent still untainted by two decades among the Coridans, "I would have told T'Sai to prepare a special meal." Soval quirked an eyebrow at the mention of his old friend's daughter.

"I was under the impression that she was on Vulcan, training to become a *kolinahr* master," he stated calmly. Tavaris' smile broadened at the implication that Soval had been keeping an eye on his old friend's family.

"She is well advanced in her studies," Tavaris declared proudly. He winced slightly, and turned his attention back to the book before him. "It is not like you, Soval, to appear unannounced," he said as his eyes tracked the curious hieroglyphics on the pages before him.

"It was not planned," the ambassador revealed. The sidelong look that Tavaris gave him was a painfully familiar one. "I require your unique talents," Soval admitted. An expression of despair crossed Tavaris' face.

"I have no unique talents, Soval," he said sadly. "You have wasted your time, I fear."

Without replying, Soval pulled a datacard from his pocket and placed it atop the massive book. Frowning, Tavaris picked it up and studied it for a moment. Heaving a heavy sigh, he slid off the chair and walked to a nearby viewer. The machine hummed for a moment as it deciphered the data.

"There are many similarities to the second battle of the Pelaxis Drift," Tavaris pronounced immediately as he examined the digital image, "which claimed the life of Surak's firstborn son. But the numbers are too few on the side of the ambushed. T'Klaas' convoy had more than is displayed here, and the Rihanssu's numbers were smaller." The image flickered, and Tavaris leaned back in surprise. "This is a space battle," he identified, eyes wide.

"Yes," Soval confirmed calmly. He watched silently as his associate studied the data display with the eagerness of a small child. Minutes crept by in silence, and Soval glanced toward the doorway. If he was being pursued, as he suspected, he had no desire to be responsible for his old friend's death.

"The architect of this battle is Rihanssu," Tavaris declared suddenly.

"How can you be sure?" Soval asked. He could feel dread lacing his stomach with ice, as everything that he had feared was coming to pass.

"Observe." Tavaris began to manipulate the controls on the viewer, advancing the digital representation of starships at a curious rate. "This entire flanking maneuver is identical to the ground offensive waged by S'Task prior to the detonation of the first nuclear weapons on Vulcan." He frowned slightly. "It does not take advantage of the extra maneuverability afforded by zero-gee environments, but remains efficient and effective. And the maneuver that destroys this command ship is virtually the same one that S'Task's forces used to capture Surak's son." His frown deepened. "This is a recent engagement," Tavaris said aloud before pinning Soval with a flat look. "The humans?" he queried.

"Yes." The ice in Soval's stomach became solid duranium. "It is a representation of their recent defeat at the hands of the Romulans."

"So," Tavaris mused softly, "Our lost brothers have returned."

"It would appear so," Soval agreed. "I suspect they have infiltrated our government." It explained V'Las's mad schemes, he realized grimly. He glanced away, momentarily lost in thought. Surely T'Pau was not working with the descendants of those who had murdered Surak. But were any of her ministers? Or her aides? "I must relay this information to T'Pau," he said softly before turning his eyes back to his old friend. "You are in danger, my old friend," he warned. "I am afraid that I bring death to your door." The smile Tavaris gave him was not as discomfiting as Soval would have expected.

"We all die eventually," Tavaris stated simply. He ejected the datacard and cleared the memory buffer of the viewer. "It has been good to see you, old friend," he said as he offered the datacard back to Soval.

"And you." Soval began to offer the *ta'al* before reconsidering and offering his hand in a distinctive human gesture. Tavaris quirked an eyebrow. "It is a human custom," Soval explained. "I have been the ambassador on their world for many years." His old friend nodded in understanding as he clasped Soval's hand.

"That explains your curious accent," Tavaris said with a hint of a smile. "Live long and prosper, Soval."

"Prosperity and long life, Tavaris," Soval replied, before turning away.

He did not look back.



Looking back on it, Hoshi Sato-Reed realized that volunteering for duty aboard *Endeavour* had probably been a mistake.

As the NC-06 rapidly approached the origin of the impulse wake T'Pol had detected, Hoshi sat at the communications board, re-familiarizing herself with a console that had undergone just enough renovations and upgrades since her time aboard *Enterprise* to confuse the daylights out of her. Every time she started to reach for a particular button, she was forced to hesitate and confirm that it was actually still there instead of being moved to the other side of the console for reasons that completely defied her comprehension.

On top of that problem was the realization that she didn't know the names or specialties of any member of Lieutenant Devereux's team. On *Enterprise*, Hoshi had known exactly who to contact if she encountered a technical problem with the linguistic database, or if she was having problems with a particularly tricky translation. Here, however, she didn't know where to start.

"We are in visual range of the target," T'Pol announced abruptly, breaking into Hoshi's mental rant about acting without thinking. The Vulcan hadn't moved from the science station since they arrived on the bridge, and had been bent over her viewfinder the entire time.

"Onscreen." Trip ordered from the command chair. He leaned forward slightly but, to Hoshi's surprise, did not stand. She frowned at the realization that she barely knew this veteran combat commander. The war had hardened him, transforming him from a gregarious and fun-loving engineer to a soldier who seemed to be expecting combat at any second.

She wondered if Malcolm would have even recognized him.

"D Type transport," T'Pol identified as the main viewscreen activated. The ancient-looking craft now displayed bore only a superficial resemblance to the many cargo transports Hoshi had seen before. "Heavily modified," the Vulcan science officer continued. "Hull registry identification, Earth Cargo Ship *Daramo*."

"*Daremo*," Hoshi corrected absently. "That's Japanese for *no one*."

"Reading no life forms aboard," T'Pol continued. She straightened and raised an eyebrow in an expression Hoshi recognized as mild interest. "There is mild structural damage on the outer hull that I do not recognize." She pressed a button, and the main viewscreen zoomed in on the structural scarring.

"That's Immobilizer damage," Lieutenant Commander Eisler growled from the tactical station.

"Dammit," Trip muttered, so softly that Hoshi suspected only she and T'Pol had heard it. "Can you get a remote link with that tub and pull the data from their flight recorder?" he asked more loudly, his eyes trained on Hoshi. She swallowed and input a few rapid commands.

"No, sir," she replied. "We can't get a signal."

"Confirmed," T'Pol said in her no-nonsense manner. "Its transmitter array has been destroyed."

"Then we do it the old fashioned way," Captain Tucker decided. He looked in Eisler's direction. "STAB team deploy."

"Aye, sir." The tactical officer pressed several buttons in rapid succession. Seconds later, Hoshi's board beeped as she began receiving telemetry. One of the buttons she did not recognize began flashing on her console, and she pressed it hesitantly. Instantly, the image on the main viewscreen changed to a real-time transmission from one of the security officers beamed to the *Daremo*.

"This is Roughneck Six," a male voice declared. Hoshi presumed it was the man with the camera. "Are you reading this, *Endeavour*?"

"We are," Trip said loudly. "You should be able to access the flight recorder from the bridge."

"Copy." The image began moving, and a pair of armored figures entered the camera's line of sight to precede the speaking officer. Hoshi found herself unable to turn away from the real-time image, even when they paused to study a pair of human corpses. "They put up a fight," Roughneck Six stated. "And their weaponry is almost military grade."

"Smugglers," Commander Eisler declared flatly, contempt in his voice.

Beeps from T'Pol's board drew Hoshi's attention, and she watched for a moment as the Vulcan began inputting commands with a speed that brought back many pleasant memories. Her own console chirped, reminding Hoshi that she had a job to perform, and she studied the data crawling across her monitors. Almost without realizing it, she fell back into her old habits, forgetting if only for a few minutes that she was primarily a codebreaker these days. Fortunately, it wasn't always just number crunching.

As the most experienced linguist Starfleet had at its disposal, the few pieces of intercepted Romulan audio inevitably came to her, and she had spent the last six weeks attempting to construct a usable database out of those scraps. From what she could tell, the Romulan tongue was a fascinating language, with some familiar proto-Vulcan words that seemed to indicate the two cultures had come into contact before, probably centuries earlier if the word deviations were any indication.

"Captain." T'Pol's voice broke the silence that had descended upon the bridge. "I am detecting another impulse signature that remains unaccounted for."

"Bearing?"

"One-three-five mark zero-zero-nine." The Vulcan leaned back from her viewer. "Range: three-seven light minutes." T'Pol nearly frowned. "I am unable to detect any mass displacements in that area."

She sounded slightly surprised.

"Roughneck Six to *Endeavour*." The security officer was now on the *Daremo's* bridge, and Hoshi winced at the damage she could see.

"The flight recorder is gone, isn't it?" Trip asked sourly.

"Yes, sir. Along with the crew manifest and the sensor logs." Tucker shook his head in frustration.

"Beam them back, Rick," he ordered the tactical officer, before glancing at Hoshi. "Inform Starfleet Command about this. We'll need a salvage team to bring this ship in." As Hoshi nodded, he was addressing the helm officer. "Set a course for the second target area. Maximum impulse."

The seven minutes it took to cover the distance to the unidentified impulse wake seemed to pass in the blink of an eye. It took less than a minute for Starfleet Command to respond to Hoshi's hail, but she was transferred three times before reaching someone who could dispatch a tug to their location to retrieve the ECS *Daremo*. By the time she had deactivated the active communications link, Hoshi was remembering why she had been so glad that Command had approved her request for a planetary assignment after her son was born.

"Contact," T'Pol announced, a subtle hint of pride in her voice that Hoshi doubted anyone else but Trip would pick up. "Bearing: three-three-six mark zero-seven-two. Range: twenty-three thousand, nine hundred forty-two kilometers." The Vulcan's body language changed abruptly. "Radiological alert," she said grimly. Even as she was announcing this, the captain was speaking.

"All stop," he ordered. "What is it, T'Pol?"

"Indeterminate readings," she replied, frustration in her voice. "It appears to be constructed of a material that absorbs sensor scans." T'Pol frowned. "I *am* able to determine that it is unmanned and has a primitive impulse drive system."

"That means there's probably a computer onboard," Eisler pointed out. "It looks like a guided torpedo to me, sir."

"That is a logical conclusion," T'Pol gave Tucker a discreet head shake, as if she was responding to something he had asked. "I do not recommend that we get any closer. A self-guided weapon would, by necessity, be equipped with sensors for navigation."

"And those sensors might be touchy," Trip nodded. "We need to get information, though."

"Sir." Lieutenant Commander Eisler was standing ramrod straight as he spoke. "Request permission to go EVA. ARC Two is prepped for launch, and I am best equipped to disable an explosive if necessary."

Hoshi sighed. It wasn't particularly loud, but drew T'Pol's attention nonetheless. The Vulcan quirked an eyebrow as she realized what Hoshi was about to say.

"Captain," Sato interrupted. "I need to go too."

"What?" Tucker was momentarily aghast.

"I have the most experience with the Romulan language," Hoshi pointed out, once more cursing herself for thinking that a visit to *Endeavour* had been a good idea. "And I can hack into its computer if necessary."

"I'll keep her safe, Captain," Eisler growled. He gave Hoshi a look that was almost approving, and, for a moment, she was inexplicably reminded of an almost identical expression that Malcolm had given her a few times. That nearly brought a tear to her eye.

Hoshi could see that Trip was torn, and she found herself glad that she didn't have to make these sorts of decisions. He so clearly wanted to go himself, yet he obviously realized that doing so was stupid and dangerous. When he nodded his approval, Hoshi could see how much it tore him up and her heart went out to him. For all he knew, he could be sending her to her death.

She made a mental note to *never* accept a command position.

The Assault Re-entry Craft was squat and ugly, but looked much tougher than a standard shuttlepod. As she approached it, still fiddling with her EV suit, Hoshi found herself wondering if it was as easy to fly. An enlisted man bearing senior chief petty officer rank was already at the pilot's station; he too was wearing an EV suit, but looked much more comfortable in it than Hoshi did. She gave him a nod before securing her comm gear in the appropriate location.

Several meters beyond the hatch, she could see Anna Hess speaking with the German tactical officer. An odd expression was on the engineer's face as she helped Eisler adjust his armored EV suit, and Hoshi frowned at Anna's unmistakable body language: she was protective of Eisler! From what Sato had seen of the man, he could likely kill people with his pinky, and from her memories of *Enterprise*, the engineer didn't swing that way, so it made no sense for Hess to be protective. Hoshi shook her head; none of this was any of her business.

Eisler entered the ARC moments later, pulling the hatch down and sealing it with a flourish. He took the seat next to the hatch.

"We're secure," he announced. A moment later, Trip's voice floated across the comm line.

"Then you're cleared for launch. Good luck."

The ARC began to shake as the engines activated, and Hoshi closed her eyes.

She hated this part.



More than anything else, Malcolm Reed hated daily briefings.

Seated in front of his computer, he frowned at the images of the various control officers now displayed on the many monitors before him. Most of the digital representations were clearly fabricated, and the

voices that emerged were electronically distorted to further conceal the identity of the speaking officer. Even Reed had decided to put up an electronic block to prevent his face from being broadcast to the other officers. In an organization as paranoid as this one, it was frankly dangerous to *not* conceal your identity.

And yet, Harris' face wasn't hidden at all, almost as if he were daring them to come after him.

Shifting slightly in his chair, Malcolm discreetly attempted to rub away the phantom pain that seemed to lance through his artificial left arm. He knew that any sensations were illusions created by an overactive imagination, but that did not prevent him from feeling a persistent dull ache stabbing through the limb of plastic and synth-flesh. The phantom pains had lessened somewhat in recent weeks, but occasionally resurfaced at the most inopportune moments.

As the imaginary pain slowly dwindled, Malcolm gave his comfortable prison a quick glance. The smart walls were currently programmed to display a beach scene, making it appear almost as if he was on a deserted island somewhere in the South Pacific. Even the overhead lighting system participated in the illusion, bathing the entire apartment with ultraviolet rays identical to those of the sun. It was nearly enough to make him forget that he was thirty meters below an illegal German brothel. Given the nature of his current occupation, the irony of that particular fact almost made him laugh.

Almost, but not quite.

"Sagan City," Harris said, and the control officer in that city shifted slightly. There was a half-second of signal lag, but that was to be expected as the man was currently on Mars. It was always surprising to Malcolm when he realized just how extensive this organization actually was.

"We've secured the Tellarite craft," the control officer in Sagan City announced, his or her voice heavily distorted, "And I've dispatched them to the coordinates of the station. If it's there, they'll find it."

"Good." Harris looked and sounded pleased, but seemed to pick up on Malcolm's confusion. "You have something to add, Aschaffenburg?" he asked, identifying Reed by the city that he was in.

"What station?" Malcolm asked, refusing to address the man with any sort of honorific.

"The one that *Enterprise* encountered following her encounter with the Romulan minefield." Harris smiled broadly. "An automated repair unit like that would make an excellent asset for the war effort."

"That station is dangerous," Reed argued. "It'll take one of the crew and turn them into part of its central computer!"

"We *are* aware of that," Harris said simply.

"Is the crew of that ship you're sending?" Malcolm demanded.

"They know what they need to know," was the cool response. Reed fell back against his chair, suddenly grateful for the false image his station was broadcasting to the other attendees of this briefing. He had known that Harris was ruthless, but willingly sacrificing someone simply to acquire an "asset" like this? It was horrifying, inhuman even.

And yet ... he could not deny that the repair station would be an amazing help to the war effort. When *Enterprise* had found the station, it had taken less than two days to repair what would have taken Jupiter Station three months or more. With the Romulans pushing in on all quarters, wouldn't the sacrifice of one man be worth the price?

