

STAR TREK: ENDEAVOUR

# ICARUS

NC - 06

ENDEAVOUR

BY  
RIGIL KENT

## STAR TREK: *Endeavour*: "Icarus"

by Rigil Kent

Genre: Action/Adventure, Drama

Rated: PG ... mild language, violence, and some serious ass kicking.

Summary: Part of the continuing adventures of the starship UES *Endeavour*. A change in *Endeavour's* mission profile leads to a deadly situation for Commander T'Pol...

Disclaimer: Nothing's changed. I own a big fat nothing so suing would serve no purpose.

Author's Note:

Major thanks to **TJinLOCA** for being an awesome beta. I also want to thank **Kevin Thomas Riley** for being a very, very helpful sounding board. An immense thank you (and congratulations on his recent marriage) to **Chris1033** for his fantastic "covers" for the previous three fics and I cannot wait to see what he does with this one.

This is the sequel to *Endeavour: Ragnarök*. 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 (NX-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): ***Daniel Hsiao***, Lieutenant (LT)

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

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

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

### SECFORCE - "ROUGHNECKS"

Roughneck 6 (OIC): ***Nathaniel Hayes*** – Lieutenant Junior Grade (LT JG)

SEAL 7 (NCOIC): ***Lee Luckabaugh*** – Senior Chief Petty Officer (SCPO), enlisted

STAB 7 (NCOIC): ***Miguel Gray*** – Senior Chief Petty Officer (SCPO), enlisted

## TEASER

**Starbase One, 18 December 2156.**

Charles Tucker was furious.

It didn't show on his face or leak into his voice as he spoke, but Jonathan Archer had known his friend long enough to recognize the signs of an impending Tucker explosion. Deciphering Trip's body language had become remarkably difficult in recent years— Jon blamed T'Pol's influence for that – but the absolute stillness in Tucker's stance was all the evidence that Archer needed to brace for what was coming.

“Can you explain this?” Trip asked, his voice deceptively calm as he offered Jon a PADD. It was unnecessary: Archer had written those orders himself.

“Explain what?” Jon replied instinctively. Months of dealing with journalists intent on splashing top secret information across headlines throughout the sector had honed his conversational reflexes. A flicker of anger played across Tucker's face for the briefest of seconds before it was replaced by what Archer thought of as Trip's “Vulcan face.”

“To: Commander, UES *Endeavour*,” Trip read from the data device, his features utterly devoid of expression despite the fire in his eyes. “From: Starfleet Command. Proceed immediately to Sol Alpha for reassignment and redeployment.” He pinned Jon with a dark look and, at once, Archer realized what his friend was thinking. It was, to coin a phrase, a perfectly logical conclusion.

“They're not taking *Endeavour* from you, Trip,” he quickly reassured the younger man, and Tucker seemed to relax fractionally. “In the wake of recent events, however,” Jon continued, “Command has decided to revise your mission profile.” Trip frowned at that and raised an eyebrow in a distinctly Vulcan mannerism. At any other time it would have been an amusing sight to behold, and was *definitely* something to tease his old friend about later.

“*Endeavour's* a warship,” the younger man argued with another frown, and Jon shook his head in response.

“Not anymore,” Archer revealed softly. As Trip opened his mouth to speak, Jon gave a sharp shake of his head in warning and reached for the comm panel on his desk. “Tyner,” he said into it, “hold my calls.” He was already depressing a second button as the petty officer acknowledged the command. With a soft rumble, heavy duranium blast shields slid up from the floor, sealing off the viewports that encircled Jon's office. A hatch slid over the small stairwell, enclosing the onetime observation deck completely, and Tucker's expression changed from frustrated anger to wary surprise. His eyes widened further as Jon pulled a device from his pocket; it was clear Trip recognized it, having received a similar device from Malcolm Reed nearly two years ago. Once activated, the device emitted a low-level pulse of harmless radiation that acted as a sort of white noise. This pulse defeated all known eavesdropping gear, including the most advanced sensors that Starfleet currently had in operation. Jon had never asked Reed where the device had come from.

“Three days ago,” Archer began softly as he placed the device on his desk, gesturing for Trip

to take a seat, “there was an explosion at the warp six complex in Montana.” Tucker's frown deepened as he took a seat, but he said nothing. “We lost fifty-three people, including Admiral Jeffries and Captain Williams.” The sadness that flashed across Trip's face was understandable: as Starfleet's leading warp engineer, he knew every member of the program personally and had worked with Jeffries rather closely years earlier.

“It wasn't an accident,” Tucker guessed, and Jon shook his head, confirming Trip's leap of logic. “Romulans?”

“The investigation is still ongoing,” Archer said with a heavy sigh, “but Intelligence is operating on the assumption that the Romulans have additional operatives like Tolaris.” Fury momentarily burned in Trip's eyes at the mention of the dead Vulcan rapist, but it was suppressed nearly as quickly as it appeared.

“That doesn't explain this,” he pointed out, gesturing with the PADD, and Jon almost smiled.

“Starfleet Command has a new mission for you, Trip,” he declared as he leaned forward to explain. Moments later, Trip's eyes widened in alarm.

Author's Note: *Endeavour's* warp nacelles are based on principles originally found in **Zane Gray's** *Differential*, and that concept is used with his permission.

## ACT ONE

### **Romulan-Occupied Space, 2 April 2157.**

Alarms were still echoing through the ship, but Harrad-Sar no longer noticed them.

Wiping blood from his face, he gave Navaar a glance, hoping against hope that she would have some surprise waiting for him that would get them out of this situation. With one look, however, he could tell that she had absolutely no idea what to do next. Anger pulsed within him as he reflected that it was *her* fault that they were adrift in space with their engines crippled and weapon systems down. It had been *her* idea to venture this deep in Romulan-controlled space against the Syndicate's explicit instructions otherwise. It had been *her* idea to approach the Romulan warships with their own weapons deactivated. It had been *her* idea...

As if sensing his eyes and perhaps his discontent as well, Navaar gave him a sharp glare. At once, he could taste the change in the air as her mood shifted and, without a word, he lowered his eyes in face of the rebuke that now laced the oxygen circulating around them. The anger still burned like acid though; and not for the first time, he let his hate for Navaar flood through him. Once again a mad plan that she had devised was collapsing around them, and he had no doubt that it would be up to him to salvage something positive out of this latest catastrophe.

But then, that was nothing new.

"Status," he demanded from his sensor operator, his tone unnecessarily cold. The boy gave him a wide-eyed look but responded instantly, a product of the harsh and unyielding discipline that Harrad-Sar demanded.

"Targets are maneuvering to board, sir!" The boy's terror was understandable: Romulans didn't take prisoners.

"As expected," Navaar stated from her place where she was slouched in the command chair. She appeared to be perfectly confident of survival; however, Harrad-Sar had been a slave to her long enough to see through that illusion and recognize how close to sheer panic she truly was.

"Sir, we need to mount a defense," the weapons officer begged from his shattered console, but Harrad-Sar gave him a quelling glance. A defense now would lead to all of their deaths, and Harrad-Sar still had dreams of dying in bed of extreme age.

"Stand down all tactical teams," Harrad-Sar ordered, his features grim. "And continue broadcasting on all channels." He looked at Navaar once more, the hatred he felt for her filling his eyes. She smirked at him contemptuously and leaned back in the chair.

They didn't have to wait long. Within minutes, the lift door slid open, revealing four figures.

Encased in armored environment suits complete with opaque faceplates, they were bipedal and moved with the singular purpose of soldiers, each bearing sinister-looking weapons and unfamiliar equipment. Three of the figures moved differently than the fourth, however, skulking forward in an almost bestial crouch despite their environment suits and disruptor rifles. At their approach, the weapons officer shifted awkwardly before casting yet another desperate glance at Harrad-Sar.

“You are ... Oh'Reon,” the fourth suited figure stated calmly in the Trader's tongue as it glanced around the command deck with an almost casual arrogance. “And you are far from your borders,” the figure continued. “The Syndicate well knows the price for violation of *our* space.”

Uncoiling from the command chair like a jungle feline, Navaar climbed to her feet in a seductive manner, a smile upon her face.

“Commander,” she cooed softly as she sauntered toward him, “we are not here on business from the Syndicate.” Another smile was offered to the helmeted Romulan, one that promised much more than simply coy looks. “Our business is with you.”

“Unlikely,” the figure hissed as Navaar reached out to stroke the environment suit's chest plate. She winced in pained surprise as the Romulan commander abruptly seized her hand and twisted it into an offensive martial hold. Fear filled the air suddenly as she panicked, her spray of pheromones blotting out coherent thought; the weapons officer scrambled for a weapon in answer to Navaar's unspoken demand for aid but fell almost at once, two searing holes burned through his chest as the bestial Romulans reacted with blinding speed. The fear that soaked the air turned to terror as a third burst of fire tore through the sensor operator in the moment that he tried to tackle one of the Romulans. Less than a second later, a brutal convergence of energy ripped apart the helmsman as he stumbled to his feet.

Barely clinging to his self-control, Harrad-Sar found himself unaccountably glad for his many years of servitude under Navaar. The decades-long exposure to her pheromones gave him a tentative resistance to them now, and he trembled with the effort it took to keep from throwing himself at the figures before him.

“We are *quite* aware of your ... abilities, *female*,” the Romulan commander declared as it held Navaar by the throat and lifted her bodily from the deck. She struggled wildly, clawing desperately at the unyielding grip around her neck as she futilely kicked the hardened armor. “And we are equally prepared to combat such tricks.” Cognizant of the three disruptors suddenly trained on him, Harrad-Sar shook as he fought the smells that washed over him, urging him to act. Anger and hate for Navaar gave him strength, and he clung to those emotions with every gram of control he still had.

“Information,” he growled through clenched teeth, drawing the Romulan's attention as quickly as if he had attacked. “We have information. Willing to sell.”

“Elaborate,” the commander ordered. It eased its hold on Navaar, and Harrad-Sar could taste her relief.

“We have trade routes used by the humans,” he revealed quickly.

“Such information we already have,” the Romulan rumbled through the voice modulator in its helmet. It was quiet for a moment before continuing. “We *do* seek intelligence about the new weapons being deployed by the humans. Torpedoes that utilize multiple independently tracking warheads. Defensive force screening. Matter transmission devices. Can you provide this information?”

“I can acquire it,” Harrad-Sar replied without hesitation, once more in control of himself. This was negotiation, and he excelled at that. “With time and money.”

A long heartbeat passed in absolute silence as the Romulan studied him through the opaque helmet and icy sweat slid down Harrad-Sar's back. Everything depended upon this moment, and an odd thought flickered through his mind.

He hoped the Romulan was in a good mood.



### **13 June 2157, 1045 Hours Earth Standard Time.**

He was in a bad mood.

His face set in a perpetual scowl, Admiral Hannibal Black stepped out of the turbolift and onto the command deck of *Endeavour*. He paused just beyond the lift doors as he gave the bridge a once-over, noting without surprise that the entire command staff was on duty. It was entirely understandable: an experiment this important absolutely demanded the most experienced staff present.

“Admiral on deck!” someone shouted and there was a momentary flurry of motion as the officers and enlisted personnel scrambled to assume the position of attention. Many officers his rank would have spoken the moment that the declaration of his presence was made, but Black waited an extended heartbeat before finally commenting. It was important, he thought, that the crew be reminded of his rank from time to time.

“Carry on,” he ordered, giving the centuries-old military command for work to resume. With quick steps, he approached the command chair where Tucker was retaking his seat; for a moment, Hannibal seriously contemplated ordering the captain from the chair but, in the end, decided against it. As much as Black may not like the fact, *Endeavour* was still Tucker's ship and issuing such an order would only diminish the captain's authority before his crew.

“Admiral,” Tucker said in greeting. If the captain's tone was a touch colder than entirely appropriate, Black couldn't tell. To him, Charles Tucker was still an enigma.

He could trace his complaints regarding Tucker to the moment when Admiral Gardner first began floating the younger man's name as a candidate to command *Endeavour*; in Black's opinion, Tucker shouldn't have even been considered for the job, despite his surprisingly competent record in recent years. As far as Hannibal was concerned, there were other officers already in the command track who had a greater amount of time in service or grade that were

far more deserving of the job. And then, there was that whole nonsense between Tucker and Commander T'Pol; if even half of the rumors about them were true, both should have been brought up on charges for fraternization or dereliction of duty after that entire Terra Prime fiasco. As was all too common, though, Hannibal's opinion was soundly ignored and Archer the idiot-savant was deferred to.