Malcolm shook his head in abject disgust, suddenly furious that he was even entertaining the notion. The hate he held for Harris intensified as he realized the insidious nature of the other man's talents: Reed was turning into the very thing he hated.

"Vulcan," Harris said, clearly of the belief that the ethical debate wasn't worth having. This time, the signal lag was even more noticeable as the distinctly male voice replied.

"We've confirmed that Ambassador Soval was involved in some sort of firefight with government officials," the control officer said at his prompt. "Preliminary reports are sketchy, but it appears that the orders came from the top."

"An attempted coup?" Harris queried, even as Malcolm was frowning. He had difficulty accepting that Soval would be trying to unseat Minister T'Pol, not after having worked so hard to put her into power in the first place. They were missing an important piece of the puzzle...

"Unknown, although Soval has gone dark since the incident." The reporting officer paused for a moment. "I don't know how this will affect Vulcan's technology transfer to Earth." That made sense, as the ambassador had been the driving force behind his government's sudden decision to volunteer previously classified technology even before the war with the Romulans began.

"Continue to observe," Harris decided. "If he resurfaces and the opportunity presents itself, attempt to recruit." He barely paused as he shifted attention. "Sacramento."

"Investigation into Black's suicide is ongoing," the female image related. "There are some inconsistencies with Commodore Casey's story that Starfleet Security failed to notice." Contempt was easily detected in her voice, despite the electronic distortions, and as an ex-member of Starfleet Security, Malcolm instinctively bristled. "We're looking into the possibility there may have been a romantic connection between the two."

"Is that speculation or are you basing it on something concrete?" Harris asked.

"Speculation based on some unexplained off-duty interactions between the two," Sacramento replied. "There are a number of recorded instances where the two of them simply dropped off the grid together for hours at a time." The image shrugged slightly. "Both of them are lifelong bachelors with absolutely no known romantic relationships. We haven't found any other connection between them to explain Casey's visit to Black's house."

"Keep digging." Harris was glowering; he hated not knowing something. "Anything else?"

"Archer dropped off the grid for nearly a minute prior to the Romulan detection," Sacramento said with an annoyed tone in her voice. "The agent assigned to follow him says he simply vanished after punching a man whose image we don't have in the database. They reappeared, talked, and the man disappeared again immediately before Archer was contacted by Starfleet Command."

"That sounds like our mysterious Mister Daniels," Harris mused. "Keep an eye on the recordings your agent made of him; they have a tendency to disappear unexpectedly."

"One other thing," Sacramento interjected. "We're reading a rise in Terra Prime chatter in the California area."

"Let the local authorities deal with them," Harris ordered. Malcolm winced slightly at the indifference in the man's voice and briefly wondered what had happened to the Terra Primer Hayes had captured in Jacksonville. Per his instructions, Reed had turned the man over to Harris, never questioning what was intended for the would-be terrorist. It had been something of a surprise for Malcolm to realize that he didn't *care* what happened to the man, not after witnessing firsthand the depths of depravity Terra Prime would sink to. If he closed his eyes, he could still see the rows of incubators on Paxton's craft that held the failed attempts at crossbreeding Humans and Vulcans, all in an attempt to prove a point Malcolm still didn't comprehend. He had never let Trip or T'Pol know that their daughter was attempt number thirty-six.

"Aschaffenburg has been working on the Romulan problem," Harris announced, and Malcolm glowered at the screen. "What do you have?" Reed drew in a steady breath, glancing down quickly at the notes he'd jotted down.

"I want to insert an operative into Klingon space," he said calmly. It was the only thing he had been able to come up with that seemed to have a chance of success, and it reminded him of how much he missed being on *Enterprise*. This sort of problem-solving would have been much easier if Hoshi or Trip were around to bounce ideas off of.

"How does that help the Romulan problem?" the officer in New Delhi asked.

"This operative's objective will be to instigate the Klingons into conducting raids across their borders into Romulan space," Malcolm replied coolly.

"Which will cause the Romulans to divide their forces," Harris smiled. "Well done." Reed wished he shared that optimism. There was a substantial risk of this backfiring; if the Klingons discovered they had been manipulated, they might ally themselves with the Romulans. Even if Earth's manufacturing capacity were completely devoted to wartime use, there was simply no way Starfleet could hold out against *two* war-like races.

"Can I presume that you have an operative in mind?" Harris asked, and Malcolm nodded.

"I have just the man for the job," he pronounced.



Even though he was ideally suited for this job, Lieutenant Commander Rick Eisler found himself battling worry.

He blamed it entirely on Anna's influence. Years ago, when he was a simple MACO weapons officer

working black ops, he wouldn't have given the danger he was about to voluntarily place himself in a second thought. There would have been no hesitation, no fear, and no concern about whether he might make a mistake that could result in a cataclysmic explosion. Now, however, instead of focusing his attention on the task at hand, he was thinking about the most recent absurd movie Hess had insisted he watch. At times, he wished he was strong enough to push her away so he could resume his life of solitude and adherence to discipline, but her unconditional friendship and support was addictive. It wasn't until Anna started pushing him to enjoy the sillier things in life that Rick realized *just* how lonely he had been.

Yes, this was all her fault.

As the ARC-16 banked sharply and began maneuvering toward the target, Rick pushed those thoughts away so he could study Lieutenant Commander Sato-Reed discreetly. Though she was nearly thirty, she carried the confidence of a much older woman, and the way she studied everyone denoted a dangerously sharp intelligence. In a lot of ways, she reminded Eisler of the three female MACOs he had served with on the Red Sabre teams: quiet and unassuming on the outside, but lethally competent when the situation demanded it. There had been no one he trusted more than those women, and he had gone on record numerous times stating that he would prefer to go into a combat situation with them than with the males of the Team.

"Shutting down the main drive," Senior Chief Petty Officer Gray announced abruptly from the pilot's station. "We'll be using maneuvering thrusters the rest of the way." Rick nodded as he glanced out the viewport and studied the object they were slowly approaching.

It was surprisingly large, perhaps twenty-five to thirty meters in length and five to seven meters in diameter. Comprised of three distinct sections, it had the unmistakable appearance of a missile or torpedo, albeit with a boxy aft area that likely housed the primitive impulse drive Commander T'Pol had detected. It was also nearly pitch black, making it difficult to spot against the backdrop of space.

"That looks like a communication array on the nose," Commander Sato-Reed said, pointing to the front section of the weapon. Rick grunted, but didn't contest her assumption; she was, after all, the communications expert, not him. "How close can we get to it?" she asked, and SCPO Gray shrugged slightly.

"I don't know, ma'am." He started to apply thrust, and an alarm began chirping. "We're being interrogated," he declared, tension in his voice. Drawing in a sharp breath, Sato-Reed reached over the senior chief's shoulder and began inputting a frequency into the communications system. Gray glanced at Eisler, and Rick shook his head at the unspoken question. Suddenly, the alarm went silent.

"I wasn't sure that would work," Sato-Reed said, relief in her voice. At Rick's look, she explained. "I used the comm frequency the Romulans seem to use most of the time, and told it that we were friendly." She shrugged. "Good thing something that size can't have a very smart computer, or it'd realize my syntax was messed up."

"Good thing," Eisler agreed, privately wondering if Lieutenant Devereux would have reacted as quickly. On the heels of that, however, he realized the comparisons were unfair; Lieutenant Commander Sato-Reed had years more experience than Devereux, and had been working on cracking the Romulan language and cyphers since the war started. His admitted personal dislike for *Endeavour's* absent communication officer likely colored his opinion as well.

Hefting his gear, he quickly secured the pack to his EV suit before checking the grapple launcher that would be necessary. He caught Sato-Reed's quickly hidden frown as she began assembling her own equipment consisting of a personalized computer and transmitter array. Rick didn't ask why she had come aboard *Endeavour* carrying such a thing; after all, he rarely went anywhere without the tools of his trade either.

"Match velocity," he ordered Gray calmly while securing one end of the grapple line to the ARC's internal clamps. "And get me within a hundred meters."

"Aye, sir." There was no immediately discernible change in the assault re-entry craft's profile as the senior chief manipulated his controls, but Eisler had worked with him long enough to trust him explicitly. Forcing himself to breathe calmly, Rick keyed in the access code that opened the ARC's hatch, immediately exposing the ARC to vacuum. They had been prepared for that, and had never activated the small craft's life support systems.

"Holding steady at ninety-three meters," Gray declared, and Rick hefted the grappler gun. The laser rangefinder integrated onto the launcher painted the surface of the target, and a soft tone sounded in Eisler's ear, alerting him that it had a solid lock. He pressed the fire button, and, with a hiss that Rick knew he imagined, the launcher fired the cable. The magnetic anchor struck the outer hull of the target and attached itself.

"*Endeavour*, this is TAC-Six," Eisler said into his comm as he secured himself to the line. "I'm moving to the target." Without waiting for a response, he triggered the EV suit's small thruster pack and let himself be carried from the ARC.

It was a thrilling ride, though he'd die before ever admitting that to anyone. He'd read the reports of Captain Tucker's insane ship-to-ship transfer shortly after arriving on *Endeavour*, and had been suitably impressed as well as just a little bit jealous. The realization that only a slender strand of cable was between him and the abyss of deep space filled Rick with a giddy rush of excitement and a sensation of freedom he'd only experienced a few times in the past. HALO jumps had nothing on this.

His mag boots impacted and latched onto the target's hull all too soon. Forcing the silly smile off his face, Eisler reached for his pack to assure himself that it had made it. The radiation detector on his suit spiked slightly, causing him to study it for a moment. Exposure levels weren't lethal, but he realized that Phlox would likely schedule him for a decon visit.

"This is TAC-Six," he said into his comm. "I'm at the target." He paused to get his bearings. "Proceeding with scans." Kneeling, he placed the hand scanner against the surface.

"Receiving," Lieutenant Commander Sato-Reed's voice filtered across the comm line. A moment later, Commander T'Pol's voice echoed the lieutenant commander's statement.

"Receiving."

"Initiating data transfer," Sato-Reed declared as Rick removed the fusion torch from the bag still secured to his suit. With a flash, the torch came to life, and he began cutting into the hull of the target. "I'm hacking into the guidance system now using the remote datalink," the communications officer announced. Rick grunted in response as the visor on his EV suit auto-tinted.

Within seconds, he was barely aware of anything but the job in front of him. The outer hull of the weapon was proving to be surprisingly resilient. For a moment, he considered using a small amount of explosives to breach the hull, but he quickly discarded the idea as both foolhardy and dangerous. Minutes crept by as he worked to pierce the outer structure of the weapon, and sweat began trickling down his brow. Wincing at the sting of sweat in his eyes, he glanced up and almost smiled at how small *Endeavour* seemed in this moment.

"I'm in!" Sato-Reed stated triumphantly. Despite himself, Rick smirked as the fusion torch sputtered and died. It seemed almost serendipitous that they would both finish at the exact same moment. He said nothing though, as he set the torch aside and aimed the hand scanner at the hole he had carved. The scanner vibrated as it began working.

"Downloading guidance plot," Lieutenant Commander Sato-Reed continued. "*Endeavour*, you should be receiving it now."

"We are," Captain Tucker responded. "It's headed for Earth."

"*Kuso*," the communications officer suddenly whispered, her voice carrying loudly across the comm line. Rick didn't know what it meant, but it sounded like an expletive. "Trip, this thing is transmitting a Starfleet IFF code!"

"Are you sure?" Tucker's voice was grimmer than ever before, and Eisler felt his own blood run cold. An IFF transponder relayed a signal that would be interpreted as a friendly target; planetary defenses wouldn't even shoot at it. The codes were top secret, known only to those with an absolute necessity to know.

And the Romulans apparently had them.

"Captain," Rick interrupted as the results of his scan crawled across the small scanner screen. He wasn't even aware that he had violated communications protocol. "This is a fission bomb."

Dead silence answered his pronouncement.

ACT THREE

His pronouncement was greeted by silence.

Fury at the Council's continuing self-inflicted blindness thundered through him, and Thy'lek Hravishran th'Zoarhi glowered darkly. He had come here at the Council's invitation to argue his case for lending aid to the pinkskins against the Romulans. Instead, he had found himself speaking to politicians who had already made up their minds.

There was *nothing* Shran hated more than other people wasting his time.

"Do you need me to repeat myself?" he asked angrily, hands balled up in tight fists. He had hoped the Council of Eight would listen when the civilian-appointed leadership of the Imperial Guard had not. Publicly elected every four years, the Council was made up of two politicians of each gender: *shen*, *thaan*, *chan* and *zhen*. It was an ancient part of the government, having its roots in similar traditions from centuries before Andoria had even been united.

"You do not," one of the *zhen* councilors stated regally. She was heavyset and wore a long-suffering expression of boredom as she gestured expansively. "Your arguments have been heard."

"Have they?" Shran demanded, crossing his arms as he spoke. He glared at the members of the Council, bitterly amused to see that most of them wouldn't meet his eyes. There was no way to tell if they were embarrassed by their actions, or if they were intimidated by him or his reputation, and Shran didn't care either way. "While we waste Guardsmen and materiel on this absurd border war with the Oh'reons," he continued loudly, "The pinkskins – our allies! – continue to lose territory to these Romulans!"

"Enough!" One of the male *chans* banged his hand on the table. He had once served in the Guard, rising to the rank of general, and Shran felt his antennae curling in contempt for the male's abandonment of the moral code that bound Guardsmen together. This buffoon had once ordered Shran to betray the crew of *Enterprise* in the Delphic Expanse, and Shran had never forgiven him. "The Council has heard your arguments, Fleet Captain, and we will weigh them against Andoria's interests." Another flare of anger caused Shran to grind his teeth.

"Andoria's interests or yours?" he snapped furiously before turning away. He didn't even bother waiting to be dismissed, and knew he had made even more enemies with the blatant insult. The Guardsmen at the entrance to the council chamber stood aside without a word, but showed their approval in their body language. It was to be expected, after all: they were the ones who would die when the shooting began.

As he stormed out of the meeting hall and exited the council building, Shran could feel eyes upon him and he knew, without looking, that his angry exit had drawn notice. He was beyond caring, though. Too many lives had been thrown away in this useless expedition against an enemy that wasn't even a threat to Andorian security. When word of raids along the Empire's borders reached the ears of the government, the Imperial Chancellor had quickly ordered the Guard to retaliate against the perceived origin of the raids: the Oh'Reon Syndicate.

For nearly an entire sidereal year, Shran had commanded a squadron of warships to hunt down an enemy that didn't have an organized government or even an identifiable chain of command. The

targets he had been assigned to destroy were generally symbolic, but, on several occasions, their destruction had resulted in massive civilian casualties. Morale among his officers plummeted as they experienced the bitter taste of becoming murderers and war criminals. Unable to stomach the growing feeling that he had turned into the enemy, Shran had begun to speak out, arguing with his superiors about every element of the ongoing war. He quickly became the most outspoken opponent of the hostilities with the Oh'Reons, which, to his surprise, made him one of the most popular officers in the Guard. He would say things publicly that the generals only thought and that made him dangerous.

It was almost enough to make him laugh.

The fact that he had been promoted after the drone incident and the loss of the *Kumari* continued to amaze him. It was common knowledge that the Imperial Guard seldom gave another command to officers who had lost a ship. Due to the pinkskin Archer's glowing report of Shran's heroism in the face of impossible odds against the Romulan craft, the Guard was pressured by the chancellor to reward the Andorian captain. That second chance had been the driving factor behind Shran's hesitance to begin his campaign against the senseless waste of lives; he had been so intent on proving to the Guard that his promotion wasn't a mistake, that he did his best to ignore the fact that the orders he received went against everything the Imperial Guard stood for.