"We're on schedule for the test, sir," the captain commented, offering Black a PADD that the admiral accepted without comment. Quickly scanning over the data present, Hannibal experienced a sudden flash of annoyance when he realized that he barely comprehended the equations on the data device; briefly, he wondered if the engineer-turned-captain in front of him knew that and was making some sort of subtle comment. "I've run the numbers twice," Tucker continued, nodding to the PADD, and Black scowled again, "and we should be good to go." The captain addressed his first officer. "T'Pol, run those field variance equations one more time and use Hess' revised fuel estimates."

"The revised fuel estimates were used in the previous set of equations, Captain," the Vulcan commander replied coolly.

"You sure?" Tucker sounded disbelieving as he spoke.

"Positive." Out of the corner of his eye, Black noticed several of the bridge officers smirking at the look of mild reproach that T'Pol gave the captain, almost as if she wanted to chide Tucker for questioning her math. Once more, the admiral's expression darkened as he took in the atmosphere of *Endeavour's* bridge. In his opinion, discipline aboard this vessel was far too lax, especially considering the monumental task they had been given.

After the bombing of the Warp Six Complex on Earth and the assassination of several key research scientists, EarthGov and Starfleet Command had decided to transfer their most gifted R&D teams to mobile facilities aboard warp capable ships that could, if necessary, defend themselves. It was pretty clear that the counter-intelligence forces on Earth weren't up to the task of preventing Romulan penetration, so spreading the best and the brightest out among the stars seemed like a logical choice. In a decision that Hannibal continued to find bizarre, however, Admiral Gardner had pulled *Endeavour* from the front lines of the war and had refit her to serve as a mobile research and development platform. Removing Tucker and T'Pol from active hot spots made sense – even Black acknowledged that the captain was the leading warp specialist that Starfleet had, and T'Pol's expertise was simply too valuable to waste on a ship-of-the-line – but taking *Endeavour* out of the battle was nothing short of ruinous.

Recently rechristened as the NC-06 following the Starfleet-wide adoption of the "Naval, Combat" or NC hull classification for their warships, *Endeavour* was the most advanced warship Earth had in its arsenal. The fastest ship in the fleet, she was also the most heavily armed, and was equipped with an entirely state-of-the-art defensive suite, all of which made her ideal for taking the fight *to* the Romulans. It gave Black heartburn whenever he thought about this magnificent warship being used for *research*.

It was poor comfort to him that dozens of new systems had already come out of what Starfleet Command called the Icarus Project.

“Engineering reports ready,” the communications officer abruptly announced, and Tucker gave her a nod. He was silent for a long moment as he studied the sensor feed installed in front of the command chair. Hannibal shifted anxiously on his feet as he waited for the next stage in this experiment; this was the only reason he had been aboard *Endeavour* for the last six days.

“Shipwide broadcast,” Tucker ordered in a soft voice that still carried authority. “Stand by for warp speed.” The captain glanced once at the Vulcan science officer as the lieutenant manning the COM board carried out his instructions. Nodding as if Commander T'Pol had made a comment, Tucker then looked around the bridge, and Black realized that he was judging the level of readiness of his crew. Despite his dislike of the man, the admiral found himself nodding slightly in approval of the action; he stopped the moment he realized what he was doing.

“Mister Hsiao,” Tucker stated as he leaned back almost leisurely, “let's make history.” The helmsman smiled broadly as his captain continued. “Take us to warp one.”

*Endeavour's* engines growled as the ship surged forward, accelerating beyond the speed of light within seconds, and Black felt his heart rate accelerate. If the projections that had come out of the Project were accurate, the enhancements to *Endeavour's* warp nacelles could very well change the course of the war.

And right now, Earth needed every advantage she could get.

As one of the most senior officers in Starfleet, Hannibal had access to intelligence that painted a bleak picture of the ongoing hostilities. In the year since the war began, Earth had yet to win a single engagement; and *every* encounter with the Romulans had resulted in another defeat or “tactical withdrawal.” These defeats weren't minor ones, either. Only three months earlier, the *Atlantis* strike group had been forced to retreat from a Romulan task force that attacked the Terra Nova colony; three *Intrepid*-classes and one of the newer *Daedalus*-class ships had been lost in the engagement, and intelligence assets had recently confirmed that the colony itself had been nuked into oblivion. A month before that, the UES *Challenger* had been scuttled by her commanding officer to prevent capture and all hands were lost; details were still sketchy, but the commanders of the other ships assigned to *Challenger* strike group had reported that Captain Stiles was answering a civilian distress signal from a ship called *Kobayashi Maru* when a squadron of Romulan warbirds had ambushed the NC-03. The crippling defeat at Thor's Cradle and the unmitigated disaster that had been Pacifica Prime only served as reminders of how outclassed Starfleet continued to be. And then there were the troubling if still unsubstantiated reports of Romulan activity within the area of space that had once been the Delphic Expanse, reports that hinted at a possible alliance between the Romulans and the Reptillian Xindi...

“Holding steady at warp one,” the helmsman announced, and Tucker shot a look at the master chief manning the damage control board.

“Injector temperatures well below standard,” the MCPO declared in response to the captain's unspoken question. Another moment passed as the senior enlisted man studied his board before commenting, “Energy consumption below norm.”

"Open her up, Dan," Tucker instructed calmly. "Maximum warp."

A subtle shudder ran through the deck of *Endeavour* and the ambient hum of her engines trebled in volume as the helmsman obeyed the captain's order. Tucker gave his science officer a look that could have meant anything; she responded with a single raised eyebrow before tapping a rapid command on her console. At once, the viewscreen snapped to life, displaying an engineering cross-section of *Endeavour* that Black recognized as the master systems display. Data scrolled across the screen, highlighting current ship status and drive output, and Tucker studied it with the narrowed eyes of an expert.

"Warp five point eight," the helmsman announced, his voice filled with the same eagerness that knotted Hannibal's stomach. "Five point nine ... warp six!" A cheer from the enlisted personnel manning the situation room rang out. Black smiled, images of warp six-capable starships defeating Romulan warbirds spinning around in his head.

"T'Pol?" Captain Tucker barely seemed to react, his features as stoic and impassive as those of his science officer. From her station, the Vulcan commander replied to an unspoken question, her eyes locked on a status display before her.

"Structural integrity holding," she stated coolly. "Field variance equations falling within expected parameters."

"Warp six point one," the helmsman reported giddily but, once again, Tucker barely acknowledged him.

"COB?" he asked, and the master chief manning the damage control console responded instantly.

"Engineering reports all systems green, sir."

"Six point one five," the helmsman said into the moment of silence, "and holding steady."

"Tactical alert," Tucker abruptly ordered and Black blinked in surprise before reminding himself that it was part of the test.

"Shields up," the lieutenant commander stated, a distinct German accent on his words, "and weapons charging." The man – his nametag read Eisler – paused momentarily before continuing. "All weapons armed and active. No discernible lag or power failure."

"Good." Tucker compared something on his sensor feed to the systems display on the viewscreen. "COB, I'm seein' a temperature spike on the port nacelle..."

"Confirmed, sir." The master chief input additional commands into his console as he spoke. "Engineering is reporting injector malfunctions." Trepidation welled up within Hannibal as the imaginary warp six fleet vanished from his mind's eye. "Injectors are failing!" the master chief suddenly declared, his voice smashing the happy mood of the bridge crew as alert lights began flashing; on the viewscreen, the image of the port nacelle began pulsing and additional data appeared around it.

"Drop out of warp," Captain Tucker ordered instantly, his eyes glued to the sensor feed installed in front of him. As *Endeavour* slowed to sublight, the ship shuddered, a clear indication of complete nacelle failure, and Hannibal felt frustration surging through him. He glanced around, noting that his emotion was reflected in the expressions of many of the bridge crew.

"Commander Hess reports systemic failure of plasma injectors," the COB announced moments later, breaking the silence that draped the bridge. "Recommends shutting down the warp core until she can isolate the reason."

"Approved." The captain looked in T'Pol's direction. "Stellar cartography?" Her response was instantaneous: the engineering cross-section of *Endeavour* disappeared from the viewscreen to be replaced with starcharts.

"The nearest inhabitable system is the freeport of Denebris," she informed him, highlighting the system in question on the display. "It is approximately sixteen point two three Terran light years away."

"Set a course," Tucker decided, "impulse only." He glanced at Commander Eisler. "Stand down from tactical alert." Rising from his chair, he looked around, smiling slightly. "This was not a failure, people." At the disgruntled expression on the helmsman's face, Tucker continued, his smile growing. "We just *broke* the warp six barrier and held it for-

"Three point four four minutes," T'Pol supplied at the captain's unspoken prompt.

"Three and a half minutes." Tucker's smile was being returned now as the bridge crew realized the truth in his words; Black found himself nodding, his own expression lighter than normal. "For three and a half minutes, we were the fastest humans alive." Smiles were turning into grins as his words settled in. "Hess will figure out what went wrong, we'll fix it and try again," Tucker declared before turning to Hannibal. "While we're waiting for Hess' report, Admiral, would you like to visit the weapons lab? Doctor Jalali has a couple of new toys she wants to show you."

"That will be fine, Captain." Black paused for a moment before deciding to comment. "Superb work, ladies and gentlemen." He smiled slightly. "Your continuing excellence reflects well on Starfleet and on Earth." Turning toward the turbolift, Hannibal noticed that Tucker had paused briefly at the SCI station to issue additional instructions; in a voice pitched low enough not to carry far, the captain spoke.

"I want someone on sensors at all times," he said softly, "and keep tactical manned as well." T'Pol acknowledged the order with the slightest of nods. "I'll be in the weapons lab," Tucker finished and Black bristled slightly – he had assumed that the younger man's invitation to join him had been an excuse that would allow them to visit Engineering. As they entered the turbolift, the captain spoke once more.

"Commander T'Pol, you have the conn." The door slid shut and Black frowned.

"You're not going to Engineering?" he asked. If nothing else, Hannibal assumed that the captain would want a status report.

"No sir." Tucker smirked slightly. "Right now, the last thing Hess needs is a superior officer breathin' down her neck demandin' status reports every twenty seconds."

Black scowled at the closed door of the turbolift. The rest of the trip was completed in silence.



### **15 June 2157, 2340 Hours Earth Standard Time.**

The silence was broken by the buzz of an incoming message, startling Trip out of something suspiciously like a doze. He jerked awkwardly in his chair, almost tumbling to the deck in his haste to respond. For a moment he was confused as to where he was, but his recovery was almost instant. He looked quickly around the ready room to assure himself that he wasn't dreaming. A flashing light from the communication monitor on the nearby wall bathed the room in sporadic illumination, and he quickly blinked the sleepiness away.

Again the low buzz echoed through the darkened room, and Tucker rubbed the bridge of his nose in annoyance. He had retired to his ready room several hours earlier in order to do the command paperwork that never seemed to end. It consisted primarily of work orders and approval of maintenance schedules, but there were also award commendations and promotions to sign off, none of which interested him in the slightest. Once again, he wondered how Jon had managed do this job without going insane.

"Computer," he stated to the empty room, "play message."

A chirp of acknowledgment answered him and, seconds later, T'Pol's voice filled the room.

"Trip," the recorded message announced in her calm but warm voice, "you need to go to bed."

He couldn't help but smile as the message ended with a second chirp. Glancing at the chronometer on his desk, he winced at the lateness of the hour; according to his calculations, he'd been up for nearly twenty hours straight, and he had no doubt that she knew better than he did how tired he actually was. It was just a pity that she wouldn't be there when he finally did get to his quarters.

In the wake of the complete breakdown of ship's discipline at Thor's Cradle and Starfleet Command's later refusal to implement their command change proposal, Trip and T'Pol had decided to re-evaluate the public aspect of their relationship. Neither of them was sure exactly whose idea it had been, but she had moved back into her own quarters without announcement or fanfare. Nothing had really changed between them – he still wanted to hold a baby Lorian more than anything in the world and knew that she felt the same – but as far as the rest of the crew were concerned, they appeared to have ended their romantic relationship. It was, they agreed, for the good of the ship; but the extra pillows on his bed were poor substitutes for T'Pol's warm body at night.

And, although he'd never admitted it out loud, Trip sometimes saw the enforced loneliness as penance for setting such a poor example, an example that had led to the emotional trauma

that both Lieutenant Devereux and the COB were just now recovering from. More than once, T'Pol had told him that he was being emotional and illogical; the communications officer and Master Chief Mackenzie *were* adults, after all, and were entirely responsible for the decisions that they had made.

It didn't stop Trip from blaming himself though.

As he stood up from the desk to stretch, he wondered briefly if T'Pol was still in the science labs. Since her presence was so rarely needed on the bridge anymore, she spent nearly all of her duty hours in the labs with his official approval, conducting experiments and research into micro-singularities. Although she didn't agree with his assessment, Trip thought that she had become slightly obsessed with acquiring absolute proof that would verify the existence of the miniature black holes. It was actually rather amusing to hear her talk about her work when they met for meals. For a member of a race that insisted on suppressing emotions, who sometimes even claimed not to experience them, she was remarkably passionate about her ongoing research.

Giving his as yet unfinished paperwork a glance, Trip tried not to envy her too much.

Sighing heavily, he glared at the mess on his desk and spent a few seconds scrolling through the PADD that held Hess' damage assessment. Part of him was ecstatic that they had actually broken the warp six barrier based on *his* design suggestions and, at nearly any other time, he'd be walking around with a grin so broad that it would make Phlox jealous. Having the warp coils fire in a sequential order fore to aft instead of simultaneously was such a simple solution that he wanted to kick himself for not coming up with it sooner. Instead, he found himself focusing on what went wrong to the exclusion of what went right; idly, he wondered what had happened to the optimistic outlook that he had possessed when *Enterprise* originally launched.

As Trip had suspected, the injectors had indeed overheated when they topped warp six, and had very nearly melted through the nacelle hull. The engineering team was already looking into fashioning replacement injectors capable of tolerating the extreme temperatures necessary for a sustainable warp six. A flicker of anger washed through him as he specifically recalled mentioning the threat of overheating to the nacelle team, but he pushed the emotion aside. Hess' team was short-handed enough, and he had little doubt that she had already had ... words with the team. Furthermore, they had already done some absolutely amazing work in bringing the port nacelle back online; Hess' initial estimates had called for nearly a week before they would be capable of warp one, but the nacelle team had repaired it in just over twelve.

Trip made a mental note to visit the team and personally thank them for their hard work.

“Bridge to Captain Tucker.”

He recognized the voice immediately. Ensign Natasha Rostova, the baby sister of Michael Rostov, was the Red Shift officer of the deck, or OOD, and thus responsible for monitoring all systems in the absence of senior officers. It was a system of command that had been recently instituted by Starfleet Command and eliminated any confusion as to who would have the bridge when the senior officers weren't present.

Rostova was, like her brother, an engineer's dream. She was smart and loved the job nearly as much as Trip did, yet didn't mind getting dirty if necessary. Hess had already taken the young girl under her wing and was grooming her for duties above and beyond the OOD. On the flip side, however, T'Pol often struggled to conceal her dislike of the young ensign for what she termed "inappropriate actions"; although T'Pol insisted that he was delusional, Trip knew that Rostova's schoolgirl crush on him annoyed the living hell out of his mate. Logically, T'Pol knew that Trip was completely uninterested in the ensign; but that didn't stop the flashes of jealousy when she caught the girl staring at him.

If he hadn't been so damned amused by T'Pol's reaction, Trip would have found the whole thing embarrassing.

"Tucker," Trip said into the comm panel, a sense of foreboding lurking in the pit of his stomach. Standing orders were clear: the OOD was to contact the captain only in emergencies.

"Sir, we have an unidentified contact at bearing one nine seven by three three," the ensign reported, and Tucker frowned. "It's at the extreme range of our sensors and appears to be bearing active sensor countermeasures." Trip's stomach lurched and he headed toward the door even as he spoke.

"Tactical alert." The door slid open and Trip spoke again as he strode through it onto the command deck. "Senior officers to the bridge."

T'Pol was the first of the officers to arrive, and she evicted the enlisted sensor operator seated at her console without a word. By the time Eisler, Devereux and Hsiao arrived, the first officer was already in the process of trying to increase the resolution of the unknown ship's image so they could run it through *Endeavour's* computers for identification.

When Admiral Black exited the turbolift, it took all of Trip's self-control to keep from frowning in disgust at the man's presence. Since coming aboard to "observe" the warp six trial, the admiral had done nothing but poke his nose into ship's business that didn't concern him, all the while making comments that rarely concealed his dislike of Tucker. Such comments only reminded Trip why he disliked the man in the first place. Had it not been for the emotional control that he gained through his bond with T'Pol, Trip would have probably punched the man by now.

A flicker of emotion washed over Trip and he recognized it as T'Pol's sense of pride at accomplishing a difficult task; it was suppressed nearly instantly, but Tucker smiled slightly, glad that he had something to think about other than an admiral with a background in logistics who couldn't lead his way out of a wet paper bag.

"You have something, T'Pol?" he asked, knowing that she would give him the raised eyebrow of annoyance that he had beaten her to informing the crew. She didn't disappoint him.

"The vessel is a Vissian light cruiser," T'Pol announced, and Trip's eyes widened slightly. Long-suppressed memories resurfaced and he grudgingly admitted to himself that he would prefer to deal with Romulans.

"Vissian?" Black asked in surprise. At T'Pol's nod, he looked at Tucker. "Starfleet is still attempting to negotiate an alliance with them, so this could be a good thing."

"Then you should handle this, Admiral," Trip said as he assumed a parade rest stance, his face tight. Black nodded at once and, from the admiral's expression, Tucker knew that he was aware of the Cogenitor incident.

Before anything else could be said, Lieutenant Devereux announced, "We're being hailed." Black stepped forward.

"On screen," he ordered. At once the viewscreen came alive, resolving into the image of a Vissian male. "Greetings, Captain," Black said with a smile, "I'm Admiral Hannibal Black of United Earth Starfleet."

"Admiral," the Vissian captain acknowledged, his eyes seeming to zero in on Trip. "Your ship appears to be damaged, but my sensor operator informs me that it is not from combat."

"The results of an experiment gone awry," Black offered, still smiling. "We're conducting repairs but wouldn't turn away assistance if you want to provide it."

"You are the commander of your vessel?" With a visible wince, the admiral gestured to Trip.

"This is Captain Tucker," he said by way of introduction. "He's the commanding officer of *Endeavour*." A frown creased the Vissian's face.

"Yes," the alien captain rumbled ominously. "We know all about *Charles Tucker*." The words struck like a physical blow, and Trip felt guilt churn in his stomach. Archer's words from years earlier thundered through his brain: *Suicide, Trip. She killed herself.*

"We will be at your position shortly to render aid," the Vissian captain stated, ending the transmission without further comment. Black looked at Trip.

"I think it would be a good idea if I run point on this, Captain," the admiral suggested. Trip couldn't remember the last time he'd heard a better idea.



**Denebris Freeport, 29 June 2157. 1157 Hours Earth Standard Time.**

The whole thing had been a bad idea.

Standing quietly in the bustling open-air market under the curiously dull sun, Lieutenant Junior Grade Nathaniel Hayes felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand up. Almost instantly, his muscles tensed as his instincts began screaming that he was in lethal danger. As he scanned the market with narrowed eyes, he silently cursed the restrictions for landing that prevented his team from wearing combat gear.

As if she sensed his sudden concern, Petty Officer 1st Class Margalit Sharett glanced at him, shifting her stance slightly to adjust the under arm holster for a faster draw of her concealed phase pistol. Nate gave her a quick nod of approval as he noticed her discreetly alert the other member of the security force present; Petty Officer 3rd Class Rashid El-Hamdani didn't visibly respond but, to Hayes' trained eye, the Basrah native went into high alert himself. As he glanced around the market, frustration bubbled up within Nate as he identified a dozen different ambush points, none of which could be easily defended against.

For the first time, he wished that he had not decided to make the trip planetside after all.

Since his promotion and Lieutenant Reynolds' reassignment to Commodore Archer's staff, Hayes had been so busy that he barely had time to think. As commander of *Endeavour's* security force, his duty schedule was already full, but being assigned the job of Gold Shift duty officer only increased the workload. For eight hours every day – specifically 0600 to 1400 hours – he was on the bridge in complete command of the ship. It was fortunate, he supposed, that *Endeavour* wasn't in active combat operations; there was no way the chief of security could also be an OOD, although he had to admit that he enjoyed the additional duties. The things that he had learned about shipboard operations made him far more than just an infantry guy who could pilot. Sometimes, he wondered if the double duty was *meant* to keep him too busy to think.

That thought troubled him more than he wanted to admit.

They had been on Denebris for nearly three days now, having been towed here by the Vissian cruiser. As the commander of *Endeavour's* security force, Nate had been present during most of the negotiations and had observed firsthand Captain Tucker's unease in the presence of the Vissians. It hadn't taken long to find out why. Lieutenant Commander Hess, aside from being a striking woman and a pretty lousy chess player, was a notorious gossip, and she had gone into great detail regarding Tucker's previous interaction with the Vissians. From there, Nate had done some research of his own, tapping into data files that he legally shouldn't have had access to so he could read the official reports about the Cogenitor incident. For the most part, he found himself in complete agreement with the stand that Tucker had taken: Vissian treatment of the Cogenitor was simply appalling and, from his review of previous incident reports, Hayes had to admit that then-Captain Archer had set the example that Tucker had followed.

Even though the Vissians were gone, having departed Denebris almost immediately after towing *Endeavour* to the freeport, their presence continued to be felt. Every member of the crew – even the research scientists who weren't even in the chain of command – had been subjected to rigorous xenobiology briefings from Commander T'Pol and Doctor Phlox that basically boiled down to sensitivity training regarding nonhuman beliefs and traditions. During that time, the captain had been in such an obviously foul mood that no one even thought to complain about the briefings.

That mood had seemed to lighten since their arrival at this market and, right now, the captain was haggling with a Denebris merchant over the price of something. Nate wasn't entirely sure what it was that Tucker was buying but, based on the look of mild disapproval the first officer wore, Hayes was sure that it involved either food or clothing; from what Nate had seen since arriving on *Endeavour*, the captain had horrible taste in both.

“What d'ya think, T'Pol?” Captain Tucker asked, his voice briefly drawing Nate's attention away from crowd watching. The captain was holding up some piece of clothing that looked vaguely like a shirt, an almost happy expression on his face. Hayes barely restrained a wince at the clash of contrasting colors on the shirt, all far too bright than necessary; it looked as if someone had eaten a bucket of crayons and then promptly vomited the colors on a shirt.

“It is visually offensive,” the Vulcan stated flatly, her face stoic but distaste lurking in her eyes. Hayes almost smiled at her words even as the captain gave her a disgruntled frown.

“What's that supposed to mean?” Tucker demanded as he looked over the shirt again. “I like it!”

“Of course you do,” the commander replied, her tone wry. “It is common knowledge, Captain, that your sense of aesthetics is ... questionable.”

“So now you're insultin' my taste in clothes?” Nate could hear the smirk in Tucker's voice.

“According to Lieutenant Sato and from my own personal observation,” T'Pol declared, “you do not *have* 'taste,' Captain.” Snickering, Tucker glanced at Nate and the lieutenant could feel his stomach sink.

“What do you think, Hayes?” the captain asked and Nate didn't even try to conceal his sigh.

“It's ... colorful,” he said in response.

“Do you like it?” Tucker asked, again admiring the atrocious-looking garment, and Nate paused to figure out how to express what he really thought without lying.

“I wouldn't wear it, sir,” Hayes finally said in what he hoped was a diplomatic manner. *Not even on a bet*, he finished silently. The captain frowned at him though, even as T'Pol adopted a distinctly smug expression. Abruptly, Tucker grinned.

“Finish up arrangin' that food shipment,” he said to the Vulcan, a mischievous glint in his eyes, “while I get a couple more ... things.” As Tucker moved away, intent on a distant stall, Nate gave Sharett a discreet head gesture that conveyed an order to accompany the captain. She acknowledged the instruction with a nod of her own and followed without comment; Nate was glad to see that El-Hamdani didn't hesitate to fall into step with PO1 Sharett.

T'Pol said nothing as she observed the captain's departure and, had she been human, Hayes thought that she would sigh. There was little doubt that Tucker was planning on purchasing something outrageous for her, an item that would most likely offend her Vulcan sensibilities. Regardless of the rumors about the state of their relationship, everyone on *Endeavour* knew that they were at least still close friends, and Nate had observed the captain long enough to be able to predict his actions. It was a good thing that the two were close, he reflected, because it was unlikely most Vulcans understood the point of a prank gift.