Climbing into the groundcar that waited for him, Shran wiggled his antennae in frustration. Every scrap of intelligence he had acquired during the year-long war with the Oh'Reons pointed toward the Romulans being behind the raids. Admittedly, this information was circumstantial at best, but there was no profit in a war with Andoria for the Oh'Reons! They were scum, of course, and at any other time, he'd be behind an effort to wipe their organization out entirely, but with the humans losing their war with the Romulans, the Vulcans paralyzed by their foolish religious revelations, and the Tellarites too busy arguing with *everyone*, the quadrant *needed* a strong Andoria.

"Home," Shran ordered the groundcar as he leaned back in the seat. With a hum, the vehicle accelerated away from the council building. The carcomp chirped as it accepted new data from the Andorian automated traffic control network, but Shran barely noticed as he stared through the opaque window at the passing terrain. Dormant was beginning, as Andoria's orbit carried her farther away from both the gas giant she orbited and the even more distant sun, and signs of the impending cold season were beginning to appear. Already, the days seemed shorter, and the precipitous drop in temperature was bracing even to natives. Soon, the attendants would begin patrolling the streets, wearing their distinctive heat-gowns as they made sure there weren't any obstructions on the streets. Only the bravest of Andorians – which was, most of the time, synonymous with stupid – voluntarily ventured out during Dormant.

With a grunt, Shran turned his attention to the carcomp and spent a few moments studying the reports that flickered across the screen. He frowned at the intelligence on the humans' war; their defeat at the place they inexplicably called Acheron was all over the news-nets, and Shran heaved a silent sigh of relief when he saw that Archer had survived. There were few pinkskins who seemed to understand Andoria as well as Archer did, and his death would have been a terrible loss.

The groundcar slowed and turned into the cul-de-sac that led to Shran's domicile. Even before the vehicle began slowing, he felt his tension and anger begin to melt away as Jhamel's presence in his mind grew. She was quite happy to feel his arrival, and Shran found himself smiling at her contagious good cheer. He didn't know how she managed to be persistently positive, not after having been told – diplomatically, of course – that she was no longer welcome among the Aenar, but he gave thanks to

Uzaveh the Infinite for bringing her into his life, no matter the tragedy that had preceded her arrival. That his relationship with her was cause for scorn among many Andorians was irrelevant, even if it meant they would never find an Andorian or Aenar *shen* or *chan* to join them in a *shelthreth* bondgroup.

Shran silently grieved for the children that would never be.

Stop it, Jhamel's voice echoed in his head as the groundcar came to a stop. Smirking at the subtle chastising feel of her thoughts, he climbed out of the vehicle, pausing for a moment to inhale the sharp taste of home. Shran loosened his uniform jacket slightly, recalling with some amusement the first time he had seen a Vulcan ambassador step onto Andorian soil; the memory of the woman's nearly horrified expression as wind sliced through her clothes was something he still chuckled at. From that point on, she had only ventured out of the consular quarters with heavily insulated gear. Shran had even heard rumors that the assignment to Andoria was considered a hardship tour for Vulcans.

"You were angry today," Jhamel accused him as entered the domicile. She was seated on the round backless chair she preferred, and he shrugged his antennae in response.

"They didn't listen," he said, anger once more creeping into his thoughts. The fools wouldn't see that they were being manipulated by a force clearly intent on conquering the entire quadrant, he reflected bitterly. Instead of focusing on the future, they kept their myopic focus on Vulcan and the perceived threat there.

"What are you going to do?" she asked him, her sparkling presence in his mind washing away the anger and frustration like the warmth of First Thaw. Shran sighed.

"I don't know," he admitted, although that wasn't entirely truthful. He knew what he *needed* to do, but his stomach turned at the direction those thoughts would take him. When he had sworn service to the Guard, he had done so out of loyalty to his people and government. The very idea of taking arms against that same government, even if it had ceased serving the people, left a bitter taste in his mouth. It wouldn't be a peaceful transition of power, not unless he could appeal to the chancellor directly and point out where the Council had gone astray. He was so lost in thought that he didn't realize Jhamel had stood until she placed her hand on his face.

"I have faith in you," she smiled, her thoughts radiating her absolute trust in him. Whatever he decided to do, she would support and aid him, no matter the situation. He hardly felt like he deserved such devotion.

"You give me too much credit," Shran muttered, wincing at the mental chortle she answered him with.

"You give yourself too *little* credit," Jhamel retorted as she reclaimed her seat on the backless chair. "Trust your instincts, Shran. They haven't failed you yet, have they?" Shran gave her a sour look; he hated it when she was right, which was, he'd realized, most of the time. Smiling, Jhamel picked up the odd-looking wind instrument that had once belonged to her brother; she had tried to teach Shran how to play, but had given up when he displayed a staggering amount of incompetence with it.

As Jhamel's music filled the air, Shran drew in a steadying breath and walked to the wall monitor. He didn't want to do this, but could see no other option. Drawing a deep breath, he reached out and activated the comm system.

Seconds later, the wall monitor snapped to life.



The wall monitor was already active when she entered the command center.

Still trying to get the last of the decontamination gel out of her ear, Hoshi Sato-Reed entered the converted laboratory a step behind Lieutenant Commanders Eisler and Hess. Following their return to *Endeavour*, Phlox had immediately ordered them into Decon for an abbreviated, but no less intense, anti-radiation treatment. The doctor had chatted with Hoshi through the comm panel for the entire hour, much to Eisler's evident discomfort. As much as she wanted to enjoy her conversation with Phlox, Sato had been constantly distracted by thoughts about what they had discovered on the Romulan weapon, and she knew her inattention showed. Thankfully, the doctor picked up the slack in the conversation, evidently realizing that she desperately needed to think about something *other* than the fact that the Romulans had access to top secret, classified Starfleet security codes.

Anna Hess had interrupted twice during that hour, both times ostensibly to get additional technical data regarding the warhead from Commander Eisler, but Hoshi suspected that excuse was just a ruse. The tactical officer's body language had undergone a surprising change while he talked to Anna, one that Hoshi couldn't quite explain. He was both angry and happy, yet fearful and confident, all at the same time. Never before had she been as confused about someone; even T'Pol had been easier to read when she first came aboard *Enterprise*.

Once given the all clear from Phlox, Hoshi had followed the two lieutenant commanders as they led her toward the command center. Anna was in a foul mood the entire short trip, rubbing her right hand through the glove that she wore on it. Hoshi winced at the foul stench emitting from the hand, recognizing it as one of Phlox's remedies; she idly wondered how the engineer had injured the hand. At Eisler's sidelong glance, though, Hess had stopped fidgeting with the glove and an embarrassed look had flashed across her face before it was quickly replaced by a scowl. Even then, Anna's body language seemed to be giving off a strange protective vibe directed toward the very capable tactical officer.

Hoshi was absolutely baffled by their interaction.

In many ways, it reminded her of how Malcolm and Trip had interacted during the Xindi mission. Hess was acting as if Eisler was hurting or injured (even though he clearly wasn't) and she wasn't sure how to offer comfort or solace, which naturally led to awkwardness. At the same time, the tactical officer was vacillating between simple appreciation of her presence and bristling at her, almost as if she was overstepping her bounds with him.

As they entered the turbolift that would carry them to B Deck, Hoshi found herself worrying about the situation on Earth. If the Romulans deployed weapons against Earth like the one that was now being taken apart by Lieutenant Commander Eisler's security teams, no one was safe. She desperately wanted to send a comm-pulse to Maddie and tell her to get little Malcolm to safety, but where would they be safe? Entire colonies had been completely obliterated by the Romulans since the war started; New Elysium, Salem Station, Terra Nova, Acheron ... the list went on. Hoshi shivered slightly, wondering briefly if the Reeds and her mother would consider an extended trip to Vulcan.

The thought of trying to convince Stuart Reed to abandon his new home in Sussex nearly caused her to smile. He was nowhere near the troll that Malcolm had always painted him to be. Gruff, yes, and uncompromising in his ideals, but hardly a monster. Seeing him dote on little Malcolm was always a sight to behold, and Hoshi just knew that Stuart would spoil the boy mercilessly in the coming years. Anyone with eyes could see that the grandfather lived for the grandson.

No, she decided. She wouldn't let these damned Romulans chase her or her family off the planet of their birth.

"-absolutely sure they're Starfleet codes?" Admiral Archer's image on the wall monitor was asking as they entered the command center. The lines on his face had deepened since their earlier contact with him, but it was entirely understandable in light of their recent discovery.

"Yes, sir," Trip replied. He too was grim as he glanced toward the trio of arriving officers before returning his full attention to Archer.

"I've got the technicians working on updating the defense systems," the admiral announced, his features implacable. It immediately reminded Hoshi of how emotionally closed off he had become during the Expanse mission, and she found herself grieving anew for the loss of Erika Hernandez. Sato had not known the captain well, but had seen the way Jon Archer's face lit up when Hernandez entered the room.

She tried not to think about how much in common she had with her old captain now.

Despite that, however, her thoughts instantly turned toward Malcolm. It angered her that she could go days without thinking about him, only to be reminded of him when she arrived home to greet the little boy who had his father's eyes and tendency toward trouble. Even more distressing was how Malcolm's family – now *her* family – seemed to understand. It was almost as if they expected her to move on with her life, no matter how much she didn't want to.

"But if the Romulans have the IFF codes," Archer continued bleakly, his harsh voice breaking into her train of thought, "our orbital platforms won't even fire at them!"

"Can't the weapons platforms be fired manually?" Eisler asked, and the admiral shook his head in disgust.

"No." The contempt in Archer's voice was easily detectable. "The *geniuses* that designed them never planned for this contingency." He frowned. "I'm reading your initial report, Commander," he said to Eisler, "and you used some acronyms that I don't know. Emm Eye Are Vee, for example..."

"It's pronounced MIRV, sir," the tactical officer stated, combining the letters to form a word. "It stands for multiple independently-targetable re-entry vehicle." Eisler began to warm to the subject, inexplicably reminding Hoshi of Malcolm whenever he was describing a weapons system of any kind. "There are multiple warheads on a single weapons system, each capable of targeting a different location. They were primarily used on nuclear missiles in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries."

"And this thing has twelve of them?" Archer was aghast and Hoshi found herself in complete agreement.

"Yes sir. Each with a sixty to eighty megaton yield." The tactical officer's words were chilling.

"My God," the admiral whispered in horror. "The weapon that destroyed Washington, D.C. in World War Three was only twenty megatons."

"There is an additional complication, Admiral," T'Pol announced from the station she was working at. "According to our scans, the exterior hull of the weapon is comprised of sensor-absorbing polymers that will make detection difficult."

"It's got sensor baffles too," Trip added. He was frowning, prompting Hoshi to wonder how often he smiled these days. His expression seemed to be perpetually dour. "I doubt any other sensor operator in the fleet could have even detected this thing." At his words, T'Pol straightened fractionally, clearly deriving pride from her mate's compliment. To Hoshi's slight amusement, however, Tucker didn't even seem aware that he *had* complimented the Vulcan. He was, after all, simply stating a fact.

"Send me everything you've got," Admiral Archer ordered. "I'll have these readings uploaded to every ship in the system in case there are any more of these things." He suddenly frowned. "T'Pol, how many of these weapons could a bird of prey carry?"

"I have no way of knowing that, Admiral," T'Pol responded without hesitation. "Based on the size and the dimensions of the birds of prey we have encountered previously, however, I would estimate no more than twenty."

"Twenty?" The admiral shook his head in horrified disbelief. "I hope you're wrong," he admitted.

"As do I, Admiral."

"Keep me posted," he ordered. "Archer out." His image winked out.

"Are we anywhere closer to finding this bird of prey?" Trip asked immediately. T'Pol's expression was not encouraging.

"Lieutenant Rostova is recalibrating the sensor array to my specifications," she said by way of explanation. "I am hoping to increase the sensitivity of *Endeavour's* sensors by approximately two point zero zero three percent."

"That much, huh?" Tucker asked sarcastically, earning himself the Eyebrow of Doom.

"As we have noted in the past," the Vulcan stated, her tone a touch acerbic, "Romulan ships are inherently difficult to track. A ship with a dedicated crew and sufficient training could conceivably avoid our sensors indefinitely."

"That's not good enough," Trip declared. "We *have* to find this ship before it launches more of these things." He gave his Vulcan first officer a look Hoshi couldn't begin to comprehend. "Draft whoever you need, T'Pol. Do whatever needs to be done." With a frown, he then pinned Hess with a look even as he continued addressing the Vulcan. "You have the authority to do *whatever* is necessary to find this thing," he said. Hess' expression soured, but she did not contest the instruction.

"Understood." T'Pol quirked an eyebrow in Hoshi's direction. "I suggest that Lieutenant Commander Sato continue to examine the guidance computer of the Romulan weapon, while I focus on extending our sensor net."

"I might be able to pull some useful data off of it," Hoshi said, hoping she wouldn't be proven wrong.

"Good." Trip glanced at Hess. "And you can help me tear that thing's impulse drive apart. Let's see if we can find anything in there that might help us track them." Anna nodded. "Let's get to work."



His hard work had paid off.

Leaning back from the half-crouching, half-kneeling position he'd been stuck in for the last hour and a half, Lieutenant Junior Grade Nathaniel Hayes winced as his lower back muscles protested. Smoothing away any visible signs of discomfort, he gave his commanding officer a discreet glance, hoping Lieutenant Commander Eisler hadn't noticed.

Naturally, he had.

Following the discovery of the fission bomb more than a day earlier, the tactical officer had assumed command of the STAB teams so they could focus on dismantling the weapon for study. Once he had been satisfied that it would not simply detonate, Eisler had ordered the weapon brought aboard *Endeavour* so he could focus on completely taking it apart. At first, the captain had balked at that idea, but the tactical officer had compromised by suggesting that the weapon be kept in the aft launch bay in the secondary hull; in case of emergency, pressing a single button would open the entire bay to vacuum.

Nate had found himself eager to work alongside Eisler for this task. While the senior tactical officer was mostly incompetent when it came to piloting or engineering, his uncanny talent with explosives of any kind was always fascinating to observe. The fact that he knew how to dismantle a fission bomb of this size was nothing short of extraordinary, especially given the fact that Earth hadn't used them in nearly two hundred years, and Hayes had leaped at the chance to learn at the older man's feet. In Nate's line of work, it was always good to know such things.

Unfortunately, Hayes had quickly discovered that most of the work involved back-breaking manual labor as they slowly – oh, so slowly – disassembled the outer casing of the weapon. Fusion torches were deemed too great a safety risk, so power saws with actual blades instead of lasers were the tools of the day. Once removed, the hull and guidance computers were immediately turned over to Commander T'Pol's science team for study.

The twelve warheads were then carefully removed so that they too could be disassembled. Each was slightly larger than a photonic torpedo, and was equipped with maneuvering rockets as well as an integrated electronic countermeasure suite. The guidance package on each warhead was also surprisingly advanced, apparently capable of identifying bio-signs from orbit. What had initially appeared to be a primitive weapons system was quickly revealing itself to be anything but.

"Lieutenant." Eisler's voice was sharp and abrupt, exactly like the man himself, and Nate glanced up

from where he was cutting into the casing of the twelfth warhead. "I need you to take over," the tactical officer stated grimly; he was attempting to extract the neo-polonium neutron trigger from the eleventh warhead. This trigger would initiate the chain reaction that led to fission, and was highly radioactive. "My hand is cramping," Eisler finished as he backed away from the exposed weapon. He was rubbing his gloved right hand and flexing the fingers of that hand at the same time.

Swallowing the lump in his throat, Hayes stepped forward and took the lieutenant commander's place before the warhead. Nate stared at the dodecahedron-shaped neutron trigger for a moment, noting instantly that there were a number of slender rods encircling the neo-polonium. If the trigger touched any of these rods, detonation would probably occur. Wishing they had a robotic arm capable of doing this job, Hayes carefully reached for the trigger.

Long moments passed as he slowly extracted the neo-polonium from the casing. He could hear his heart hammering as he willed his hands not to tremble. The slightest error could be fatal, and he still dreamed of dying at an extremely advanced age. His sigh of relief when the neutron trigger was free echoed through the launch bay.

"That was well done," Eisler complimented softly. There was an air about the tactical officer that nearly caused Nate to frown. He could feel the lieutenant commander's eyes on him, as if the older man was studying an animal or a hostile threat that needed to be subdued. Incredibly, Hayes realized that, despite his clear physical and mental superiority to the other man, Eisler frightened him.

And that infuriated him.

"You have some experience dismantling explosives," the tactical officer continued, his tone knowing. The expression on Eisler's face was calm, almost uncaring, but Hayes wasn't fooled. When he glanced at the lieutenant commander, he was abruptly reminded of a cobra, and braced himself for the strike.

"Part of the job description, sir," Nate replied to the unspoken question, a forced smile on his face. He carefully placed the neo-polonium neutron trigger into the containment case and sealed it. With it tucked away, they could turn to removing the conventional explosives and the uranium isotopes still encased within the weapon, thus rendering it completely inert.

"Which job would that be, Lieutenant?" Eisler asked. There was no doubt in the tactical officer's voice as he spoke, and he stood in a deceptively casual stance. Every one of Nate's instincts was screaming that he was in danger, and he licked his lips unconsciously. *He knows*, Hayes realized.

"I don't understand, sir," he said in an attempt to gain time. His eyes flickered toward the distant door, and he suddenly understood why the tactical officer had requested his assistance on this shift.

"You don't lie well," Eisler retorted, eyes narrowed. "And you're not as careful as you think." Nate frowned slightly at that, wondering what could have given him away. "That's to be expected, though," the lieutenant commander continued, eyes never leaving Hayes' face, "Your kind has a tendency towards arrogance."

"My kind?" Nate knew he was frowning, and tried to hide it. "You mean Canadian?" he asked in as joking a manner as he could, even as he calculated the odds of getting out of this situation without having to resort to violence. They were depressingly slim. He'd sparred with the tactical officer a few times in the past and, even with his reflexes and strength, had found himself unable to defeat the man.

"I mean Augments," the lieutenant commander said coldly. Hayes took a step back instinctively, glowering as Eisler shifted his own position to block the path to the doorway. It was a subtle move, but one that displayed the ex-MACO's absolute confidence in his own abilities. He knew Nate was stronger and faster, yet was unafraid.

"If that's the case," Hayes replied softly, "then I'd have to kill you to keep my secret."

Eisler laughed.

It was a sharp bark of total amusement that sent a jolt of fury surging through Nate's veins. He trembled as he clenched his hands into fists, and grit his teeth against the red tide that thundered through his vision. How dare this pathetic genejoke mock him!

"Better men than you have tried," the tactical officer stated with a cold smile. "And even better Augments as well."

Shock washed through Hayes at those words, and his fury vanished. He stared at the lieutenant commander with wide eyes. As if he knew what Nate was experiencing, Eisler smiled once more.

"Is that what they told you?" he asked. "That you were the only one?" The tactical officer shook his head in slight disgust. "Let me guess," Eisler continued. "Project Achilles? Or was it the Morituri Process? You're not Asian, so it can't be the Chi You Program, and the Shiva Protocols were shut down nearly thirty years ago."

"How do you know all of this?" Nate asked, even as he felt the sharp stab of betrayal. Harris had assured him that the Achilles Project had been a fluke, an illegal government program that hadn't been replicated since or before. Hayes knew about Soong and his Augments, of course, but that had been an isolated incident involving a single individual.

Hadn't it?

"You don't know much about humanity, do you?" Eisler queried. There was no mockery in his voice, and he appeared to have relaxed slightly. "The moment humans discovered that they *could* tamper with genetics, they started doing exactly that." Contempt was in his voice as he continued. "And kept doing it. Evolution isn't quick enough for some people." The tactical officer paused, once more studying Nate through narrowed eyes. "Including your Mister Harris," Eisler said calmly.

"How do you know that name?" Hayes asked, shock robbing him of coherent thought. Once more, the lieutenant commander smiled; it was eerie seeing him do so, and it sent a shiver up Nate's spine.

"I've encountered your type before," the TAC replied. "Smart, fast, and impossibly strong men or women brainwashed into obeying the Section, or the Bureau, or the Ministry, or whatever acronym they're using to identify themselves now." Eisler frowned. "Eventually, your kind always starts to question why they're obeying instead of commanding, and the kill order is issued."

"Red Sabre," Nate said abruptly, prompting Eisler to narrow his eyes fractionally. "You were a member of the Red Sabre team." Hayes could remember his parents talking about rumors that were circulating about a black ops MACO kill team that no one could actually verify the existence of. Command always

denied the team's existence.

"The official designation," Eisler responded softly, "was Special Projects. Red Sabre never existed." There was steel in the tactical officer's voice as he continued. "In my life, I've killed seven Augments working for your ... organization, Lieutenant. Men and women who thought they were better than everyone else, and lost sight of their roles in society." His eyes might as well have been cybernetic implants for all the emotion they revealed. "Harris and his people serve a necessary purpose," the TAC declared. "But they – and you – are not *entirely* above the law. Step out of line and I *will* deal with you." Eisler smiled; it was a feral expression, utterly and completely devoid of human emotion. "And trust me, Lieutenant: you will never see it coming."

"Why are you telling me this?" Nate asked as the tactical officer started to turn away.

"The captain and the XO clearly know about you," the lieutenant commander replied, "so you're serving a purpose. Providing information, I presume." He shrugged. "Whatever your arrangement is, I don't care." His voice darkened. "But step out of line once, and I won't hesitate to neutralize you," he said, before leaning closer. "Every surviving member of Special Projects knows about you now, *Augment*. Don't fuck up." Eisler gestured to the remaining warhead. "I still need that hull removed, Lieutenant." Blinking in slight surprise, Nate nodded slowly.

"Aye, sir," he said in response as he turned away. The whine of the power saw was surprisingly comforting as it drowned out every other sound in the launch bay. It gave him time to think.

And he had a *lot* to think about.



She had had far too much time to think about this.

Shifting her posture slightly, Commander T'Pol studied the data now appearing on the master display, a subtle frown on her face. For the last seventy-five hours, she had been here in the command center, monitoring *Endeavour's* sensor scans as well as coordinating the fleet-wide search for the Romulan ship. In that time, two additional fission bombs had been located and destroyed, five smugglers had been detected and apprehended, two asteroids had been discovered that contained rare minerals that would be beneficial to Starfleet needs, and one previously uncharted comet had been officially classified as P/2157 D3 T'Pol (due primarily to Trip's influence.)

But there had been no sign of the Romulan bird of prey.

Frustration threatened to spoil T'Pol's poise, but utilizing her many years of experience, she suppressed the emotion under a layer of rigid self-control. Indulging in a moment of annoyance, no matter how desirous it may be, would not get her closer to locating the bird of prey. There was no doubt that the warship was still there, and T'Pol was intent on finding it. She simply wished that it did not feel like she was overlooking something.

Her sensor board chirped, informing her that the latest adjustments to the sweep pattern were now going active. At her direction, all of the ships in the Sol System had linked their sensors together to

form a system-wide sensor net. Boomer transports, *Iceland*-classes, *Daedalus*-classes, even the Tellarite and Vulcan ambassadorial ships currently in Earth orbit were joining together to scan the system.

And they were *still* not detecting the Romulan ship.

"Ignoring me won't make me go away," Phlox informed her from where he stood at the doorway. For the past thirty hours, the doctor had been pestering her to rest. Ignoring the urge to sigh, she gave him a sidelong look.

"I am not ignoring you, Doctor," she responded as she turned her attention back to the master display screen. The digital image representing the UES *Saratoga* was now flashing, indicating that the *Iceland*-class ship had detected an anomaly and was moving closer to investigate. "My duties, however, require my full attention," T'Pol continued.

"You need rest," the Denobulan declared, stepping closer and violating her personal space. T'Pol instinctively stiffened before frowning slightly; Phlox knew she was uncomfortable with such blatant physical closeness, and was likely trying to either put her on the defensive or to intimidate her. Neither would work, of course, but it was a fascinating display of his keen insight into psychology. It was at times like this that she was reminded of the doctor's own amazing intellect and experience: he was, after all, older than she was.

"I do not have the time to rest, Doctor," T'Pol retorted sharply. The incoming data stream from *Saratoga* altered, and she fought the urge to glower at the false alarm. Beside her, the Denobulan crossed his arms in frustration. Fortunately, he took a step back, evidently recognizing that his latest tactic was not working. "Your concern for my health is appreciated, but unnecessary. As you know, Vulcans can go several days without sleep."

"T'Pol, you've been awake for over ninety hours," Phlox argued. "You haven't slept. You haven't eaten. You haven't meditated." A beep from the master display caused him to hesitate, but he continued once he saw that it was a routine status report from the *Beijing*. "I have the authority to relieve you," he said ominously.

"You do." T'Pol turned to look him in the eye. "In the past seventy-five point three hours," she stated calmly, "My presence here has led to the discovery of two additional fission bombs." He blinked in surprise at that, which was to be expected. His duties in sickbay had prevented him from attending the most recent command briefing; two of the STAB personnel who had disabled the first fission bomb were experiencing the first stages of radiation sickness; a fractured seal on one of the warheads had been discovered too late. She made no mention of the fact that this fracture was likely the only reason she had been able to detect the weapon in the first place. "I am well aware of my limits, Phlox," T'Pol said, purposely using his name instead of his honorific. She hoped he recognized the honor she paid him in doing so.

The wall comm interrupted whatever he was about to say.

"Sato to T'Pol." The Vulcan's hand was reaching for the comm panel before she was entirely aware of it.

"This is T'Pol."

"I've finished my partial reconstruction of the targeting profile," the linguistics officer announced, a hint of triumph in her voice. "Uploading it to your station now."

"Acknowledged," T'Pol replied as the incoming file appeared on her screen. She silently urged it to load faster. Behind her, Phlox stood quietly. "I have the data now," the Vulcan stated as she began to study the translation in front of her. Sato had spent the previous three days laboriously reconstructing and translating the fission bomb's guidance software, hoping that it would provide some insight into the bird of prey's location or sensor profile.

"Those are Denobulan bio-signs," Phlox said abruptly. He stepped forward, pausing the data's advance. "And human, and Vulcan, and Tellarite." His expression tightened as he advanced forward slightly. "There are a dozen different species here ..."

"It appears that the guidance software is able to differentiate between life signs from orbit," T'Pol remarked. She pressed a button on the console, advancing the data slightly. "And then select targets for the maximum number of casualties," she continued. It was both monstrous yet efficiently logical. By targeting civilian populations with a weapon such as this, the Romulans could effectively neutralize their enemies' supplies of fresh troops.

"Commander Sato, inform the captain," T'Pol said into the comm line. It was mostly a formality, as she could feel Trip's horrified disgust at their discovery through the bond, but it was a necessary one for the official record. "I am examining the sensor data now, and will have an update for him in five minutes."

"Aye, ma'am. Sato out." The comm line went dead, and T'Pol spent a long moment staring at the data on the screen. Phlox had not budged from where he stood, and was examining the display with equal intensity.

"How has the Romulan ship avoided detection?" he asked, and T'Pol raised an eyebrow at that. She had no concrete proof, of course, but her research pointed toward a strong possibility.

"By taking his warp core offline," she replied. Almost instantly, she was aware of the less than precise nature of her response, and the urge to blame Trip for her use of a pronoun to describe the Romulan ship was nearly overwhelming. She caught herself pressing her tongue against the side of her cheek, and sighed almost imperceptibly. Clearly, she was more tired than she thought. Trip's unconscious habits only bled through when she had not meditated sufficiently.

"That would trap the ship in the system," Phlox realized. He reached forward and advanced the data.

"Yes, but it would also significantly reduce the ship's sensor profile." She backed the data up as she spoke, earning herself a sheepish look of apology from the doctor. "Given the Romulan predilection for self-destruction rather than capture," T'Pol remarked, "It is logical to assume that the crew of this ship is aware that it has a small chance of survival." With her left hand, she began inputting new sensor frequencies based on some of the data she was studying. Phlox watched her for a moment, but said nothing; his silent yet steady appraisal was mildly disconcerting, and caused her to make a minor error in her calculations. She quickly corrected it, however, and was confident that he did not see the mistake in the first place.

As she was about to upload the revised sensor sweep patterns to the fleet, familiar readings in the guidance software caught her attention, causing her to hesitate. Frowning, she spent another long moment studying the data. Anger flooded through her then as she realized the extent of her error, and her fingers began flying across the console. Phlox's surprise was evident, and T'Pol fought to suppress the emotion on her face. She was only partially successful.

"Commander?" the doctor asked in the moment before the computer accepted her new commands. The comparison between the fission weapon data and the sensor net was almost instantaneous. T'Pol felt her stomach clench at the horrifying truth.

The Romulan ship was posing as the UES *Saratoga*.

She struck the Transmit button on the comm panel with slightly more force than was necessary, and Phlox jumped visibly at the sound.

"T'Pol to Tucker," she said sharply. "I've found the Romulan ship."

"Battle stations!" her mate's voice echoed from the comm panel, as T'Pol darted toward the exit.

A moment later, the klaxon began to sound.

ACT FOUR

The sound of the com chirp caused him to jump in surprise.

Seated in the cramped ready room of the UES *Triton*, Commander Aidan Cross looked up from the department reports on his tiny desk, momentarily glad for the brief reprieve. The level of readiness throughout the ship didn't worry him, even with the damage that was still not repaired; all of the department heads were combat veterans, and only the newest of them hadn't been aboard during Black's Bungle. At any other time, Aidan would have even been a little giddy at having being given his own command, but several years of experience aboard *Columbia* had clearly spoiled him. Everywhere he looked, he found himself comparing the oldest *Neptune*-class still in service to his previous ship.

Columbia won every time.

"What the hell did I do to deserve this?" he asked the empty air as he reached for the comm panel. His first command was supposed to be *Columbia* after Captain Hernandez was promoted to commodore or decided to retire, not a first generation *Neptune*-class that had been in service before Aidan entered college.

"This is Cross," he said into the comm-line. "Status report."

"Incoming message from Fleet Command," the voice of *Triton's* communications officer echoed from the wall panel, and Aidan straightened slightly in his seat. A communique from Command could only mean one thing - Admiral Archer.

"Patch it through," Cross ordered. For less than a heartbeat, he considered adding the comm officer's rank before realizing that he still didn't know it. It was frustrating: on *Columbia*, he had known every officer and enlisted man or woman by name and face. Here, he barely recognized the department heads and was still struggling with *their* names. Barely thirty seconds after Cross spoke, Admiral Archer's face appeared on the computer display.

"Commander," the admiral said in greeting, a grim expression on his face. The older man didn't waste time on pleasantries. "We've located the Romulan ship." Archer glanced to someone off-screen, before continuing. "It's the *Saratoga*,"

Icy shock pulsed through Cross, and he blinked in stunned surprise as he tried to comprehend what he had just heard. His eyes narrowed.

"Are you sure?" he asked, and Archer nodded.