Following close behind the Vulcan, Hayes resisted the urge to ogle her posterior, instead keeping his eyes on the crowd of market attendees. So far, he had been unable to shake the

feeling of being watched, and each second that passed only served to increase his sense of paranoia. When T'Pol stopped and began speaking with a Denebris merchant, Nate barely registered her words, so intent was he on the crowd around them. He noticed her sidelong glance at him and knew that once she was finished he would be questioned about his distraction, but that didn't concern him now.

Minutes passed without incident, but Nate found his apprehension spiking nonetheless. As T'Pol turned to address him, a sound he recognized instantly spurred him into action and, without hesitation, he dove toward her, catching her in a full body tackle that carried them both back over the market stall. An explosion of fire and heat washed over his back as the incoming air-to-ground missile detonated behind them, ripping apart one of the smaller stalls. He was rolling to his feet almost instantly, ripping his phase pistol free from its holster in a single smooth motion. T'Pol did the same even as Nate triggered the emergency beacon on his communicator that would signal *Endeavour* to their danger. Neither spoke as they exchanged a glance but Hayes knew that their thoughts were focused on the same thing.

Captain Tucker.

They were sprinting forward almost instantly, weapons out and ready. It was hardly surprising that the sight of their pistols sent locals scrambling out of the way, but Nate couldn't find it in himself to care about their panic. The sound of weapons fire could be heard as they charged through the marketplace and T'Pol accelerated her run; easily matching her stride, Hayes abruptly realized that they were running at a pace that a normal human should not be able to match.

In the moment that this thought occurred to him, they rounded a corner to discover an ongoing firefight. Several armored figures – bipedal but not immediately familiar to Nate – were facing away from them, firing at an overturned cart with disruptor rifles. At a glance, Hayes took in the situation; both Tucker and Sharett were down, with the petty officer sprawled out over the captain as if she had moved to protect him. Backed into a corner and already injured, PO3 El-Hamdani was returning fire with his phase pistol from behind the cart; he appeared to be squeezing the trigger as quickly as he could without bothering to aim. As Nate leveled his own weapon at the nearest of the targets, he could see disruptor beams slice into the petty officer's face and drop him like a puppet with its strings cut.

Even as Hayes was squeezing the trigger of his pistol, T'Pol sprinted forward again, firing her own weapon. Two of the armored figures fell almost as once, caught unprepared by the sudden attack from behind. By the time the remaining three had turned to face this unexpected assault, the Vulcan commander was among them, discharging her pistol in the face of one of the figures at point blank range while she hit another of them in a body check that Hayes thought would have made a linebacker proud. Shifting his aim, Nate dropped the last of the figures with a well-aimed shot to the face.

Ignoring the figure that she had body checked, T'Pol raced forward, sliding to a kneeling position beside Sharett and the captain. Hayes rushed forward, pausing only long enough to shoot the figure T'Pol had checked as it struggled to stand. He skidded to a halt at her side, flinching as he looked at the dozens of entry wounds on Sharett's back. That she was dead was instantly apparent: the small metal darts from a flechette weapon of some sort had punctured her major organs and pierced the back of her skull.

To Nate's surprise, T'Pol simply rolled the dead woman off Tucker, revealing a spreading bloodstain on the captain's abdomen. She inhaled sharply, a clear indication of concern, before touching the side of his face with one hand. For a moment, Hayes was confused: surely it was more important to get Tucker immediate medical attention than to stroke his face!

“Recover,” she whispered suddenly, and Nate blinked in surprise once more. Before he could comment, though, he noticed a movement in the corner of his eye, and snapped his weapon in that direction. Too late, he saw the incoming grenade.

The world disappeared in a flash of light.

Author's Note: A **big** thank you to **Distracted** for her assistance and medical knowledge once more. I also failed to thank both **CX** and **HTH2K** in the previous act for their assistance in actually getting this fic moving. Thanks, guys.

## ACT TWO

### **Denebris Freeport, 29 June 2157. 1236 Hours Earth Standard Time.**

Light glittered off the hull of the assault re-entry craft as it dove toward the atmosphere of the planet, and Rick Eisler braced himself for the coming turbulence.

Shooting a quick glance at the rest of the team, Eisler noted with approval that every member of SEAL Team Two appeared poised and ready for action. Weapons were stowed in appropriate positions to avoid being jostled by the hard re-entry, yet were close enough for easy access. Safety harnesses were secured over each member of the team to prevent injury. Expressions were grim yet resolute.

Exactly as it should be.

“Three minutes!” Chief Gray announced from the pilot's station, and Rick gave him a thumbs-up as he double-checked his own safety harness. It was an understandable precaution: the ARC-16 was old, even by MACO standards, and had only recently been reintroduced into service. Based on a similar airframe as the standard Starfleet shuttlepod, the re-entry vehicle was wider, longer and significantly better armored. Two blister turrets, each manned by a Security crewman, were on either side of the -16, and a retractable rocket pack awaited deployment on the roof. Retired nearly ten years earlier, the ARC-16 was ugly yet efficient, like all good weapon systems. A pair of the venerable -16s was assigned to *Endeavour*, but this was the first time they had been used for anything beyond a training mission.

As it hit the outer atmosphere the small craft began to shake, and the temperature in the cramped troop compartment skyrocketed. One of the team began to mutter something softly under her breath; to Rick, it sounded vaguely like a prayer, but as he didn't speak Spanish he couldn't confirm that guess. Hidden by his helmet, he very nearly smiled when it occurred to him that praying was probably a good idea if one happened to believe in a higher being of some sort: the ARC-16 hadn't exactly had a great reputation for safety even when it had been in widespread use.

It was complete happenstance that found Rick in combat gear when Lieutenant Hayes' emergency beacon was activated. As the tactical officer on a ship that rarely needed a tactical officer, Eisler had joined SCPO Luckabaugh's team during their latest training exercise; as was often the case, it had been an exercise that he himself had developed based on his own record in the MACOs, one that he had loathed *because* it was so effective.

Drawing in a sharp breath as the -16 suddenly made a stomach-lurching drop, Rick found himself reflecting on his duties aboard *Endeavour* in an attempt to avoid thinking about just how ancient the engines on the old re-entry craft were. With Commander T'Pol spending more and more time in the Science Labs, Eisler had assumed many of her duties as executive officer, all the while recognizing that the captain was grooming him for the actual job. For the most part, Rick didn't mind: with Tucker's tacit approval, he had instituted a series of

shipwide policy changes that fixed a number of things that had annoyed him from day one. Physical training was no longer optional, and fitness tests were now routine. Every member of the crew was required to meet certain weapons qualifications, and cross-training was the order of the day. Drills – whether they were Repel Boarders or Hull Breach or General Quarters – had become commonplace and had honed the crew into a well-oiled machine. On several occasions, the civilian research scientists had complained about the fact that Eisler expected them to participate as well; but, each time, Tucker backed Rick up.

The changes to the Security Force were more extensive. Given free rein, Rick had immediately split Security into two distinct branches, each of which was further broken down into two teams. The first branch was known by the acronym STAB, which was short for Shipboard Tactical Actions and Boarding. These two teams were trained to specialize in zero-gee tactics and assault operations aboard starships. STAB teams were essential in a Repel Boarders scenario, and the senior enlisted man – SCPO Gray – doubled as the weapon systems officer, despite the Fleet-wide consensus that the WSO should be an officer of at least lieutenant rank.

The other Security branch operated under the name SEAL, an acronym Rick had taken from Earth history that stood for Sea, Earth, and Land. Specializing in planetary operations, they were responsible for the security of landing parties. SCPO Luckabaugh had even been given veto authority regarding the make up of teams going planetside. PO1 Sharett and PO3 El-Hamdani were SEALs.

“One minute!” Gray said abruptly, and Eisler reached back to hit the 'Ready' button. An amber light illuminated instantly, informing the team to prepare themselves. The team moved quickly but efficiently, unstrapping themselves from their seats and securing their zip-lines to the deployment collars near the doors of the troop compartment before grabbing their weapons. The zip-lines were an old technology as well: The deceleration cables that attached to the combat armor worn by the SEALs would allow them to exit the re-entry craft from a height of up to ten meters. Rick checked his own weapon, secured to his battle harness with a safety cord, and waited.

The light changed to green as the ARC suddenly jerked to a stop. The whine of the engines changed in pitch, a clear indication that the craft was now in 'hover' mode. The twin side doors on the -16 slid open and the SEALs moved, jumping through the open hatchways without hesitation. Rick was the last one out, but only because of his seat placement; he plunged to the ground, slowed by the deceleration cable, and he hit the release button the moment his feet hit the ground. The cable retracted without a sound.

“Team Two dirtside,” he stated into his helmet comm as the four other team members held their circular formation around him. “Moving to last known position of *Endeavour* Six now.”

“Team One dirtside,” came SCPO Luckabaugh's voice across the comm, and Eisler let loose a soft sigh of relief that the other ARC had arrived without incident. “Moving to Roughneck Six beacon point.”

“Copy.” Rick gave a sharp hand gesture, and Team Two began moving through the shattered remains of the marketplace. “Eagle One, Eagle Two, maintain overwatch.” The acknowledgment from the two circling assault re-entry craft was instantaneous.

Fires burned unchecked all around them, appearing to have been caused by explosions of some sort, and craters had replaced several stalls that Eisler recalled from his visit to the marketplace the previous day. Bodies were everywhere, many mangled beyond recognition from shrapnel, concussive force or flame. He was glad for the biofilter in his helmet: the stench of burned flesh must be powerful.

“Our people come first,” Rick reminded PO1 Simons when the corpsman started to break formation to attend to wounded locals. For a heartbeat, Eisler thought that he would have to make it a direct order; but Simons nodded and fell back into formation.

Minutes later, they arrived at the captain's comm signal location, and Rick felt his stomach clench at the sight of Tucker sprawled out next to PO1 Sharett. Lying in a pool of blood, neither appeared to be breathing. Simons sprinted forward, slinging his rifle as he drew his med-scanner. PO3 Chao followed, his own weapon held at the ready to protect the corpsman if necessary.

“Sir.” It was Petty Officer 3rd Class Hensen, the computer and sensor operator. Pointing with his rifle, the CSO drew Eisler's attention to another body that had to be El-Hamdani; at a glance, Rick could tell that the young petty officer was beyond help.

“Orions,” one of the team muttered as she rolled the body of a dead figure over with her toe. With effort, Eisler bit back the guttural oath that he wanted to snarl at the stupidity of the SEAL: the figure *could* have been booby-trapped.

“No life signs, sir,” a subdued Simons announced, taking in the readings from his med-scanner. Rick glared at the dead Orion, fury and regret competing for dominance. The death of Captain Tucker would hit the ship hard. The corpsman hung his head and began to lower the scanner, when suddenly the instrument beeped. “What the fuck?” he muttered, his voice carrying across the squad frequency. Dropping to his knees, Simons adjusted the med-scanner for a long moment before urgently setting it aside and reaching for his field trauma kit. In seconds, he had torn open Tucker's pant leg, exposing the captain's upper thigh, and, muttering something under his breath, quickly donned a pair of surgical gloves. Still grumbling softly, he swiped the captain's leg with antiseptic before pulling a large needle free from the trauma pack. He tore the needle free of the sterilized package and, with a smooth motion, began inserting it into Tucker's leg. Using the scanner as a guide, he slowly fed a catheter into the captain's body.

“Commander,” the corpsman said through clenched teeth, his eyes never leaving the scanner display, “I need Phlox.” At the grim tone of Simons' voice, Eisler reacted without hesitation.

“*Endeavour*, TAC-Six,” he said into his helmet comm. The reply was nearly instantaneous.

“*Endeavour*.”

“I need MED-Six on the line ASAP.” The doctor's voice echoed across the comm line seconds later.

“Phlox here,” the Denobulan stated, and Eisler frowned at the improper communications

protocols.

“Doctor,” Simons broke in as he continued to work, “I have a critical patient suffering a laceration of the portal vein. Patient is hemorrhaging and I'm applying a vascular patch now. Stand by to receive vitals.” He glanced up briefly at the petty officer who stood over him. “Chao, hit the transmit button on the scanner.” The addressed SEAL complied, and seconds later the Denobulan’s voice filled the line once more.