"We're uploading the data to you now," the admiral replied. "*Endeavour* will be in weapons range in ten minutes and I've redirected all other ships to your location." Aidan swallowed, finally recognizing why Archer was telling him this. *Triton* was the closest ship to the Romulan vessel, and a single *Neptune*-class couldn't successfully tackle a bird of prey alone. The admiral was ordering them into harm's way, knowing that there was a strong possibility that they would not survive.

Aidan couldn't imagine having to make such a difficult choice.

"Understood, sir." Cross drew himself upright. "We'll hold them until *Endeavour* arrives."

"Good hunting, Commander." The tightness in Archer's face was obvious, and Aidan suddenly remembered the rumors surrounding the man and Captain Hernandez. He found himself hoping that those rumors weren't accurate after all.

"Thank you, sir. *Triton* out." Aidan was heading toward the door before the screen even blanked out. He stepped through the doorway and onto the bridge, noting the already tense atmosphere present. "Battle stations," he ordered as he moved to the command chair. "Helm, set an intercept course with the UES *Saratoga*, maximum impulse," Aidan continued. He dropped into the chair and primed the ship's log for ejection. "Tactical, lock onto *Saratoga* and fire as soon as we're in range."

"Sir?" The ensign manning the tactical board had a horrified expression on her face, and Cross gave her a sharp glance.

"It's *not* the *Saratoga*," he revealed grimly. Glancing in the direction of the science officer, Aidan spoke again. "TacOps," he demanded.

Instantly, the main viewscreen snapped to life, revealing a tactical operations display of the immediate area. Covering little more than 25,000 kilometers, the display gave Aidan an overview of the environment in which they would be engaging the Romulan ship. He grit his teeth at the massive sensor distortions already being caused by their proximity to the asteroid belt; many of the ores within the belt would cause havoc with *Triton's* sensors, and he found himself hoping that the Romulan ship would have the same problems.

"Incoming from *Saratoga*," the communications officer announced. He was a skinny junior lieutenant who looked much younger than his twenty-five years. "Audio only," the lieutenant added with some surprise. For Cross, that confirmed more than any data Starfleet Command had sent.

"Weapons range in twenty seconds," the ensign at tactical said in response to Aidan's look. Nodding, Cross leaned back in his command chair.

"No response," he told the communications officer. On the tactical display, the image representing the *Saratoga* was beginning to maneuver toward the asteroid belt, clearly intending on using it as cover. *Here we go*, Aidan told himself as he gripped the armrests of the command chair. A beep from the tactical board informed him that they were in weapons range. "All weapons: fire," he ordered.

Phase cannon fire sliced out, burning through the hard vacuum, even as a pair of Mark VI photonic torpedoes rumbled from *Triton's* launch tubes. The *Saratoga* – or rather, the *image* of the old *Iceland*-class – twisted into a spiraling dive as the twin warheads corkscrewed toward it. Bright green bursts of disruptor fire flashed from the pursued ship's guns even as the false holographic image surrounding it flickered and died, revealing a bird of prey. Romulan point-defense systems opened up, ripping apart the two torpedoes before they could get within a hundred kilometers of their intended target.

Diving around one of the seemingly motionless asteroids, the bird of prey accelerated deeper into the asteroid belt, and Aidan frowned darkly. Navigation through the field wouldn't be that hard – the density of the material within the belt was so low that the odds of a collision were less than one in a billion – but the difficulty of detecting and targeting the Romulan ship would only increase the deeper they went.

Even as *Triton* banked into the asteroid field, the bird of prey was disappearing around one of the larger asteroids, engines burning bright against the darkness of space. Proximity alarms began sounding throughout *Triton's* bridge as the navigational deflector array began sucking up power to protect the ship from stellar debris tumbling through the belt. Aidan pressed a single button on the command chair controls, silencing the alarms instantly.

Spinning along its horizontal axis, the Romulan bird of prey suddenly raced back into view as it climbed over a twenty kilometer wide asteroid that sensors identified as 434 Hungaria. Disruptor cannons barking, the bird of prey accelerated toward *Triton* with frightening agility and grace. The searing energy slammed into *Triton's* polarized hull with explosive results; great chunks of hull plating were simply vaporized under the incredible heat of the directed energy beams, and the venerable *Neptune*-class shuddered under the fierce onslaught. A second salvo sliced into *Triton's* lower hull, completely incinerating one of the hull polarization systems.

"Return fire!" Cross shouted. The urge to displace the tactical officer was nearly overwhelming, but he suppressed it even as he issued additional orders. "Full evasive!"

Phase cannon fire briefly sketched out an outline of the nearly invisible force screen that surrounded the Romulan bird of prey, and Aidan swallowed a curse. Attempts to add a shield system to the old *Neptunes* had consistently met with failure, and were one of the reasons that they fought in groups of two or more. Alone, a *Neptune*, especially one as old as the *Triton*, was no match for a bird of prey, despite their similarities in size and mass.

Another salvo of disruptor fire slammed into *Triton*, this time carving a jagged scar along the entire hull and punching into the superstructure. Polarization systems began to fail shipwide, and hull breach alarms began shrieking their clarion cry. Like a wounded animal, *Triton* twisted into a spinning dive to avoid fire, even as her phase cannons continued to fire, uselessly pouring energy into the defensive screen that protected the Romulan ship. A hollow *thrum* sounded through the deckplates as another pair of torpedoes surged from the launch tubes; both were torn apart by the Romulan P-Def system almost instantly.

434 Hungaria loomed in front of *Triton*, its jagged surface shuddering as disruptor beams that missed the *Neptune*-class slammed into the asteroid. Chunks of reddish rock were torn free from the asteroid and sent spinning through the void as the bird of prey slid into a pursuit course behind *Triton*, disruptor cannons still barking fire. *Why haven't they used torpedoes?* Aidan wondered as the helmsman sent the *Neptune*-class into a steep, twisting climb to evade the enemy's shots. The inertial dampeners struggled with the abrupt change, and gravity pushed Cross back into the command chair.

Lethal fire continued to rain from the bird of prey, stabbing through the endless night and into the superstructure of *Triton*. An explosion rocked the Starfleet vessel as a disruptor beam burned into the port nacelle. Warp plasma ignited suddenly, ripping the nacelle apart with a flash of azure fire, and sending burning shrapnel into the already weakened hull. The force of the detonation sent *Triton* spinning out of control as maneuvering thrusters misfired and the impulse manifold fractured.

Clinging to his command chair, Aidan stared in horror as the *Neptune*-class ship tumbled toward 434 Hungaria. Alarms were shrieking as the crew struggled to regain control of the crippled ship, but Cross knew the truth.

He knew that they would be too late.



They were going to be too late.

Hands clinging to her console, Hoshi Sato-Reed stared in horror at the images now being displayed on the main viewscreen. The *Triton* was reeling under concentrated fire from a Romulan bird of prey, and she gasped as the *Neptune*-class ship shuddered under brutal barrages. Hull plating was sent spinning into the darkness, and Hoshi felt her stomach tighten.

Through the deckplates, she could feel *Endeavour's* impulse drive straining as Lieutenant Mayweather pushed the envelope, exactly like her brother would have done. Going to warp to cover the vast distance wasn't much of an option; in the best of times, it was dangerous to break the light barrier within the confines of a system, but with an exit point within an asteroid field? That was tantamount to suicide.

Out of the corner of her eye, Hoshi could see Trip leaning forward in his command chair, one hand gripping the armrest tightly as he studied the sensor feed in front of him. There were no immediate indications of worry on his face, although Hoshi had known him long enough to recognize the tightness around his eyes for the concern that it was.

On the viewscreen, *Triton* suddenly shuddered as Romulan disruptor fire burned into Starfleet vessel's hull, and Hoshi looked away, forcing herself to focus on the communications console in front of her. She didn't want to watch the *Neptune*-class die.

"The hell with this," Captain Tucker muttered abruptly. "Helm," he said loudly. "Stand by for warp speed."

"Captain-" T'Pol started to say, but Trip continued to speak over her, his tone implacable.

"Communications, sound collision," he ordered. As Hoshi obeyed, he continued, this time directing his comments to his first officer. "I'm not going to sit here and watch them die."

"I wasn't asking you to," the Vulcan retorted calmly as she manipulated her board. "Uploading recommended flight path to navigational control now." Hoshi's board beeped, and she gave the small display a quick glance.

"All stations report ready," she announced.

"At warp six," T'Pol continued, "it will take approximately six point three seconds to reach the target. Automatic warp shutdown is recommended."

"Do it," Tucker decided. On the main viewscreen, *Triton's* port nacelle suddenly exploded, and Hoshi forced herself to look away. "Engage," Trip said.

With an aggressive rumble, the warp drive of *Endeavour* engaged, and the NC-06 surged forward at two hundred and sixteen times the speed of light. The six seconds seemed to flash by, and *Endeavour* dropped from warp less than a thousand kilometers from the out-of-control *Triton*. Even as the NC-06

began to maneuver toward the two ships, the Romulan bird of prey accelerated away from the newly arrived Starfleet ship, clearly recognizing that the NC-06 outgunned him.

"Track them," Tucker snapped, before glancing in Lieutenant Commander Eisler's direction. "Get a tractor lock on the *Triton*," he ordered.

"Romulan craft is deploying mines," T'Pol announced from her station. A moment later, *Endeavour* shuddered slightly as its tractor beam locked onto the *Triton*. The sudden addition of millions of kilograms of mass caused the NC-06 to lurch to a virtual halt, and Hoshi winced at the resulting high pitched whine that echoed through the ship. The grimace that flickered across T'Pol's face was gone nearly before Sato saw it.

"*Triton* is stabilizing," the Vulcan said moments later. "Maneuvering thrusters are firing."

"Cut 'em loose," Trip instructed. "Helm, pursuit course for the Romulan ship." He leaned forward slightly. "Weapons are free."

Engines growling, *Endeavour* accelerated deeper into the asteroid belt. The viewscreen was suddenly alive with pyrotechnics as the point-defense systems on the Starfleet vessel began firing at the two barely noticeable mines, ripping the defensive weapons apart with x-ray laser pulses. A third mine began shifting position as its integrated thrusters began firing, but two of *Endeavour's* phase cannons opened up, their beams converging upon the explosive and vaporizing it.

"Where the hell is he?" Captain Tucker demanded, his expression tight. He glanced in T'Pol's direction.

"I am detecting multiple sensor contacts," the Vulcan revealed, her fingers dancing across her board. "All are relaying contradictory information." To Hoshi's ears, she sounded slightly surprised.

"Elaborate." Trip's words required an immediate response, and, once more, Hoshi realized how much he had changed. He no longer seemed to be the fun-loving extrovert he'd always pretended to be while aboard *Enterprise*; now, he wore authority like a coat, and the lines around his eyes revealed the cost that it was demanding. It wasn't that he seemed older – to the contrary, in fact – but the distance in his eyes lent him an air of aged wisdom.

At his words, however, T'Pol merely gave him a sidelong glance, complete with the raised Eyebrow of Annoyance. It was a slightly modified version of the Eyebrow of Doom, and Hoshi had learned that it was the Vulcan's way of expressing that whomever she was talking to at the time was being obtuse. In the early days of *Enterprise's* launch, it was a toss up as to whether Jonathan Archer or Trip Tucker received this particular Eyebrow more.

"I do not have sufficient data to do so," the Vulcan responded to the captain's demand before bending back over her board's viewer. "It is probable that the Romulan craft has activated its holographic cloaking device, while deploying a number of devices to confuse our scans."

"Countermeasures," Commander Eisler growled from his station.

"Confirmed." T'Pol pressed a button on her board, and the main viewscreen abruptly zoomed toward a specific target. At first, Hoshi thought it was the bird of prey; its albedo, color and general shape were

very similar to that of the Romulan warship. A flash from the engine section revealed the presence of maneuvering thrusters, but there was something not quite right about it, something that caused Hoshi to give it a second look.

"What the hell is that?" Trip asked, speaking Sato's thought.

"An inflatable decoy ballute," Eisler answered. He sounded mildly impressed, as if he approved of the Romulan's battle tactics. Tucker gave him an incredulous look, before returning his attention to T'Pol. She was still leaning forward, her eyes glued to her viewer.

"Detecting mass displacement equivalent to a bird of prey," she stated. "Outer hull appears to be a semi-flexible skin of duranium composites with internal structure comprised primarily of oxygen and helium." Her fingers tapped additional keys. "Additional components appear integrated to provide it with a close approximation of the bird of prey's sensor cross section," she finished.

"So, it *is* a decoy," Trip mused, ignoring the almost triumphant expression on Eisler's face. "Why haven't we seen these before?"

"Because we've always been outnumbered," the tactical officer rumbled. "This is the first time one of *them* is outgunned and being hunted."

"Fascinating," T'Pol muttered under breath, her comment pitched so low that Hoshi doubted anyone else heard it. "I am detecting debris that would indicate these decoys were deployed via torpedo."

"But what about the Romulan ship?" Trip asked, his fingers gripping the armrests of his chair. He appeared poised to stand, probably to pace, Hoshi presumed.

"As I stated earlier," the Vulcan first officer reminded him, "I am receiving contradictory information." She pressed another button on her board, and the main viewscreen returned to its broad overview. "Stand by."

"Slow to one-quarter," the captain ordered. He glanced toward Eisler. "Target those decoys and fire."

"Recommend we capture one for study," the tactical officer said, and Tucker nodded sharply.

"Contact!" T'Pol declared abruptly. "Bearing: one nine three mark one one four."

"That's behind us!" Trip realized. "Full evasive, maximum impulse!" he snapped. Lieutenant Mayweather was already applying acceleration, even before the captain spoke.

"Incoming!" Eisler's voice carried over the sudden wail of proximity alarms. Disruptor beams hammered into *Endeavour's* shields, rocking the Starfleet vessel, even as a trio of torpedoes screamed through the void. As the point-defense lasers began tracking the rapidly approaching warheads, Mayweather sent the NC-06 into a sudden, lurching dive. Hoshi felt her stomach suddenly jump into her throat as one of the torpedoes ignored the sudden flashes of pyrotechnics from *Endeavour's* countermeasure suite, and an overwhelming sense of *deja vu* washed through her. With effort, she pushed away the dark memories of the last battle she had been a part of as the p-def system ripped the incoming warheads apart.

Her heart was hammering as she focused her complete attention on the comm frequencies in an attempt to think about anything but the fact that she was once more in the middle of a battle. Six Starfleet vessels were en route, four of them *Daedalus*-classes. To her surprise, she discovered that a poorly armed Boomer ship was even now maneuvering toward the partially disabled *Triton* to tow it free of the combat zone, despite the many communications from Starfleet Command to stay clear.

Hoshi glanced up from her board, noting the attitude of focused determination that seemed to surround the three senior officers present. There was no concern, no panic at being outmaneuvered, or even a hint of worry about the ultimate result of this engagement.

She shook her head in amazement.



He shook his head in disbelief.

As *Endeavour* shook under a sudden salvo of fire from the bird of prey, Lieutenant Commander Rick Eisler found himself more than a little surprised at the sheer audacity of the Romulan commander. The Starfleet ship clearly outgunned the smaller Romulan warship, and committing to an attack run as the Romulan was doing made little tactical sense. If the enemy commander had not already displayed cunning, Rick would not have been worried.

"Hard to starboard!" the captain demanded as the Romulan ship continued to fire. Sizzling disruptor beams splashed against *Endeavour's* protective force screen, momentarily bathing the larger ship with a viridian hue that outlined the extent of its shield. Three torpedoes curled through the hard vacuum, shuddering in mid-flight as *Endeavour's* point-defense guns burned into them. Even as the Starfleet ship banked to the right, her own weapons were replying. Scarlet streams of phase cannon fire stabbed toward the bird of prey, splattering against the shields surrounding it.

To Rick's continuing surprise, the Romulan ship did not maneuver to maintain its position at *Endeavour's* aft, choosing to instead turn hard in the opposite direction. Eisler frowned at the unconventional tactic as he issued new instructions to Hayes' weapons teams; in response to these new orders, a quartet of Mark VI photonic torpedoes darted from the launch tubes, orienting themselves almost instantly toward the rapidly maneuvering bird of prey.

"Get us behind him!" Tucker ordered, and Lieutenant Mayweather's hands began dancing across her navigation board. Gravity pushed Rick back into his seat as the dampeners struggled with the sudden change in velocity. He frowned again as he studied the sensor feed at his station. Too late, he realized what the Romulan was doing.

Engines flaring brightly, the bird of prey rolled along its horizontal axis as it raced by one of the inflatable decoys, missing the ballute's surface by mere meters. The sudden merging of the Romulan and decoy sensor signatures confused the primitive tracking computers in the four pursuing torpedoes; three of them were completely fooled, and slammed into the decoy with a fierce explosion. The remaining warhead took two impossibly long seconds to discern between the conflicting signatures; it curved away from the exploding decoy to formulate this decision and, by the time that it decided to continue pursuing the bird of prey, its fuel supply had run out. Following its programming, it self-destructed harmlessly hundreds of kilometers away from either ship.

Displaying maneuverability that *Endeavour* could not match, the Romulan ship climbed into another attack run, this time approaching from an oblique angle that made targeting it with the primary weapons difficult. *Endeavour* shook once more as disruptor fire slammed into the shields. Rolling, the bird of prey abruptly dove away from the larger ship, engines flaring with what Rick assumed was the equivalent of afterburners.

"Mister Eisler," Captain Tucker said sharply, his tone tenser than it had been in a very long time. Rick shrugged slightly as he issued new instructions to the weapons teams loading the torpedo tubes.

"He's very good," the tactical officer replied as the Romulan ship continued its rapid evasive maneuvers. *Endeavour's* phase cannons were still spitting fire at the fast ship, but most of the shots went wide as the bird of prey jinked and rolled.

Under Mayweather's hand, *Endeavour* pursued the more agile ship doggedly, inexplicably reminding Eisler of a boxer relying on brute strength to defeat a much more nimble opponent. The commander of the Romulan ship seemed to recognize that he was outgunned, and continued to dance just out of optimal weapons range. Shots were exchanged, but with minimal effect.

"Got you!" Lieutenant Mayweather suddenly growled as the bird of prey began another wide turn. The lieutenant's hands flew across the helm console as she sent *Endeavour* into a steep, stomach-lurching climb. For a moment, Rick didn't comprehend what she had done, but the confusion dissolved as the Romulan ship banked directly into the NC-06's line of fire. Clearly, Mayweather had seen a pattern in the bird of prey's flight path and taken advantage of that.

Instantly, *Endeavour's* weapons systems unleashed a withering barrage of fire upon the smaller ship. Phase cannon fire punched through the bird of prey's weakening shields, carving jagged scars across the warship's hull. Four torpedoes roared from the launch tubes and screamed across the void; two were instantly destroyed by Romulan point-defense, and a third missed wide and detonated against a small asteroid chunk. The fourth warhead hit the bird of prey with hull-crushing force, but, incredibly, skipped off of the warship and tumbled end over end deeper into the asteroid field. Though the torpedo did not explode, the kinetic energy of its impact shattered hull plating.

Reeling under the brutal onslaught and trailing atmosphere, the bird of prey curved sharply away from the NC-06, momentarily exposing its aft quarter as it raced away. One of the engines was flickering sporadically, but before *Endeavour's* weapons could take advantage of this brief second of weakness, a mine-sized object was ejected from the Romulan ship and sent tumbling toward the Starfleet ship. Point-defense systems immediately began targeting the object.

And then, the object exploded.

Almost instantly, Rick's sensor feed went blank, and he heard a startled gasp come from another bridge officer. Glancing up quickly, he could see that the monitors on all systems had temporarily failed. Static flickered upon the main viewscreen, and all eyes turned toward the Vulcan first officer.

"Fascinating," she murmured, her fingers rapidly inputting commands to her station. "All external sensors have been affected," T'Pol announced. "Attempting to compensate."

As she worked, Eisler studied his own data with a frown. Prior to system failure, *Endeavour's* sensors

had detected massive damage on the bird of prey. He issued rapid instructions to the weapons teams, ordering them to concentrate all subsequent fire on the damaged areas. Once the targeting sensors were back online, he would have a better idea of how extensive the damage was to the Romulan ship.

"T'Pol..." The captain's voice betrayed his worry, and the Vulcan commander gave him a quick look that had a hint of annoyance in it.

"I am working as quickly as possible, Captain," she stated. "Complete restart of all sensor algorithms in thirty seconds."

"We might not *have* thirty seconds," Tucker retorted before glancing toward Rick. "Another new toy?" the captain asked grimly.

"Evidently," Eisler replied. "He's running scared now, sir." At the captain's disbelieving look, Rick continued. "If he had any more torpedoes, Captain, he would have used them while we're blind. This is the equivalent of popping smoke, sir." Tucker was silent for a moment.

"What the hell does that mean?" he asked, and Rick grimaced slightly, once more reminded that the captain didn't have the same training that he did.

"Infantry combat tactics, sir," Eisler stated. "To conceal their retreat, a unit throws smoke grenades."

"Sensors coming online," T'Pol declared. A heartbeat later, Rick's data feed came alive, and he glowered at the complete lack of a target. He quickly checked the number of decoy ballutes, noting that two more of them had been destroyed during the firefight. His board chirped as Lieutenant Hayes informed him that the weapons teams were operational and standing by.

"Where is he?" Captain Tucker asked, leaning forward in his command chair as he did.

"Scanning," the first officer replied. She was silent for at least thirty seconds. "I am detecting a debris field approximately seventeen thousand kilometers from our current position." Another moment passed as she input instructions. "Impulse wake ends at this debris field."

"It can't be *that* easy," the captain muttered, and Rick nodded in agreement. "Any sign of the holo-cloak?" Tucker asked.

"Sensor distortions are making scans unreliable," the Vulcan said as she manipulated the controls at her station. Suddenly, she paused and straightened from her crouch over the board's viewer. One eyebrow was quirked, and she gave Tucker a look that Rick couldn't possibly comprehend. The captain nodded, almost as if she had asked him something, and turned to Eisler.

"I want Remoras loaded," Tucker ordered quickly, "and programmed to target anything with a Romulan hull. If there's no impulse wake, that means he's on maneuverin' thrusters only." The captain's accent, usually barely noticeable, was particularly thick as he spoke.

"Aye, sir." Rick nodded his approval as he keyed in the new instructions for Lieutenant Hayes; use of the Remoras in this manner would be the equivalent of ancient sea-going ships using depth charges to flush out a hiding submarine.

"Lieutenant Mayweather," the captain continued, "slow to one-quarter and stand by for emergency thrust." His attention shifted to Lieutenant Commander Sato-Reed. "Hoshi, keep Starfleet vessels from pursuin'. It's about to get ugly in here."

"Remoras standing by," Rick announced. Tucker nodded, glancing once in T'Pol's direction. The Vulcan was bent over the scanner on her board once more, completely intent on whatever it was she was doing, and gave no hint that she was aware of the captain's look. Despite that, he nodded before looking at Eisler. With a frown, the captain spoke.

"Fire."



At Trip's command, *Endeavour* unleashed hell.

Hollow booms rumbled through the NC-06 as four Remora torpedoes roared from the launch tubes, breaking into multiple warheads almost instantly. The space around the Starfleet ship was alive with explosions as the warheads screamed toward their targets. The five remaining decoy ballutes were torn apart almost instantly as fully half of the explosive payload slammed into the decoys' duranium composite hulls. Most of the remaining warheads circled for long moments, seeking targets and ultimately self-destructing as their fuel supplies dwindled.

Most, but not all.

Two warheads angled sharply away from *Endeavour*, detonating with fierce flashes as they slammed into what seemed to be an invisible barrier. A third Remora shuddered inexplicably as it maneuvered in the same direction, a clear indication that it had been targeted by a Romulan point-defense system.

"Target," T'Pol abruptly announced. Her hands were flying across the Science board as she directed all of *Endeavour's* sensors toward the holographically cloaked bird of prey. Through their bond, Trip knew roughly what she was doing, but the science and equations that flickered through her consciousness were so far beyond his comprehension that he didn't even try to understand them. Her efforts, however, had an immediate effect. As the main viewscreen focused on the seemingly empty space, a sudden pulse of light from *Endeavour's* deflector array bathed the area with golden illumination.

Almost instantly, the Romulan bird of prey's holographic cloak failed.

"Fire!" Trip snapped, even though he realized it was unnecessary. *Endeavour's* phase cannons were already responding, sending lethal streams of burning energy across the silent void to slam into the Romulan's hull. Geysers of molten metal sprayed out from the bird of prey as the white-hot energy melted polarized hull plating. A second salvo punched into the warship's superstructure and sliced into the engineering section, venting debris and atmosphere into the hard vacuum. The bird of prey shuddered as its engines failed, and it began to slowly spin.

"Cease fire," Tucker ordered quickly as another phase cannon burst carved a jagged scar across the Romulan ship, this time cutting into one of the nacelles. "STAB teams stand by to deploy." A wave of relief washed through Trip as he realized that it was finally over. "Hoshi, hail the Romulan ship. Let's

see if-

"Incoming transmission," Sato interrupted. "Audio only." At Trip's nod, she pressed a button on her board; a chime sounded, indicating that the communications link was now active. The sound of T'Pol's fingers inputting commands into her station seemed remarkably loud, but Tucker pushed the thought away.

"*Shaoi dan, Endeavour.*" The voice that spoke was male and sounded pained. An odd accent flavored his speech as he continued. "This was a ... well fought battle and I salute you as the victor," the Romulan stated before his words dissolved into a paroxysm of coughing.

"Romulan warship," Trip said confidently. "Stand down and prepare to be boarded."

"That I cannot do, *Endeavour.*" Once more, coughing prevented the speaker from continuing. "I regret that I have but one additional duty to perform," the voice stated moments later. "You should get clear of us."

"Captain," T'Pol said suddenly, her voice pitched low so it wouldn't be picked up by the communication line. "I am detecting an energy surge in the Romulan warp core."

"Hard about," Trip demanded. "Get us out of here." Mayweather was already obeying as Tucker gave the viewscreen another look. He frowned at the incongruity of the Romulan's actions; tactically, it would have made more sense to draw *Endeavour* closer before activating any sort of auto-destruct. By warning the Starfleet ship away, the Romulan commander was instead ensuring that *Endeavour* would ultimately face and likely kill more of his species in the future.

It made no sense.

With a ferocious flash of light, the bird of prey violently self-destructed, vanishing in a ball of flame that ripped the hull apart and atomized metal. *Endeavour* shook as the shockwave of the warp core breach slammed into the retreating Starfleet ship. Alarms began shrieking their warning cries, but Master Chief Mackenzie silenced them without comment.

"Starboard nacelle is damaged and venting plasma," the COB announced. "Damage control parties on it." Trip glowered at that: *Endeavour* could reach warp speed with only one nacelle, but doing so was dangerous. Ships had been lost to core breaches while trying to maintain superluminal velocities with such an uneven warp field.

"Captain." Hoshi's face was scrunched up in an expression of concern as she spoke up, and she was cupping the earpiece in an attempt to focus on something. "Just before it exploded," she said ominously, "the Romulan ship sent out a comm-pulse."

"Can you track it?" Trip asked, including T'Pol in the question. Before the Vulcan could reply, Hoshi drew in a sharp breath.

"Reports of multiple detonations on Mars," the communications officer announced grimly.

"Set a course for Earth, maximum impulse," Tucker ordered. By his calculations, it would take over seventeen long minutes to reach their destination at impulse; even if both nacelles were fully

functional, *Endeavour's* current location made warp speeds even riskier. Only a fool or a desperate fool would try to break the light barrier this close to the system's gravity well. Trip shot a quick glance toward T'Pol, noting that she was discreetly watching him, concern lurking in her eyes. She had clearly caught the panicked memory of how he had felt when he had learned that Lizzie was gone, and the horrifying thought that it was happening again pounded through his mind.

He didn't even try to force a smile.

As *Endeavour* hurtled forward at just under one hundred and fifty thousand kilometers a second, Trip found himself leaning forward in his command chair, steepling his fingers in order to keep himself from tapping the armrests. It was only after a few moments that he realized how much he looked like he was praying. He did not change his posture, though. He *was* praying, after all.

Hoshi looked in his direction, a question on her face as she gestured to the comm board, and he nodded in response. She activated the bridge speakers, and instantly, Jonathan Archer's voice filled the air.

"-on my authorization," the admiral was saying, his tone bleak. "Planetary defenses are now active. No IFF codes will be recognized as valid. If any ship enters Earth's outer atmosphere, it *will* be fired upon."

"Contact," T'Pol declared suddenly, drawing Trip's attention. He silently chastised himself for becoming so focused on what the admiral was saying that he had briefly lost track of what was happening on the bridge. "Bearing: zero five two mark three zero four. It is now approaching Earth's upper atmosphere at maximum impulse." Without being asked, she activated the main viewscreen.

The shattered wreck of a Boomer ship dominated the image, and Trip winced with the realization that it had likely been destroyed by the defense grid once the IFF codes were taken offline. Planetary defense systems were already firing at the incoming ordnance, filling the void with lethal streams of excited plasma. Displaying amazing maneuverability, the fission bomb went evasive as it raced toward its destination. Trip felt his breath catch as the outer casing on the weapon fell away abruptly.

With a flare of igniting rocket motors, the twelve warheads launched.

One was torn apart by the planetary defense systems almost instantly, and three more quickly followed suit. Three *Daedalus*-class cruisers lumbered forward from the orbital drydocks, coordinating their firepower to create a more effective spread of fire; together, they blasted apart another one of the deadly warheads. The Vulcan ambassadorial ship – the *Ni'Var* – raced into the killing zone, absorbing heavy damage from the indiscriminate fire of the orbital cannons as it fired its own particle beams; one of the warheads was instantly vaporized, and a second was so badly damaged that it was a sitting duck for the orbital cannons. Incredibly, a rickety-looking Boomer cargo ship dove headlong into the midst of the crossfire, taking brutal phase cannon fire shots to its superstructure before colliding with one of the maneuvering warheads. Both vanished in a flash of atomic fire.

That left four.

One of the surviving warheads slammed into an orbital cannon, exploding with a ferocious burst of fire that completely atomized the target and sent a massive shockwave into many of the other weapons. A second warhead streaked toward the largest of the comm-sats currently in orbit, detonating hundreds of meters away from its target. The shockwave from the violent explosion smashed into the satellite and

sent it spinning toward the planet below. Somehow evading the concentrated firepower directed against them, the two remaining warheads fell into the atmosphere of humanity's birthplace.

Seconds later, Trip could see the detonations as they struck Earth.

ACT FIVE

Earth was in mourning.

From the aircar that was rapidly carrying him home, Jonathan Archer could see the indications of humanity's grief over the millions of lives lost only weeks earlier. Flags were at half-staff across the planet, and wreaths of flowers, both artificial and organic, seemed to be everywhere. Images of those lost – whether in Bombay, India, or Henan, China, or Sagan City on Mars – seemed to be the centerpiece of these memorial wreaths, and it was difficult to find someone who hadn't lost a friend, or co-worker, or passing acquaintance. For the first time since the immediate aftermath of the Xindi attack, Earth seemed *truly* united.