“Vitals received.” The doctor's voice was flat and grim. “After you've achieved patch adherence, begin plasma expanders and stand by for emergency transport,” he ordered abruptly, no trace of his normal jovial demeanor in his voice. “I'll meet you there.” Simons barely acknowledged the instruction as he quickly rooted through the pack for an IV bag: The plasma expanders that Phlox had referenced, Eisler presumed. Attaching the intravenous bag directly to the catheter, the corpsman began squeezing it with one hand as he double-clicked on his helmet comm, indicating that he was ready.

Time seemed to slow to a crawl as the distinctive whine of an active transporter sounded around them. Simons and the captain dematerialized slowly, finally fading from sight after an impossibly long moment. Rick released a breath that he hadn't realized he'd been holding.

“TAC-Six, SEAL Six.” Luckabaugh's voice crackled across the squad frequency and Rick answered immediately, his eyes still fixed on the spot where the captain and PO1 Simons had been.

“TAC-Six.”

“We are at the last known location of Roughneck Six. There is no sign of him, but we did find *Endeavour* Five's communicator.” Eisler frowned; he couldn't believe that Commander T'Pol would ever be that sloppy.

Rick’s interactions with the commander had improved considerably since he had first come aboard, and he knew more about her relationship with the captain than anyone aboard *Endeavour* save Phlox. When they had given Starfleet their command change proposal, Captain Tucker and Commander T'Pol had also informed Eisler of the mating bond that telepathically linked them together. While he couldn't help but disapprove on principle of the relationship between them, Rick had to admit that their behavior after Starfleet refused the proposal had impressed him.

He didn't want to think about how her death would affect the captain.

“Extend your search pattern,” Eisler ordered grimly. The centuries-old maxim for men like him came to mind: no one is left behind. “Find T'Pol.”



**29 June 2157. 1245 Hours Earth Standard Time.**

T'Pol of Vulcan opened her eyes.

For a single extended heartbeat, she was remarkably confused. Her last clear memory was of melding with Trip in an attempt to ease the pain that had knifed through their bond. Instinct had taken over as she neared him, causing her to rush forward in an ill-advised charge, but she had felt his body begin to slide into the trance when suddenly light had consumed everything. There had been a sensation of motion, and then voices speaking in a language that she did not immediately recognize. Reflexively, she reached out to Trip through the bond.

A wave of panic swept through her when she realized that she could no longer sense him. His presence in her mind had become such an integral part of how she defined herself that the absence of his sometimes chaotic emotions was unsettling. Fear, anger and grief pulsed through her veins with each beat of her heart, and she struggled to recover control: acting without all of the facts was dangerous and emotional, she reminded herself, and had resulted in tragic consequences in the past. Gradually logic reasserted itself, and she clung to the hope that the reason she could not sense Trip was because of the healing trance.

For now, hope would have to be enough.

Having suppressed the raging emotions that were every Vulcan's curse, T'Pol finally took notice of the fact that her body was not obeying her. She was aware of feeling – the floor was cold and her uniform uncomfortable – but try as she might, her limbs would not respond to her efforts to move them. Sweat broke out across her brow as she bent her considerable willpower into combating the lack of motor control; but the only result was a single finger twitch.

T'Pol allowed herself to feel concerned.

Hands rolled her over and began to peel the uniform from her body. Fear surged through her at the sight of the leering Orion male suddenly kneeling beside her, but she concealed it behind the control that had been instilled in her since childhood. Meeting his lascivious gaze with the coldest eyes she could manage, she mentally recited Surak's litany against fear in an effort to fortify herself against what she knew was coming.

A sharp feminine voice sounded, speaking in the language of her captors, and the male that was fondling her reacted instantly; leaping to his feet, he bowed deeply before the unseen speaker. Feet appeared within T'Pol's line of vision and then a face that she recognized: Navaar.

“Commander T'Pol,” the Orion female said with a smirk. “So good to see you again.” Had her body obeyed her, T'Pol would have answered in an appropriate manner, one that would likely have included a nerve pinch; instead, she allowed her eyes to convey the message. Again, the female smiled in response before glancing away; Navaar's expression darkened and she snapped something in her native tongue, something that included Trip's name. Hope warred with fear in T'Pol's mind, but she suppressed them both as an unseen male responded to the female's query.

“You are always in the company of such beautiful males,” Navaar abruptly stated, a forced-looking smile on her face. “This one, however, is much more to my tastes than your captain.”

One of the males dragged a body forward and T'Pol recognized Lieutenant Hayes immediately; unlike T'Pol, he appeared to be genuinely unconscious. A serious but non-fatal burn covered part of his face, and he wore nothing but his undergarments. Attached to his neck was a device that T'Pol recognized instantly: a neural inhibitor. Commonly used by slavers, the inhibitor disrupted the electrical impulses of the subject's nervous system, effectively paralyzing them without causing actual injury. The presence of the inhibitor explained her own lack of motor control, and she desperately tried to recall methods of defeating the device.

“A pity about your Mister Tucker,” Navaar continued, her smile cold and absent of true emotion. “I am told that he was already dead.” Grief struggled to manifest itself, but T'Pol forced it down as she watched the Orion stroke the side of Hayes' face, fingers lingering briefly on the burn. “Such a pity...”

Abruptly standing, Navaar said something in her native language and hands immediately seized T'Pol, lifting her unresisting body off of the floor. Hefted over the shoulder of one of her captors, the Vulcan hung limply, unable even to voice a complaint at the indignity of the situation. Instead, she concentrated on memorizing the route they took from the airlock; such information would be valuable, she told herself. That it gave her something to focus on other than the hole in her mind where Trip should be was an added bonus.

Approximately twenty meters and three right turns later, they arrived at their destination. The hiss of a pressurized door echoed loudly and a draught of cold air washed over her body; had she been able to, T'Pol would have shivered with the unexpected chill. The Orion that carried her – the same one that had fondled her earlier – lowered her to the floor and propped her against the wall. He met her eyes and gave a wicked smile as he caressed her face with a meaty hand. The promise in his expression was dark as he stroked her ears.

T'Pol endured his touch with no hint of emotion in her eyes, but memorized his features for future encounters. Vengeance was illogical, she reminded herself, but that thought did nothing to cool the fire burning in her stomach. In one way, it was fortunate that Trip was not present: the primal emotions at the core of the mating bond would drive her mate to kill this creature with his bare hands for daring to touch her, and T'Pol had no desire to see Trip so enraged.

Once again, Navaar's voice prevented the male from progressing beyond a mere touch. A flicker of fury passed across the male's face but was gone nearly before T'Pol registered it, replaced by an expression of dumbfounded awe that the Vulcan recognized; She had seen it often during the incident when Navaar and her sisters had been aboard *Enterprise*. His head hanging low, the male followed Navaar to the door. The female Orion smiled mockingly as she met T'Pol's eyes.

“Please enjoy the amenities,” Navaar sneered before pressing a button that shut the door.

The moment that the door sealed behind the Orions, a low beep echoed in the room and T'Pol felt a tingling in her extremities. She exhaled in heartfelt relief when her arms finally obeyed her, and she spent several long moments experimenting to determine if her reflexes were still inhibited.

As she suspected, the inhibitor was secured against an easy release; initial attempts to dislodge it caused a painful electrical jolt. She suspected that further attempts to remove the device would result in electrical shocks of greater intensity that would eventually culminate in unconsciousness. She believed it was unlikely to cause death, however; Killing their captives would not fit the Orion personality profile, since corpses never sold as well as living subjects.

Grief again threatened to overwhelm her, and T'Pol focused her attention entirely upon Lieutenant Hayes in an attempt to divert herself from reflecting on Trip's fate. Although it was illogical and highly emotional, T'Pol felt that she would know if her mate was dead. There had to be an explanation for her inability to sense him...

Hayes was breathing evenly and T'Pol took the opportunity to study him, a slight frown touching her face as she let her mind puzzle over the lieutenant. His unprecedented skill as a pilot during the battle in the Vigrad System had not escaped her notice and, while his official records did indicate extensive flight training from a maternal grandparent who was a noted pilot, her curiosity had nonetheless been piqued. When she had learned of the failure of *Endeavour's* medical computer, a data corruption that just happened to include Hayes' records, logic immediately told her that the data loss had been deliberate; as Surak had once said, there *were* no coincidences. It had taken several weeks of careful work, but she had managed to reconstruct over forty percent of the lost data.

Although her specialty was astrophysics, T'Pol knew enough about genetics to recognize several discrepancies in Hayes' record. That in itself caused her growing suspicion, and she spent an additional month conducting discreet observations of the lieutenant. Hayes, it turned out, was in better physical condition than any other member of the crew, including the fitness-obsessed Lieutenant Commander Eisler. The lieutenant was also significantly stronger and better coordinated than his fellow humans, a fact that he generally managed to conceal; on no less than three occasions, T'Pol had observed Hayes simulate exhaustion around other crewmembers before resuming his duties with no trace of actual fatigue.

Hayes' scholastic history was remarkably uneventful. According to every record that T'Pol had examined, he was an above average student who attended regularly but wasn't memorable in any way. He did not participate in extracurricular activities despite his clear athletic ability, and he was not known for excessive alcohol consumption – something that, according to Trip, was apparently a requirement for most humans in institutes of higher learning. Hayes' record, for lack of a better word, was perfect... too perfect, in her opinion.

T'Pol had taken her observations to Phlox, enlisting the Denobulan's medical expertise regarding the apparent genetic discrepancies. When the doctor confirmed her suspicions about the lieutenant's abnormal genetic make-up, she had then relayed this information to Tucker. It had taken considerable effort, but she had managed to convince Trip to refrain from revealing their newfound knowledge; recognizing that she was trained to deal with this sort of subterfuge, Trip had then told her to use her own judgment in how to proceed. Thus far, she had done nothing beyond suggesting that Hayes be given an increased workload that would keep him too busy to do much thinking. That he was an Augment was obvious once one had the appropriate information; what interested T'Pol was how he had managed to avoid notice from Starfleet Medical.

If he had, in fact, avoided notice.

Lifting her eyes from the lieutenant's unmoving form, T'Pol took a moment to study the room that was serving as a cell. It had a vaguely ellipsoidal shape and was, by her estimation, perhaps three meters at its widest. The room's single door was oversized, indicating that this may originally have been a storage room of some sort. The wall access pad beside the door had been covered by a flat panel of metal. The temperature of the room remained unnecessarily cold, furthering her hypothesis that this had originally been a freezing unit for food storage. In her rudimentary scan, she identified the location of two concealed vid-cams in addition to the prominent one just above the door.

A slight change in the ambient noise was her first warning and, seconds later, she felt a subtle tremor run through the floor that denoted a ship going to warp. There was no trace on her face of the despair that she suppressed with some effort. *Fear is an emotion*, she reminded herself, *and Vulcans do not experience emotions.*

Instead, she focused on her breathing.



### **29 June 2157. 1255 Hours Earth Standard Time.**

His breathing was so shallow it was virtually nonexistent and his cardiac rhythm was barely detectable, but the captain *was* alive.

Kneeling at Tucker's side, Phlox released the breath that he had been holding since the captain and PO1 Simons materialized on the transporter. He exchanged a knowing look with the corpsman before glancing up at the silent COB.

"Stretcher," Phlox said as he rose, his eyes once again focused on the small med-scanner in his hand. Master Chief Mackenzie gave a sharp hand gesture to the two crewmen standing behind him and they moved forward at once. As they expertly transferred the captain to the stretcher, Phlox momentarily glowered at the small display on his scanner: it was every bit as dire as Simons had indicated.

A foreign object, presumably from a weapon of some sort although Phlox hadn't yet ruled out shrapnel, had punctured Captain Tucker's liver, clipping the portal vein that ran through the organ, but had then lodged in the tenth thoracic vertebra; a half centimeter lower and the object would have missed the vertebra entirely and sliced into the captain's spinal cord. A half centimeter to the left and it would have lacerated the aorta and he would have been dead in two minutes. Right now, Phlox wasn't concerned about the damage to the liver, however; for a vascular organ, it was surprisingly resilient. What *did* concern him was the continuing risk of hemorrhage. Already, the captain's abdomen was filled with blood from the lacerated portal vein and, although Simon's quick application of a vascular patch had temporarily sealed the vein, the doctor was eager to fix the laceration definitively. There were other concerns, of course, but repairing the damaged vein was the doctor's priority.

None of Tucker's injuries explained his abnormal vital signs.