It was ironic, Jon reflected bitterly, that an attack that seemed intended to drive humanity apart had accomplished the opposite goal. Where there had once been petty squabbles over territory or representation in the UE senate, now there was complete unity of purpose. Never in the history of mankind had the entire planet been so focused on a single objective.

Or so furious.

Almost overnight, the groups protesting the war with the Romulans seemed to vanish as the mood toward the conflict underwent a massive change. The media especially altered how they were reporting the war, suddenly shifting their focus from the numerous military setbacks to the heroism of the men and women serving in Starfleet. The more cynical part of Jon's psyche wondered if the Romulan destruction of the communication satellite had been perceived by the journalists as an attack on the institution of the news media.

As the reports of the attack filtered in, Archer had initially been worried that this second attack on humanity's homeworld by extraterrestrial forces would reignite the simmering xenophobia that had caused so many problems in the past. To his surprise, however, that was not the case. The images of Ambassador V'Lar leading her consular teams into radiation-ravaged Bombay to lend assistance were splashed across the news-nets on an almost hourly basis, and the heroic actions of Captain Sopek of the *Ni'Var* had caused a massive shift in popular opinion for Earth's oldest ally. That Sopek was killed during his defense of humanity only turned him into a martyr.

"Incoming call," the carcomp announced, causing Jon to turn his attention away from the passing cityscape. "Identification: Starfleet Command."

"Accept call," Archer said as the aircar began descending toward ground level. The image of Jon's yeoman appeared upon the small dashboard screen. "What is it, Tyner?" Archer asked.

"I have the details about your meeting with the president, sir," the petty officer replied, and Jon nodded. "The shuttle departs at sixteen hundred and the meeting is scheduled for eighteen hundred." Tyner hesitated, and Archer gave him a 'get on with it' look. "There's a black tie reception at twenty hundred for the Chinese and Indian delegations, sir."

"Dress uniforms," Jon muttered darkly. He loathed these sort of functions in the best of times.

"Yes, sir." It was said with as much contempt as Jon felt; evidently, Tyner hated them too.

"Track down Lieutenant Reynolds and tell him to be ready at fifteen hundred." Archer decided. "I'll want both of you with me in case the president ambushes me with questions again."

"Aye, sir," Tyner said glumly. At Jon's look, he spoke again. "That's all, sir."

"Then get some sleep, Tyner. I'll see you in the morning. Archer out." He pressed the END button on the small display, causing the image of the petty officer to wink out.

"You have arrived," the carcomp declared in its monotone voice. The door retracted almost at the same time, and Jon climbed out of the small automated vehicle, pausing only long enough to grab his briefcase. One of the Starfleet Security officers waiting outside the apartments gave him a quick nod, and slid into the aircar to park it. Archer quickly walked toward the waiting turbolift, fishing out his identification as he did. An armed guard accepted his ID and checked it against the master roster, even though they had gone through this same routine every night for the past fifteen days.

The operator of the apartment's secured turbolift was a grizzled Starfleet veteran who only had one arm after having lost the other one during a plasma fire aboard the UES *Ganymede* several years earlier. He gave Jon a broad smile as Archer stepped into the lift.

"Evening, Eddie," Jon said in greeting. "Haven't seen you around lately." The lift lurched slightly as it began to climb, and retired Master Chief Petty Officer Edward Boyce shrugged slightly.

"Was at my boy's graduation, Admiral," the retired master chief said with another smile, before abruptly shaking his head bemusedly. "Can you believe he starts STC next week?" Jon blinked in surprise.

"I thought he was going to be a doctor," Archer commented. The last time they had spoken, Boyce had been bubbling with news about his son Robert's plans to become a surgeon.

"He is. Just for Starfleet now, instead of Johns Hopkins." The older man chuckled. "I swear, between the History and Moral Philosophy classes he's been taking, and these damned Gannett Brooks documentaries that keep airing, the boy is halfway convinced that he's destined to be an admiral!" There was no reproach in the master chief's voice, only amused pride. "At least he's not reading Hemingway again..."

"I can talk to him if you like," Jon offered, and Eddie laughed again.

"God no, sir. If *you* try to talk him out of it, he might just sign up for the infantry!" The master chief sobered slightly as the lift began to decelerate. "If it wasn't for this damned arm," he commented softly, an undertone of anger in his voice. "I'd try to sign back up myself."

It was a common refrain, one that Jon had heard numerous times since the attack on Earth. Retired Starfleet and MACO veterans had begun contacting recruiters within hours of the attack to inquire if they could rejoin the Service, many even offering to accept a reduction in grade as long as they were allowed to rejoin. At the same time, adults both young and old across the planet abandoned their previous vocations to volunteer for active duty. For the first time in its existence, the United Earth Space Probe Agency had more personnel than they knew what to do with. Manpower shortages were gone almost overnight.

And still, the volunteers were coming.

With a soft chime, the doors opened, and Jon gave a nod and smile to the retired master chief as he stepped out of the turbolift. There were only three doors on this level, and Archer was glad to see that the logistics officer who currently resided across from him was either asleep or visiting his mistress. The third door was currently vacant, although Jon suspected that Commodore Burnside Clapp – soon to be rear admiral – would be living there soon.

The moment that he stepped into his apartment, Archer knew something was wrong. He silently drew the phase pistol that Reynolds insisted he carry, and crept forward into the large living room. At any other time, he would probably have paused just beyond the threshold to stare at the ugly throw rug that Erika had loved so much, or the silly-looking vase she had bought from a Tellarite trader, or even the beautiful Vulcan wall hanging that he had purchased for her, but his attention was instead riveted on the man sitting on the couch.

Harris.

"The pistol isn't necessary, Admiral," the man stated with a slight smile. He nodded in the direction of where Dumas was lounging on one of the chairs. "I took the liberty of feeding your dog."

"Give me one good reason," Jon said grimly, "why I shouldn't just stun you where you sit."

"Because if you did," Harris replied, still smiling, "I couldn't help you."

"Help me?" Archer gave a short, mirthless chuckle. "What the hell do I need *your* help for?"

"It has come to my attention," the other man began, his jovial appearance transforming into a dangerous-looking glower, "that the real reason the planetary defense grid didn't work was *not* because of some mythical super stealth capability on the part of the Romulan warheads."

Jon hesitated for a moment, then slowly lowered the phase pistol. That had been the official story leaked to the media to prevent the public becoming aware that the Romulans had possessed Starfleet IFF codes. According to Archer's best estimate, less than ten people currently knew the truth. Even Gardner didn't know it yet, as Jon had been struggling with whom to inform. Daniels' warning about there being a traitor in Starfleet Command continued to ring in Archer's ears. If he told the wrong person, it could lead to disaster.

He studied the spymaster sitting on his couch for another long moment in an attempt to discern whether the man could be trusted or not. Very little was known about Harris, or the organization that he ran; Jon's attempts to learn more had consistently met with bureaucratic roadblocks or deleted files. Every flag officer that he had spoken to expressed a complete lack of knowledge about any such organization, although Archer doubted that many of them were speaking truthfully. His own research had yielded ominous coincidences since UESPA first launched a Starfleet.

And yet, everything that Jon had discovered seemed to indicate that Harris' organization was dedicated toward the defense of Earth, regardless of the methods they used.

"The Romulans had our IFF codes," Archer finally said, breaking the protracted silence. To his surprise, Harris frowned, clearly surprised at this revelation.

"That's ... less than ideal," the spymaster stated darkly. "I had expected that they may have penetrated the targeting stations with one of their operatives, but this is a bit more troubling." Harris leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees as he interlocked his fingers together. "You suspect a traitor in Command," he theorized, and Jon nodded.

"I have it on good authority that a traitor exists," he commented.

"From your Mister Daniels," Harris remarked. At Archer's surprised look, the spymaster offered another slight smile. "One or two of my people have had interactions with him in the past, Admiral," he smirked. "You can't conduct an investigation of this magnitude while running the war," Harris continued. "But *I* can." He rose to his feet. "I will keep you apprised of my findings, Admiral."

"Just like that?" Jon asked, narrowing his eyes. "From what Malcolm told me, you always have an angle." The spymaster chuckled softly.

"As a matter of fact, Admiral," he replied, "I do need your assistance in a small matter." Harris' expression was deadly serious as he spoke.

"What sort of matter?" Archer asked. Jon's eyes widened as Harris answered.

He certainly hadn't expected that.



Hoshi certainly hadn't expected him to show.

Standing at the open door, she stared at the sheepish expression on Phlox's face as he stood just outside her apartment. When she had extended the invitation for him to visit her here in London for Malcolm's birthday party, she hadn't been sure that he had actually heard her, and she certainly hadn't actually expected him to show up. With so many injuries from Acheron crowding Starfleet hospitals, as well as the millions of radiation victims from the Romulan attack still needing treatment, it hardly seemed likely that a physician of Phlox's amazing talents and skill would show up for something as trivial as an infant's first birthday party.

If she was entirely honest, Hoshi still felt a little guilty over throwing the party in the first place. It seemed ... wrong to be laughing and smiling while there were still so many people suffering in China or India or even on Mars. Up until the minute that her first guest arrived, she had honestly expected no one to show. That nearly everyone she had invited did appear seemed to validate her theory that they needed something to think about other than the fact that Earth itself had been attacked again.

"Your invitation did say that the party began at fifteen hundred," Phlox smiled. He was dressed in civilian attire and was carrying a large duffel bag.

"Of course! Come in!" Hoshi exclaimed as she backed away from the door and quickly gestured for him to enter. The muted sounds of the party could be heard from the main room, as Phlox crossed the threshold and entered the apartment. He shifted the duffel slightly as he followed Hoshi through the two meter long hallway. A hush fell over the small group of adults and children within the large room

at his appearance, but to Hoshi's pleasure, no one seemed upset at his presence.

"You all know Phlox," she said, and that broke the ice. Stuart Reed limped forward to lend a hand with the duffel that the doctor was carrying, even as Maddie began clearing another place on the table.

"I do hope I'm not intruding," the Denobulan started, and Stuart gave him a slightly surprised look, as if it was ludicrous for the doctor to believe that his presence was not desired.

"Nonsense," the patriarch of the Reed clan declared. "You're always welcome here, Doctor." The Denobulan's grin was broad, but not the largest that Hoshi had seen from him. Still, she had to admit that it was nice to see him cheerful once more. During her short span of time on *Endeavour*, she'd been amazed at how dour he had become in recent weeks. The war, it seemed, had begun to grind him down as well.

"In that case," Phlox remarked as he began extracting items from the duffel, "Captain Tucker officially deemed me to be the bearer of gifts for young Malcolm." He smiled. "He wanted to come himself, but repairs to *Endeavour* required his presence." His smile faltered slightly, and Hoshi doubted that anyone but her had even noticed it.

"He threw you off the ship, didn't he?" she asked as she tried calm her suddenly over-eager son. The rueful expression that briefly crossed the doctor's face caused her to laugh, and Phlox gave her a sidelong look before chortling himself.

"The good captain threatened to have me escorted to the transporter if I did not make myself scarce," he chuckled. Several of the children present were staring at him with wide eyes, almost as if they didn't dare to breathe lest he suddenly vanish. "I suspect that Commander T'Pol was actually behind the decision, however."

"Why's that?" Stuart asked as continued to stack the boxes from the duffel in a pile; he was wearing a slightly stunned expression at the sheer volume of gifts coming from Starfleet crewmembers. The older man's breath abruptly caught, and he glanced away from everyone, clearly hoping that no one had noticed his momentary loss of composure.

Hoshi noticed, however.

She realized almost instantly what Stuart was experiencing, and her heart went out to her father-in-law. The gifts were coming from the friends of Stuart's lost son, all of whom probably wanted to be here in person but were unable to attend because of their duties with Starfleet. It was another reminder to the elder Reed of the many years that he had lost with his son because of foolish pride. Apart from the stories that Hoshi had told him, Stuart barely knew the Malcolm Reed who had served and died aboard *Enterprise*, and witnessing how much respect his absent shipmates had for their lost comrade only seemed to hammer that point home.

"I believe you humans have a saying," Phlox replied with an almost teasing smile. "Behind every great man, there's a much, much smarter woman." Hoshi joined the other women in laughing at his comment, even as the men present exchanged long-suffering looks.

The party was a greater success than Hoshi had hoped for, and accomplished her primary goal of getting the attendee's minds off of the recent Romulan attack, if only for a short period of time. It was

not difficult to identify Phlox's present: a sterile tribble that was still capable of emitting its brethren's soothing coos. Trip's gift was also remarkably easy to identify: remarkably accurate-looking toy phase pistols mocked up to make obnoxious (but accurate) sounds every time that the trigger was pulled. To Hoshi's surprise, T'Pol had acquired a small stuffed sehlat and sent it, along with several candles obviously meant for the stressed out mother. Admiral Archer's gift was a small plaque that named Malcolm Reed Junior an honorary member of the *Enterprise* crew, with a place waiting for him in Starfleet once he was old enough; though her son didn't appreciate the plaque as much as Trip's annoying noisemaker, Hoshi found herself touched by the thought behind the admiral's gift.

Oddly, there was also an unmarked box bearing a beautiful stone octagon.

Hoshi studied the pendant for long moments before finally recognizing it as Akaali construction. Glittering red and green jewels were inlaid within the octagon's surface, and gold – or something that looked like gold – lettering spelled out a phrase. She frowned as she mentally translated it: family is everything. Unable to discern an origin of the gift, she put it aside for future contemplation, and returned her attention to her now sleepy – and thus, cranky – son.

By eighteen hundred hours, most of the party attendees had departed, leaving only Hoshi's mother, her in-laws, and Phlox. Getting Malcolm to sleep was much easier than Hoshi had expected, which allowed her to return to her guests quickly. Unsurprisingly, the topic of conversation had turned toward the war.

"-should string up the damned contractors who built that planetary defense system," Stuart was saying as he nursed a glass of wine. Hoshi's expression tightened slightly, and she busied herself with cleaning up so as to not reveal her inside knowledge. When Admiral Archer had ordered the knowledge about the Romulan possession of Starfleet IFF codes be kept secret, she hadn't been surprised. Discovery of that fact by the general public could only lead to bad things. She gave Phlox a discreet look, wondering if he was even aware of this fact.

"According to the news-nets," Peter April, Maddie's husband of only a few months, pointed out, "those weapons were the reason only two of the atomics got through."

"That was still two too many," the Reed patriarch grumbled. He gave Phlox a look. "Do you think the Denobulans will join the war, Doctor?"

"I don't know," Phlox admitted, his expression revealing his discomfort. "My people have no military force to speak of anymore," he continued. "Not after our last war with the Antarans." The latter was said with a sad, almost embarrassed, expression.

"What about the Andorians?" April asked. "Or the Tellarites? They're part of this Coalition, aren't they?" He exhaled noisily and glowered at Stuart. "I swear, if your daughter hadn't forbidden it, Stu, I'd join Starfleet myself."

It was said in a joking manner, but the subtle undertone in Peter's words was anything but. It was a sentiment that Hoshi had encountered literally hundreds of times in the past week and a half. Whether it was the boy who ran the register at the local grocery she visited, or the two security guards at Heathrow, or even the friendly old man who lived across the hall from her, every non-member of Starfleet that she ran into during her off duty hours inquired about how they could help or whether UESPA needed someone of their particular qualifications.

"You do that," Maddie interjected with a smile, "and I'll divorce your bloody ass."

"Ah, a dominant female," Phlox chuckled, drawing several startled looks. He leaned closer to Peter and spoke in a stage whisper. "We have them on Denobula Triax too. It's best to do as they say." His broad, inhuman grin caused Stuart Reed to begin chortling.

"Listen to him," Hoshi smirked. "He has three wives." If anything, Phlox's smile grew even larger as Peter April shook his head in surprise.

"You're either completely daft," April commented, "or braver than any man I know."

"A bit of both, I suspect," Phlox replied, his comment causing even more chuckles. "But my great-father was much worse. He had *nine* wives." Surrounded by attentive listeners, Phlox seemed to warm to the subject, once more the ebullient and outgoing Denobulan whom Hoshi had first befriended. The grim resolve that had surrounded him while she was aboard *Endeavour* was gone, if only temporarily.

It was good to see him smile.



His smile was entirely heartfelt.

Leaning back in his seat, Trip found himself grinning as the recorded message from his father played on the small viewscreen. It had arrived earlier yesterday during the most recent data dump from Starfleet Command, but he had been so busy that this was the first time he'd been able to watch it.

"-worthless brother of yours has decided to move here to Jacksonville," the recording of Charles Junior was relaying with a smile. He looked much better than the last time Trip had seen him. "I think Mary was mostly behind that, though." The elder Tucker chuckled. "At least I'll get to see the boys more regularly." A positively wicked expression abruptly crossed the older man's face. "And I'm gonna spoil those boys like you wouldn't believe. Revenge for all the hell Billy put me through while you kids were growin' up." Trip found himself laughing along with his father's image. "Anyway," Charlie said, "I should let ya go. Give our love to T'Pol and stay safe out there, son."

As the image blinked out, Trip sighed. It was good to hear from his father, and he was overjoyed that they were unharmed in this latest attack on Earth, but he found himself wishing that he could have spent more time at home during his last visit. Even before the war started, he knew that his visits weren't long enough or frequent enough, but it wasn't until now that he really realized just how much he truly missed his parents' home.

With another sigh, he returned his attention to the work stacked up on his desk. Most of it was work orders from Hess' damage control teams, or status reports about the progress of repairs, and he gave each a cursory glance. Once he saw that T'Pol had already read them and made comments, he simply approved whatever her suggestions were without further examination. They had developed a discreet code with these reports; if T'Pol signed off on them using the acronym CMDR for her rank instead of the shorter CDR, Trip knew that he needed to read the report in depth.

With a grunt, Trip stood up from his desk and began to gather the PADDs into a neat stack. He was still at a loss how he constantly managed to acquire so many of the data devices. One of them was still active as he picked it up, and he glowered at the screen for a moment. Lieutenant Hayes' transfer to Starfleet Intelligence had caught him completely by surprise, and left him with a ridiculously green ensign straight out of STC to act as weapon systems officer. Trip had protested, of course; not even taking into account Hayes' connection to Harris' organization, the lieutenant was a very good officer. The timing of the transfer was especially unusual, and even Admiral Archer's signature on the orders had given him pause. Jon had been ... evasive about the reasoning behind the transfer when Trip had commed him to plead his case.

That particular fact bothered Tucker more than he could explain.

Glancing around his new office, he shook his head in mild amazement at how much had changed since *Endeavour* launched. Once, this entire area would have been part of Engineering, designed for systems analysis and manned 24/7. Following his decision to declare the A deck bridge 'off limits', he had quickly realized that he would need an office for official business; it had been Hess' decision to turn this unused section into a secondary ready room. She had even added a door that connected it to the new bridge.

Trip hadn't been surprised to learn that the ship commanders who survived Acheron had made an identical decision to abandon the vulnerable bridge.

Lieutenant Rostova was in the command chair as he entered the bridge, and she started to rise the moment he appeared. He quickly waved her back to the chair before giving the gamma shift a quick glance. Most of them were enlisted, but he trusted them as much as the alpha shift team.

"What's our status?" he asked.

"Continuing to waypoint epsilon at full impulse," the lieutenant replied quickly. She offered him a PADD, likely with a full status report on it, but he shook his head and gestured with the nine that he already had. "ETA: five hours. No sign of Romulan sensor signatures, but we are running silent per your instructions."

Trip nodded. *Endeavour's* current orders were to deploy a number of upgraded communication and sensor buoys at key locations along the periphery of the Sol System. Normally, this would be the job of a Boomer ship hired for the job, or perhaps an *Iceland*-class, but Starfleet Command wanted to make sure that the buoys would actually *make* it to their target locations. Boomer ships were simply too vulnerable for such a task should there being any hostile ships in the region, and the discovery of the *Saratoga's* remains in a rapidly deteriorating orbit around the Uranian moon Oberon only highlighted the vulnerability of the *Iceland*-class ships to Romulan fire. According to preliminary reports, the *Saratoga* hadn't even seen the bird of prey until it was too late.

Especially troubling was the Romulan use of Immobilizer-like weapons.

"Carry on then," Tucker said. "I'm going to bed. Don't crash my ship, Lieutenant." Rostova gave him a weak smile as he dumped the PADDs into her lap. "And take care of these," he ordered with a sudden grin. Sometimes, it was good to be in charge.

He made a quick detour to the mess hall for a late snack where he found, to his surprise, Lieutenant

Commanders Eisler and Hess sharing a table. As their discussion really wasn't any of his business (both were off-duty, after all), he pretended to not notice them as he fished out a slice of key lime pie from the small refrigerator. It was weird, though; he'd always thought that Anna was a lesbian based on some of the things he'd heard her say. In recent days, however, he'd become halfway convinced that something was going on between his tactical officer and chief engineer; knowing about Eisler's contempt for fraternization, however, made Trip wonder exactly what it was that was going on. Shrugging, he ducked through the door before either of them looked up and saw him.

The pie was gone by the time he arrived at his quarters, and he tossed the small paper plate into the recycler before heading for the shower. Tentatively, he reached out through the bond and barely suppressed a smirk when he realized that T'Pol was in the stellar dynamics lab, working on her pet micro-singularities project. If she was off duty and wasn't in her cabin (or in his), the SD lab was generally where she could be found.

Trip spent an unusually long time in the shower, once more puzzling over the odd actions of the Romulan commander. If warning *Endeavour* away from his ship before self-destructing hadn't been odd enough, the commander's comments had only added to the puzzle. According to Hoshi, it had been a salutation between equals, something that she had never heard before. As the resident expert, she had theorized that the Romulan captain was paying Trip a compliment of some sort, and that simply made no sense whatsoever. The shower chirped, warning him that he had exceeded his daily allotment of hot water, and he shut it off. Shaking his head, he used some of the techniques that T'Pol had taught him to push the thoughts about the Romulan out of his mind.

He was very nearly asleep before his head hit the pillow.

The dream began like it usually did. Lizzie was at the cafe, sitting at the round table that she preferred. T'Pol was there too, meditating under the Florida sun, and Lorian sat alongside her, smiling that half-smile of his. A hideously deformed figure with bolts in his neck and half of his skull missing was between them, holding a baby in his arms; as the monstrosity shifted, scars and stitches could be seen across Sim's face, and he was smiling at the sleeping infant that he was holding. Trip wanted to close his eyes when he saw Elizabeth T'Mir's innocent face.

His breath caught as the Xindi weapon suddenly loomed overhead, blotting out the sun with its impossible size. It was bigger than the moon. There was no death ray this time, though. This time, it was spitting fission bombs that were all too familiar. Trip tried to scream, tried to warn them, but no words emerged from his mouth. As he shrieked silently, the dream T'Pol blinked as if she had just woken and looked around, her eyes almost instantly zeroing in on Trip. Her hazel eyes seemed to gleam with emotion, and she shook her head.

Instantly, the dreamscape transformed to a Tucker family picnic. The Xindi weapon was gone, and the paralyzing fear that had gripped him vanished. He inhaled peace as T'Pol stepped closer to him, her eyes locked on his. The part of him that was still aware of the world outside of the dream felt her warmth as she slid into bed beside him, and was glad that she had come. He didn't think that he could take the horrific images tonight.

"You won't," her mental image promised, and Trip exhaled with relief. The dreams that had plagued him in the Expanse had returned with frightening regularity following the second attack on Earth, displacing the usual ones of Sim's final hours, and Tucker knew that some part of his psyche blamed himself for the fifteen million who had died on Earth and on Mars in atomic fire. If only he had done

something different, had acted faster, or was a better captain, then maybe...

"Dance with me," he urged as he pulled T'Pol to her feet, suddenly desperate to think of something other than the war. In this place, he could forget the terrible cost of lives that had already been paid, or the fact that the war was far from over. He could pretend that he was just Trip, and she was just T'Pol, and they were just an unlikely couple in love with no duties or responsibilities save to one another. The expression on her face as his request sank in caused him to laugh.

"Vulcans do not dance," she pointed out primly, and he laughed again.

"It's a dream!" Trip reminded her. "We all do crazy things in dreams!" She appeared hesitant, so he snapped his fingers. A tango pulled from his memory began playing, though there was no band, and he grinned as T'Pol's eyes widened slightly in recognition of the tune. It had been in an old twentieth century movie about a spy whose wife did not know he was a spy until near the midway through the film. "Dance with me," he repeated.

"I don't know the steps," she prevaricated, and Trip laughed again. No one would ever believe him if he told them that the fearless T'Pol was afraid of dancing. Her eyes flashed as she tasted his thoughts. "I am *not* afraid," she declared as he basked in the warmth of her *katra*.

"Prove it," he replied.



"You have nothing to prove."

The words hung in the air, causing D'deridex i-Mheissan tr'Irrhaimehn to frown slightly. He continued to don the powered armor as he sought the proper response to S'enrae's assertion. From where she lounged on his bed, his new lover watched him as he dressed. A small part of his ego allowed him to imagine that it was concern for his life that glittered in her eyes, not worry for her new station.

"On the contrary, I have *everything* to prove," he declared. Turning to face her, he made it a point to look into her eyes. The urge to let his gaze roam down her nude form was quite difficult to suppress. "I am still new to my rank and position. Most of my officers distrust me and envy my rapid rise." As he began securing the cuirass, she rose and approached to assist; his breath caught as she was momentarily bathed in a halo of light. D'deridex swallowed; she was entirely too attractive for his state of mind. He needed to focus on the here and now, not his base instincts. "If I am to accomplish my goals, I must earn their respect." He did not add that he trusted no one to speak to the Xin'di in his stead.

"Male foolishness," S'enrae murmured. She circled him, eyes examining the armor. "Where do I fit in this master plan of yours?" she asked. Her eyes bored into his.

"I haven't decided yet," he replied with a smirk.

Before she could reply, the ambient sounds of the *Vastagor* changed, and D'deridex's amusement faded. They had arrived. It had taken nearly four *dhaei* (weeks) to get here, with his chief engineer complaining the entire time about the speed needed, but they were finally here.

"You should get dressed," D'deridex said as he turned away. To his surprise, S'enrae caught his arm and forced him to face her again. This time, he could easily see concern on her face.

"If you die," she started, and D'deridex placed two fingers upon her lips to silence her. He did not know if she was truly concerned about him or merely an exceptional actress; in the end, he allowed himself to think that it was the former.

"I will not," he stated firmly before heading for the door. As befit his station, he paid no attention to the two Reman bodyguards that stood watch inside his cabin. They were completely loyal to him, and most of the time, he was barely even aware of their presence.

His first officer gave him a tight-lipped nod when he entered the command-executive center. There was no love lost between them, and D'deridex knew that *Arrain* L'haen was behind the two assassination attempts that had already been made on the commander's life. The first had been made within *dierha* (hours) of the *Vastagor's* departure from the Convocation of Commanders; a pair of centurions had gambled upon D'deridex being alone and unarmed while in his personal quarters.

He had been neither.

In retrospect, D'deridex had realized that it had been a tactical error to simply dispose of the two centurions without fanfare or announcement. He had presumed that their silent disappearance would have been warning enough, but the second attempt on his life proved that to be an error in judgment. It was fortunate that S'enrae had been present at the time, as the poison that one of the cooks had laced his food with had caused an immediate cardiac seizure; coming on the heels of his sated mating cycle, the poison had taken advantage of his weakened state. According to S'enrae, he had died twice while she tried to revive him.

This time, he had not allowed sentiment to cloud his judgment. He had acted swiftly and completely without mercy; three of the four cooks had been killed during the purge, and two additional centurions had been executed by airlock. There had been no official ties linked *Arrain* L'haen to the assassins, but the circumstantial evidence was overwhelming, and D'deridex had acted. The poison that *he* had fed to L'haen was a binary one, and the first officer had been made quite aware of the terminal consequences of a third attempt on D'deridex's life.

"We are now entering orbit," L'haen announced stiffly. "Communications has already been made with planetary defense. They are awaiting your arrival."

"I trust the trip will be a smooth one," D'deridex said, his expression blank. "It would be ... unfortunate if there were some form of miscommunication that led to an incident." L'haen frowned darkly.

"There will be no incident, *Daise'Erei'Riov*," he replied. "This I swear."

"Good." D'deridex made no further comment as he strode from the command-executive center.

The trip planetside *was* uneventful, and gave D'deridex an opportunity to review communication intercepts from the humans. His mood darkened as he studied their reaction to the *Hnoiyika's* attack on the Terran homeworld. Exactly as he had predicted, the humans were rallying together, and were now united where they had once been divided. Chulak was a fool, he decided as he set aside the data-slate,

and would likely look at the entire excursion as a success.

With the slightest of bumps, the shuttle came to a stop on the designated landing platform, and D'deridex forced himself to relax. He pulled on the concealing helmet, blinking quickly as the laser pulses within clicked on. The integrated heads-up display snapped alive as the lasers beamed the information directly onto the lenses of his eyes, and he spent a long moment examining the data that appeared before him. Satisfied that everything was in working order, he strode to the hatch of the shuttle, flanked by the everpresent Reman guards.

The Reptilian Xin'di that was waiting for him outside the shuttle was indistinguishable from the others of his species, and D'deridex wondered if they used some sense other than sight to tell one another apart. It was wearing the ridiculous-looking uniform that he had seen all other Reptilians wear, but the metal rings were bronze instead of silver. He wondered if that had some meaning.

"I was expecting Admiral Valdore," the Reptilian said as D'deridex approached him. The integrated translator within the helmet appeared to function without problem.

"The admiral is no more," D'deridex replied, offering a data-slate with his credentials upon it. "I am his replacement." For a long moment, the Reptilian studied the device, prompting D'deridex to wonder if perhaps this *was* a mistake. It should not take this long to verify the information that was plain. "Is there a problem?" he asked, grateful for the voice modulators on the helmet that robbed his words of emotion.

"No," the Reptilian replied as it handed the data-slate back. "Certain changes in protocol have occurred since the war began." It spoke matter-of-factly about the ongoing civil strife between the Xin'di, evidently presuming that D'deridex was already aware of those facts. He nodded in understanding.

"It is unfortunate," he said, "that your Arboreal and Primate brothers do not recognize your superiority."

"They have always been difficult," the Reptilian groused. It studied D'deridex for another long moment, clearly attempting to see past the opaque faceplate. "Your communique indicated that your need was urgent. How may we assist our ally?"

"My government," D'deridex stated calmly, "desires to reopen negotiations for your matter transmission device. We are willing to provide you with military assistance in your war."

"How is this urgent?" the Reptilian demanded, almost angrily. Behind him, D'deridex could sense the two Remans tensing at the Xin'di's body language.

"There are two other things that we are interested in," he revealed. "One is a trivial matter, barely worth mentioning, but the other ... we wish the technical schematics for the weapon that you deployed against the humans." He crossed his arms. "We wish to construct one of our own."

END

Watch for *Endeavour: Medea* coming soon...