“I have him now,” Phlox told Simons as the two crewmen hefted the stretcher, now bearing the captain. The petty officer nodded as Phlox turned his attention to the engineer manning the transporter console. “Have Cutler prep for surgery,” he ordered before giving the COB another nod. Mackenzie took the lead and, close on his heels, the crewmen carrying the captain followed, with Phlox a half step behind them.

The trip to Sickbay took longer than Phlox was entirely comfortable with, and he made a mental note to suggest that future Starfleet ship designs place the transporter on the same deck as the medical facility. The ideal solution, of course, would be to situate the transporter immediately adjacent to Sickbay to facilitate casualty collection more readily, but doing so would likely be seen as a security threat of some sort.

Master Chief Mackenzie led the way, his bleak expression keeping most crewmen out of their way; he resorted to verbal commands only once, when a pair of research scientists wandered into their route, so totally absorbed in their own conversation they weren't even aware of the medical emergency.

“Make a hole!” the COB bellowed, his voice loud and demanding; both scientists flattened against the wall instantly, having long since learned to obey the master chief without question. Had the situation not been as grim, Phlox would have smiled at the expressions of worry on the faces of the two scientists.

Admiral Black was lurking outside Sickbay, and Phlox nearly frowned in annoyance. He had barely interacted with the admiral but, in that admittedly brief time, the doctor had grown to share Captain Tucker's opinion of the man. Before Black could open his mouth, no doubt to request another absurd status report, Phlox spoke up.

“The captain is in critical condition,” he announced, his expression daring the admiral to contest it, “and requires immediate surgery.” The two crewmen continued through the open door into Sickbay as Phlox paused for one final comment. “Master Chief, standing order number three is in effect.” As he entered the medical facility, the doctor could hear the COB calmly refusing to allow the admiral entry. *Endeavour* Standing Order 3 was simple: when the Chief Medical Officer was in surgery, nothing short of a warp core breach was to interrupt him.

Lieutenant Cutler was waiting for him as he approached the operating table. Quickly running his hands through the sterilizer field, Phlox took a moment to study the biobed display. Once more, he frowned: there was no reason for Tucker's vitals to be this low! Glancing at the captain's unmoving form, Phlox pushed down a sudden memory of Sim and focused on the present: he had a job to do.

Surgery took less time than the doctor expected. The first step was to suction all the free blood in the abdomen with a laparoscope so he could repair the vein permanently. The peritoneal defect then needed to be mended from the inside, both anteriorly and posteriorly. Removing the foreign object – which turned out to be an arrow-shaped article that he recognized as a flechette weapon of unfamiliar design – required a three-centimeter incision near the spine. Once he was positive that there was no nerve damage, he sealed up the damaged vertebra with the bone annealer and closed the incision.

As Cutler cleaned up, Phlox once more turned his attention to his patient's vital signs. Attempts to restore the captain's blood pressure and pulse rate to normal levels had thus far failed, and the doctor found himself at a loss to explain it. All of the captain's autonomic functions were reduced to the point of being nearly nonexistent. His core body temperature was lower than it had any right to be, and even the electrical impulses running through his nervous system had slowed to a crawl. If Tucker had been a Denobulan, Phlox would have thought that he was in hibernation. Had the captain been Vulcan...

"Elizabeth," he said abruptly as the idea suddenly spiraled through him. "Bring up the captain's neural patterns again." Cutler gave him a slightly confused glance, but obeyed without question. Phlox studied the display for a few moments before grinning broadly.

"Doctor?" Lieutenant Cutler asked hesitantly, and he addressed her without taking his eyes from the readout.

"What do you know about Vulcan healing trances?" he asked, and she gave him another odd look.

"Not much."

"That's no surprise, I suppose." The optimism that made Phlox who he was bubbled over into his voice, and he made no effort to restrain it. "It's an instinctual response, like hibernation, and they don't often discuss it openly. When a Vulcan is seriously injured, he or she automatically slips into such a state to accelerate healing or extend life until medical assistance can arrive. From what I recall, part of the training that young Vulcans receive is to learn how *not* to enter such a state if badly injured." He paused and glanced at her. "There's a religious order on Earth that uses a similar technique in their meditations, but human science refers to it as 'biofeedback'."

"That's ... nice, Doctor," Cutler said after another moment of confused silence. "But what does that have to do with the captain?"

"Captain Tucker," Phlox declared as he gestured to the biobed display, "is in a Vulcan healing trance."

"But he's not Vulcan," Cutler pointed out, and the doctor nodded.

"Do you see these neural readings?" Phlox asked as he highlighted the pertinent data. Liz nodded and he smiled again. "Those readings are indicative of a Vulcan mind meld." Her eyes widened as the pieces of the puzzle fell into place.

"Commander T'Pol put him in the trance!" she exclaimed in understanding.

"That is, to coin a phrase, the logical explanation." Cutler rolled her eyes at his pun and the doctor glanced to the doorway, his smile faltering slightly. "Speaking of which," he said, "I wonder where she is." Glancing at the wall chronometer, Phlox realized that it had been over an hour since the captain was first brought into sickbay.

Outside the door, Phlox discovered two of the security force standing guard. For a moment,

he was surprised; never before had Roughnecks been given such a duty. Before he could comment, one of the two spoke up.

“Master Chief's orders, sir,” the grim-looking woman said. Glancing quickly down the hallway, she continued in a low voice. “The admiral was gettin' antsy so the COB sent us here to keep him from botherin' you.”

“Ah,” Phlox said in understanding. “You may tell the Master Chief that Captain Tucker is out of surgery but will be unconscious for some time.” He paused briefly, unsure how to phrase this without giving away too much. “Where is Commander T'Pol? There are some Vulcan techniques that I'd...” He trailed off at their expressions; a sick feeling began to churn in his stomach.

“I don't think she made it, Doc,” the other security officer said softly. “The SEALs haven't been able to find her body, but...”

“I see.” Phlox swallowed the grief and gave the two a forced smile. “Thank you.” He retreated into the medical facility. Two steps beyond the door, he grabbed the edge of a biobed and closed his eyes. Composure briefly failed him and he struggled for control. It was impossible for him to imagine T'Pol dead. After everything that she had gone through, to die in such an absurd manner... it was inconceivable. This would kill the captain.

The captain.

Phlox's eyes snapped open and he quickly darted to Tucker's bed, heart pounding with something he could only define as hope. Scrolling through the displays, he paused on one and narrowed his eyes. On a normal human, it was an unused portion of the brain, a vestigial element that served no discernible purpose, much like the vermiform appendix. On Captain Tucker, however, it was constantly alive with activity; this had prompted Phlox to tentatively identify it as the origin of the telepathic linkage between the captain and Commander T'Pol. Although Phlox had no absolute proof, he was confident the theory was more than sound.

If the commander was dead, then why was the link still alive?

The hiss of the sickbay doors opening drew the doctor's attention away from the display, and he watched Lieutenant Commander Eisler enter. Still wearing his combat armor, the tactical officer approached with a grim expression.

“Doctor,” he said by way of greeting before glancing at the captain. “How is he?”

“He should survive.” Eisler nodded, almost as if he expected such a reply, and glanced at Phlox once more.

“We haven't found Commander T'Pol,” the tactical officer stated with no hint of equivocation. “Local authorities are operating on the assumption that she's among the dead.” He frowned as he continued. “So is Admiral Black.”

“The admiral is wrong,” Phlox replied. At Eisler's pointed look, the doctor gestured to the readouts above the biobed. “Captain Tucker's vitals indicate that he's in a Vulcan healing

trance.” The lieutenant commander's eyes widened fractionally at that. “Since he's not a Vulcan, it's my theory that Commander T'Pol placed him in this trance.”

“Do you have any other evidence?” Eisler asked, and Phlox paused. From the commander's expression, it was clear he too doubted that T'Pol was dead.

“There are certain changes to his neural patterns that seem to indicate a telepathic meld.” Lowering his voice, the doctor continued. “And if T'Pol were dead, Captain Tucker would be displaying ... other symptoms.” Eisler nodded in understanding at that.

“That tracks with my theory,” the tactical officer said. “Based on the vectors of attack, this looks like a smash-and-grab. The casualties they inflicted were meant as distractions while the capture team moved against the real target.” He looked up, meeting Phlox's steady gaze with his own eyes. “Commander T'Pol.” He suddenly glowered. “Now I have to convince the *admiral* of this.” Black's rank was said with such contempt that Phlox nearly smiled.

“And if he doesn't listen?” It was a legitimate question, based on what they had seen of the admiral thus far. Eisler shrugged slightly before turning away. “Commander,” Phlox said suddenly, and the tactical officer hesitated. “In regards to that ... matter we spoke of earlier,” he started; the lieutenant commander stiffened slightly, but nodded for Phlox to continue. “The initial diagnosis stands. I'm sorry.”

“It's not unexpected, Doctor.” Eisler glanced at him again. “How long until I'm unable to perform my duties?”

“I can't definitively say,” the doctor dissembled. He hated giving this sort of news, hated seeing hope die in the eyes of his patients. “There are a number of treatments that we can still try, many of which have promising results.”

“How long?” Eisler repeated, his voice harder than before, and Phlox sighed.

“Two years if we're fortunate.” The lieutenant commander winced slightly at that, but gave no other indication of what he thought. Finally he nodded, as if he had made a decision.

“Thank you, Doctor.” He began to walk toward the door, but hesitated once more. “When will you inform Starfleet Medical?”

“When I *have* to,” Phlox replied instantly, “and not before.” For a moment, Eisler said nothing. Once again, he looked Phlox in the eyes; this time, there was emotion behind the gaze.

“Thank you, Phlox.” The lieutenant commander was through the door and out of sickbay before the doctor realized that Eisler had used his name. An overwhelming sense of sadness washed over him and he closed his eyes.



**29 June 2157. 1415 Hours Earth Standard Time.**

He opened his eyes.

He had been awake for several minutes but, instead of leaping to his feet and revealing this fact to any potential observers, Nate had instead used the time to silently take stock of his situation and surroundings. The room was cold, perhaps twelve to fifteen degrees Celsius, and a low hum vibrated through the deck that he was lying on, indicating that he was aboard a starship of some sort. It wasn't much of a cell and actually appeared to be have once been a storage room pressed into service for this job; he gave the room a quick once-over before focusing his attention on Commander T'Pol.

The Vulcan commander sat in a far corner of the room, her eyes closed and her breathing steady. For a moment, Hayes found himself admiring her exquisite physique as she meditated; he'd found her attractive from the moment that he first glanced over her file, and this was the first time that he had seen her in such a state of undress. Her recent decision to allow her hair to lengthen only accentuated her exotic beauty, particularly as her features were partially concealed by the shoulder length hair. The effects of the cold were immediately evident upon her anatomy and he licked his lips before finally tearing his eyes away from her breasts. Lust thundered through his veins and he struggled for control as a darkly seductive part of his brain began to whisper terrible things to him. If he *really* wanted her, he could take her. She couldn't stop him. No one could stop him. It was his birthright: take what he wanted, when he wanted.

*Stop it*, Hayes snarled to that familiar and hated voice. *I'm better than that.*

He wished that he could truly believe that.

Like the ever-present anger that simmered within him, the voice was another part of his Augment heritage that he wished he could lose. A physical superiority that he could never forget had combined with his already conflicted sense of morality to awaken a primal arrogance in him that, at times, urged him to act in completely inappropriate ways. *Superior ability breeds superior ambition* was how one Section psychologist had explained it to him, and Nate found himself struggling with it on a daily basis. He fought the urges, fought against them with every scrap of his self-control, but times like this made him wonder if he wasn't already too dangerous to be allowed freedom. *A civilized man*, he mused bleakly, *doesn't think about rape.*

The moment passed and he breathed in deeply, desperately trying to regain his composure. By concentrating on the current situation, he found himself sliding back into a normal frame of mind, and he slowly felt control returning. *Ascertain your assets*, he reminded himself as he climbed to his feet, *and determine a plan of attack.* Pretending to be unsteady for the vid-cam that he had already noticed, he stumbled and dropped back to his knees; in that moment, he touched the side of his left foot and noted with some satisfaction that the electronic lockpick was still secured there. Concealed by a strip of synth-flesh that appeared to be nothing more than a childhood scar, it was designed not to show up on sensor scans and would be helpful for any escape attempt.

He briefly studied the piece of metal that covered the access pad of the door before turning away, confident that, with a little effort, he could rip it free. Long minutes passed as he

conducted a visual and tactile search of the room; three listening devices and a second concealed vid-cam were found and he crushed all of them underfoot. A third vid-cam was hidden in the ceiling but he pretended not to notice it.

It wasn't the first time that he had been put in a situation like this. During his early training as an operative for the Section, he had been placed in a maximum security facility deep within China. False identity papers were created for him; as far as the Chinese authorities were concerned, he was a cold-blooded sociopath who had the blood of dozens, if not hundreds, on his hands.

Nate tried not to think about the accuracy of that description.

It had been a dangerous training exercise that had lasted over six months. Daily physical and mental abuse had strained his control to its breaking point, and he still suffered occasional nightmares from those days. One guard in particular had delighted in trying to break him and, had the Section's orders not explicitly forbidden injuring any of the prison guards, Hayes would have killed the man during the escape.

Instead, Nate had tracked him down and killed him months later, long after his superiors in the Section had forgotten about the exercise.

In the course of his search of the storage-room-turned-cell, Nate found a discarded label from what had probably been foodstuffs of some sort. He recognized the writing instantly and felt his stomach lurch slightly. If this was an Orion craft, then he realized that he would soon discover if his anosmia would give him any advantage over Orion pheromones. Another deficiency in the process that had been used to augment his genetic structure, Nate's lack of a sense of smell was an admittedly trivial medical problem, but it had led to some difficulties in the past. Humans took for granted how much of a role the sense of smell played in day-to-day activities.

Sinking down against the wall, he hugged himself in an apparent attempt to keep warm in the biting cold. Keeping the cell temperature below the comfort zone was a familiar technique, one that the Chinese had used with considerable success on him, and he wondered briefly how Commander T'Pol would fare against the cold. As he sat quietly, he let his fingers trace another false scar on the underside of his right arm. It too had gone unnoticed; he forced his face to display no emotion.

Once more he studied T'Pol, although this time he found himself wondering how useful she would be. If Tucker had died, it was probable that she would sense it through that telepathic link of theirs and, according to everything that the Section had acquired on bonded couples, she would either fly into a homicidal rage or slip into a catatonic depression that would culminate in self-termination. The information on bonds was still incomplete, of course, but Nate wondered exactly how accurate it was: he knew of numerous Vulcans still alive that had lost their husbands or wives. Still, he decided to keep an eye on T'Pol just in case she did display such symptoms.

Her intelligence background could be useful, Hayes mused as he again glanced at the sealed door. According to the information that his Control had provided him, T'Pol had spent a number of years serving as a member of the Ministry of Security, and had specialized in

fugitive retrieval. Nate smirked suddenly at the thought of the petite Vulcan serving as a government-mandated bounty hunter. *If nothing else*, he thought, *no one would expect it from someone who looked like an underwear model.*

He quickly realized that the device attached to his neck could be a problem, and spent a few minutes trying to get it off. Electrical shocks lanced through his body as he tried to pull it free, and he gritted his teeth against the agony that burned away coherent thought. Gasping for air, he abandoned the attempts and spent several long minutes trying to recover from the pain. It was altogether too much like his time in the prison; they too had used electricity as an instrument of control.

An odd sound drew Nate's attention back to T'Pol, and he tensed at the expression on her face. She was frowning slightly, and he could see that her eyes were darting around beneath the closed lids, almost as if she were in a state of REM. Abruptly, her breathing began to come at a more rapid and shallow pace, and Hayes glowered at the closed door. Her reaction could only mean one thing: Tucker was dead.

"Trip," she muttered softly in the moment before her eyes snapped open. To Nate's surprise, she appeared almost visibly joyful. A smile played across her lips for a fraction of a second before she smoothed her features back into the stoic mask she wore most of the time. Confusion swamped him momentarily; she wasn't acting as though the captain had died.

"Lieutenant," T'Pol said by way of greeting. She gave him a slight nod and he returned it cautiously, but said nothing as she glanced around the room. She noticed the smashed remains of the eavesdropping equipment immediately and raised an eyebrow that he took as an unspoken question. Shrugging slightly, he let his eyes drift toward the ceiling and the third vid-cam in hopes that she would recognize his meaning. Another nod came from her and he exhaled slightly in relief.

"I'm sorry about the captain," Hayes said after a long moment of silence. It was the only way he could potentially find out about Tucker's fate without revealing that he had information he shouldn't have; after all, the bond between the captain and Commander T'Pol was ostensibly a secret.

"Captain Tucker survived," she declared, no doubt at all in her voice, and Nate glanced at her in surprise. "We should look to our own situation and focus our respective talents on escape," T'Pol continued. As he nodded in agreement, Hayes abruptly recognized a double meaning behind the commander's words.

And he frowned.

Author's Note: Another big thank you needs to go to my friends over at the “We Want Brunette Jolene Blalock” board who have constantly kept after me (harassed me, almost) to get the next chapter out. The same goes to **Blackn'blue** who has equally pestered me. Thanks, guys and gals! This one's for you...

### ACT THREE

#### **Denebris Freeport, 29 June 2157. 1520 Hours Earth Standard Time.**

His frown had turned into an outright glare, but Lieutenant Commander Rick Eisler didn't care anymore.

Eisler had spent the last twenty minutes desperately trying to talk sense into the surprisingly obtuse Admiral Black and, despite his respect for the older man's rank, he found himself on the verge of lashing out physically. The still ongoing investigation by Denebris officials had already provided voluminous circumstantial evidence that pointed to the deaths of both Commander T'Pol and Lieutenant Hayes; Black, apparently eager to acquire a new ally in the “government” of Denebris, had agreed with their findings. The admiral's apparent willingness to write off the XO and Hayes was infuriating, and Eisler briefly wondered if Starfleet would actually have the balls to punish him if he blew the arrogant son of a bitch out the nearest airlock.

It wasn't entirely Black's fault that Rick found himself in a killing mood, though; discovering that he had less than two years to live had done a pretty good job of that on its own merits. As he had told Phlox earlier, the diagnosis hadn't exactly caught him by surprise: Krupitzer Syndrome was hereditary, and Eisler couldn't help remembering the miserable years during which his mother slowly wasted away. Knowing that he was a good candidate for the genetic disorder had been one of the reasons he had joined the MACOs in the first place. He'd rather his death be on his own terms; after all, if he died doing this grim and bloody job then at least other *normal* people wouldn't have to.

If Rick was being entirely honest, he'd have to admit that this outlook had negatively affected his personal relationships as well. Friendships were rare and lovers nonexistent; he had made the decision to completely avoid romantic relationships on the day he had buried his mother. No one, he decided, would grieve when he died; and he would *not* pass the already rare Krupitzer's on to another generation. It was a lonely existence, but he had learned to cope with the lack of companionship by burying himself so completely in his work that he could forget how much he actually disliked himself.

Occasionally, it even worked.

“Sir,” Eisler began once more, his voice tight with the effort it took to keep himself fully in control, “Starfleet regulations require that we expend all available resources to locate missing crewmembers.” It was the one thing that Starfleet had in common with the MACOs, and was best summed up by a centuries-old maxim that many militaries had adopted: *Leave no one behind.*

“Don't quote *Starfleet* regulations to me, *Major*,” Black replied sharply, his own expression grim. The use of Eisler's MACO rank was clearly intentional. Rick glowered at the older man

while trying to determine the best way to make his point. They had had this same conversation at least three times since the admiral had last spoken with the Denebris officials, and Rick had no doubt that Black was as tired of it as he was.

Out of the corner of his eye, Eisler noticed the less than subtle frown that Lieutenant Hsiao directed toward the admiral and, inwardly, he sighed in frustration. Twice, he had tried to convince Admiral Black to take this disagreement to the captain's ready room where junior officers wouldn't see the spectacle of a flag officer making an ass of himself. Both times, Black had only glared in response.

"You have your orders," the admiral said, his voice slightly louder than necessary. This was, Rick had come to realize, Black's way of exercising his rank. It was also patently unnecessary. "Effective immediately, this investigation is over," Black stated firmly. Thinking the conversation was finished, the admiral turned away. Rick didn't hesitate to respond.

"I am afraid, Admiral, that I cannot recognize your authority to issue such an order aboard *Endeavour*." It was the trump card, the one angle that Eisler had not wanted to use. There was a very strong chance that this could end his career. *It's not like I've got anything to live for anyway*, he reflected morosely.

"What?" The admiral turned back to glare at him, his expression incredulous, and Rick noted the hushed silence among the bridge crew.

"I cannot recognize your authority to issue directives contrary to our standing orders, Admiral," Eisler repeated, never once giving in to the urge to abandon his parade rest stance. "The chain of command is clear, sir. I answer to Captain Tucker, who reports to Commodore Archer. The commodore answers to Fleet Command ... of which you are not a member in your capacity as Commander, Operational Test and Evaluation Force." The older man's expression was darkening by the moment and Rick continued, carefully keeping his tone calm. "If you wish to consult Captain Tucker's orders, you will find that *Endeavour* was never officially placed under your command and still answers to the commander of the Third Fleet." Black appeared on the brink of a meltdown, and Rick tried not to enjoy it too much. He was mostly successful. "Your rank exceeds mine, Admiral, but Starfleet regulations are clear: you *cannot* assume command of *Endeavour* without explicit orders from Fleet Command."

"Disobeying a direct order in a time of war is a capital offense," Black nearly hissed, and Rick nodded.

"So is attempted piracy," He answered calmly, taking in the admiral's expression of surprise before adding, "Sir." The outrage in Black's face grew as Eisler finished. "Continued attempts by you to assume command of *Endeavour* without orders signed by Fleet Admiral Gardner will be construed as attempted piracy and I will have you placed in the brig until such a time as you can be turned over to the Judge Advocate General's office for prosecution."

Absolute silence claimed the command deck as Admiral Black stared at Rick in stunned disbelief. The conflicting emotions that played across the senior officer's face were easy to read, and Eisler quickly recognized that Black was trying to determine if Rick was bluffing. It was entirely understandable that he might consider that: there was no way that a charge of piracy against the admiral would hold up, and both of them knew it. The more likely scenario

would involve Eisler being stripped of his rank and probably thrown into prison. A charged moment passed.

“You wouldn't dare,” the admiral finally stated, his posture belligerent, and that was all Rick needed.

“Master Chief Mackenzie,” he called out, eyes never leaving Black's. “I want Roughnecks with sidearms up here on the double.”

“Not necessary, sir,” the COB declared, stepping up beside Eisler as he drew his phase pistol from its holster. It was an audacious move, one that caught both Rick and the admiral by surprise, and it put the master chief squarely against Black. The COB had to realize that this could be a career-ending move for him.

“Be careful, Master Chief,” Admiral Black said softly. “You don't want to make a decision that you'll regret.”

In response, Mackenzie rotated the selector switch on his pistol to stun.

“What are your orders, *Commander*?” the COB asked, his expression deceptively calm. The emphasis he placed on Eisler's rank was unmistakable, and the fury in Black's eyes grew.

In that moment of silence, a familiar voice emerged from the opening turbolift.

“What the hell is goin' on?” Captain Tucker demanded as he limped forward. He was pale and leaned heavily on a cane, but the fire in his eyes was intimidating and fierce. Wincing with each step he took, Tucker approached slowly, his features set in a scowl darker than any Rick had seen before. Phlox followed closely behind the captain and, from the expression on the doctor's face, he was not happy that his patient had chosen to become mobile.

“Lieutenant Commander Eisler was making a mistake,” Admiral Black responded crisply, his eyes taking in Tucker's wan appearance.

“Lieutenant Commander Eisler doesn't make mistakes,” the captain retorted in an equally sharp tone. Rick straightened slightly, a flush of pride washing over him at the unexpected praise. Master Chief Mackenzie gave him a slight glance and Eisler nodded in response to the unspoken question; without comment, the COB quietly returned his pistol to its holster.

“Then threatening to throw me into the brig wasn't a mistake?” the admiral asked through clenched teeth, and Tucker's eyes flickered briefly to Rick. He wasn't sure, but Eisler thought that he saw sympathy there.

“I don't know, Admiral. Did you deserve it?” The captain's comment was a surprise; Tucker had never been this openly aggressive with Admiral Black in the past, despite their clear dislike for one another. Even the admiral reacted to that, giving Tucker a heated look that spoke volumes. Rick shifted anxiously, growing less comfortable with this situation by each passing second. As if he sensed Eisler's thoughts, the captain gestured toward his ready room door.

“My ready room if you will, sir,” he suggested in a tone that clearly stated it was not a request. Black said nothing as he spun on his heel and strode toward the door, but his features were tight with anger. *If we're lucky, he'll suffer an aneurism and solve all of our problems,* Rick mentally groused before reminding himself that such thoughts about a flag officer weren't appropriate.

“You have the bridge, Commander,” Captain Tucker said as he limped to the now open doorway and disappeared through it. As the door slid shut, a collective sigh of relief sounded from various members of the bridge crew. Rick shared a knowing glance with Master Chief Mackenzie before shrugging slightly; if the captain lost this pissing contest, both of them were in deep shit.

“I think the captain is going take the admiral to the woodshed,” Hsiao gleefully commented, his words obviously meant only for Devereux's ears, and Eisler winced slightly at the disrespect in the comment.

“Lieutenant Hsiao,” he said loudly as turned back toward the command chair. The helmsman straightened in his seat. “In the future,” Rick said firmly, “you will keep your personal opinions about superior officers to yourself.” Hsiao's expression quickly melted into one of regret. “You are an officer, and it is your duty to act like an officer at all times.” The lieutenant nodded quickly in acknowledgement. “No matter how accurate or well founded such an opinion may be about an incompetent senior officer who couldn't find his ass with a map and a flashlight,” Eisler continued, his own expression unchanging, “you will keep your mouth shut. Is that clear, Lieutenant?”

“Crystal, sir.” Hsiao's efforts to keep from grinning were rapidly failing.

“Good.” Eisler glanced around as he rapidly began formulating plans. “I want you and Lieutenant Ricker to coordinate efforts. Tag and identify all ships that departed Denebris space between the time of the attack and the present.” Both of the lieutenants nodded. “If necessary, hack into planetary satellite data; but find me a ship.”

“What kind of ship are we looking for, Commander?” Ricker asked from the Science station.

“An Orion interceptor,” Eisler replied. “Fast with a stealthy profile. It needs to be capable of atmospheric re-entry and evading passive sensor scans.” His attention shifted to the COB. “I want the SEALs standing by for planetary operations in ten minutes. Someone must have seen something. We're going hunting.” That wasn't the only reason that Rick wanted the SEALs planetside again, but the revenge he craved for the deaths of two of his troopers wasn't something that he was quite ready to admit.

“And the STAB teams?” Mackenzie asked.

“Threat level bravo. I want them on immediate standby for boarding operations.” As the master chief nodded, Rick glanced at the OOD. “Tell Hess that she has command authority to recruit whomever she needs to get us fully operational again. That includes any and all of the civilians. We need high warp capability ASAP.” Once more, Eisler paused as he glanced over the assembled bridge crew. “Make it happen, people,” he ordered before turning away. “Officer of the deck, you have the bridge.”

Phlox was waiting for him in the turbolift and offered a forced-looking smile as the door closed behind him. An odd thought popped into Rick's head as the lift began to move: he missed the more optimistic and extroverted doctor he had first met when coming aboard *Endeavour*. The war had affected even Phlox's normally cheery outlook.

"How is the captain?" Eisler asked into the silence. Phlox smirked at that.

"Not dead," was the quick reply, and Rick almost smiled. "And stubborn. He shouldn't be on his feet, but he insisted on coming to the bridge." The doctor sighed. "I'll be monitoring him closely to make sure he doesn't push himself too hard." Eisler grunted his doubt; he had seen Tucker's work ethic firsthand and doubted the doctor would manage to rein it in entirely. Phlox glanced at him, clearly recognizing what Rick was thinking. "I have experience in dealing with the captain," the doctor commented as the lift slowed.

The door slid open, and as Eisler started forward the Denobulan spoke once more.

"And what are you going to do, Commander?" The question was obviously intended to have a double meaning and most likely referred more to the issue of his Krupitzer Syndrome, but Rick ignored the subtext as he responded.

"What I do best." The turbolift door slid shut on Phlox's response, and Eisler put the brief exchange out of his mind.

There was work to do.

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## **29 June 2157. 1530 Hours Earth Standard Time.**

It was difficult to work in the icy room, but T'Pol managed to keep from shivering.

She couldn't remember the last time she had been this cold, but, using every single mental trick she had learned, she forced herself to ignore the temperature. As she hugged herself in a vain attempt to retain body heat, she found her attention once more beginning to drift and she struggled to refocus on the problem at hand. At least three standard hours had passed since their captors had accelerated to warp speed. She mentally calculated the distance between the ship and Denebris, factoring in probable warp capabilities of a ship this size. She seriously doubted that it could top warp four, but she made adjustments to her calculations in the unlikely event that it could. Such mental calisthenics served no real purpose beyond distracting her from their current situation; but focusing on the simplicity of pure mathematics and warp calculations was far preferable to obsessing about her mate's current condition.

No longer could she sense Trip's mind as she had while she had meditated earlier. With each moment that passed, an even greater amount of distance was put between them. It was ironic, she mused, that there had been no problem connecting with him during his short-lived transfer to *Columbia*; but now, years after they had acknowledged the mental bond that linked them, she found it impossible to replicate. Even in the weeks after his return to

*Enterprise*, they had still managed to retain the ability to converse telepathically but, as they grew closer both physically and emotionally, the connection gradually changed from a simple touching of the mind to something more akin to communion. No longer did they need to use words: thoughts alone were enough. Having finally set aside their absurd games of miscommunication and misunderstanding, they had truly become of one mind.

Thus was the nature of the Vulcan mating bond.

T'Pol leaned her head back against the cold wall of the cell, mildly grateful for the length of her hair as it cushioned her neck against the chill. Growing it out had been an interesting exercise in hygiene, one that occasionally necessitated additional meditation due to the frustration inherent in dealing with longer hair, but the result had unexpected uses that she had not anticipated at the outset of the experiment. The ability to conceal a micro-transmitter within the filamentous outgrowth of dead cells from the skin, for example, was something she would not have considered before. And despite some of the rumors circulating among *Endeavour's* officers and crew, Trip's positive reaction to the new length of her hair had absolutely nothing to do with her decision to allow it to go uncut.

Nothing at all.

Once more, Lieutenant Hayes paced across the room, passing through her line of vision as he slowly conducted another anti-surveillance sweep. By her count, four hundred and thirty-seven such sweeps had been made in the last hour. In that time, he had discovered no additional eavesdropping equipment, but that did not stop him from continuing to seek what was not there. She recognized the effort for what it was: a distraction.

Hayes paused at the hatch once more, fingers tracing the piece of metal that covered its access pad. T'Pol said nothing as he tapped the welded metal, clearly pretending to seek weak points in its surface. Had she not been Vulcan, she would have smiled at his attempt to feign incompetence. It was time, she decided, to address his unique heritage. Escaping from this situation would require both of them to utilize their respective talents to their fullest. Now was no time for continuing deception.

"The hatch is vacuum-sealed," she said into the too quiet cell. Hayes glanced at her once before returning his attention to the hatch; his fingers had now shifted to the hinges and he knelt to examine the lower one. Inexplicably, she found herself grateful that he did not look at her for longer than several seconds. On the rare occasions when he did so, an unexplained threat seemed to lurk in his eyes that disturbed her.

"Yes ma'am," he responded stiffly and she raised an eyebrow as the sharpness of his tone. "This is an old ship, Commander," Hayes pointed out as he began toying with the middle hinge of the hatch. "We might get lucky."

"In my experience," T'Pol stated calmly, "there is no such thing as luck." The moment the words emerged from her lips, she realized the inaccuracy of the statement. More than once, she had marveled at the ability of Commodore Archer to defy the laws of probability and emerge relatively unscathed from any number of situations that should have led to a certain death. Trip also had displayed an uncanny ability to emerge intact from improbable circumstances or to be in exactly the right place at the right time. Luck was as good an

explanation as any.

The lieutenant gave her another look, this one half amused, and she tried not to frown at him; nothing she had said should have been amusing. After spending a moment reviewing her words, T'Pol mentally shrugged. Humans were impossible to predict; human males doubly so. Six years around Trip had taught her that lesson remarkably well.

“Well, Commander,” Hayes smirked, “this time, we happen to be in *luck*.” He gestured to the three hinges. “These aren't as sturdy as they look. I think, with a little effort, we might be able to work them free.”

It was a lie, and she recognized it as such immediately. The hinges on the hatch had been one of the first things she had checked upon waking, and they were as secure as any she had seen before. Vulcans possessed, on average, between two and four times human strength and, if she was unable to budge the hinges, the probability that a normal human could do so was statistically null.

But then, Lieutenant Junior Grade Nathaniel James Hayes was far from normal.

“It is fortunate,” she stated calmly, “that you possess sufficient strength to accomplish such a task.” Hayes looked at her out of the corner of his eye, and she returned his gaze with a bland expression that revealed nothing. Trip had occasionally called it her 'poker face,' and that expression had led her to additional research into human card games, research that had finally resolved her lingering questions regarding the curious human picture of canines that she had seen on Vigrid Station. As in many other cases, she found the human expression to be surprisingly apt.

“Yes, ma'am,” the lieutenant said in response, once more glancing away quickly and focusing far too exclusively on the middle hinge. She recognized an attempt to evade additional questions and was nearly amused. A moment of silence passed as T'Pol assessed the situation and made a decision: now was as good a time as any other.

“I am curious, Lieutenant,” she said cautiously. Hayes shifted his attention to her without actually looking at her, and she continued. “How exactly are you planning to dislodge the hinges?” She waited until he opened his mouth before pressing the point. “The hinges that I, as a Vulcan, could not dislodge.” Again, he started to respond and she spoke over him. “A normal human does not possess the tactile strength necessary for such a task.”

The lieutenant's reaction was interesting to observe: His eyes narrowed immediately and he studied her for an extended moment, neither breathing nor moving. Emotion played across his features; he wet his lips as his eyes darted away for an instant. When he looked at her again, T'Pol met his eyes calmly and waited. The silence stretched into minutes as he stared at her, but she gave him no indication of her own thoughts. Slowly, his expression transformed into one that was half-stricken and half-relieved.

“You know,” he finally whispered. It was not phrased as a question. T'Pol said nothing in response, instead inclining an eyebrow. It was a tactic that she had learned in her youth from her mother, and one she had used to considerable effect while aboard *Enterprise*. By remaining silent and focusing her entire attention on the person she addressed, she managed

to present the illusion of knowing much more than she actually knew. In most instances, the person in question would then make additional comments or excuses, which then often gave her insight into what was being concealed. It had worked quite well for several years, until Trip had happened to tumble upon the secret during the Expanse mission and then later revealed it to Archer.

She still hadn't quite forgiven him for that.

“How long have you known?” Hayes asked, still crouched by the hatch. Another eyebrow quirk was her response, and he glowered at the floor briefly before looking up again. “It was the computer crash, wasn't it?”

“You aren't as efficient as you think,” T'Pol answered him smoothly, giving nothing away. Lieutenant Hayes sighed heavily as he ran his fingers through his hair.

“I was following orders,” he started to explain before shooting her a glare. “As an ex-spook, I figured you would understand.”

She blinked in surprise at that. Her past career as an operative for the Ministry of Security was not commonly known, nor was it something that a junior lieutenant should be aware of.

“I was not a *spook*,” she replied, hyper-annunciating the slang term. Trip had used the expression once following one of their ... explorations, so it wasn't entirely unfamiliar to her; the idea of her once being a covert agent had inexplicably excited him, which T'Pol still didn't understand.

“Close enough,” Hayes muttered. He glared at the wall before sighing once more. “Harris warned me you were dangerous,” he grumbled and T'Pol fought the urge to raise an eyebrow in surprise at the name. She recognized it, of course, as the mysterious individual that had once been Lieutenant Commander Reed's employer. It answered one question that T'Pol had been wrestling with in regards to Hayes: clearly he *had* been noticed by someone. “I guess you can understand why I'm supposed to keep a low profile.”

“Genetic augmentation is illegal on Earth,” she responded coolly. Hayes winced at that but nodded grimly as she continued. “There are severe repercussions for those involved in such research, regardless of intentions.”

“It's not like I had any choice in the matter,” the lieutenant snapped in response, and T'Pol rewarded the comment with an eyebrow raise. It had the desired effect, and Hayes looked down. Another long moment of silence passed.

“It was called the Achilles Project,” Hayes said after several minutes, apparently taking her continued silence as an indication that she knew much of what he was revealing. Inwardly, she smiled. “A Canadian research team funded by a MACO black ops unit. They were trying to recreate Project: Superman from the twentieth century.” He grunted and sank down to sit, wrapping his arms around himself to ward off the cold as he leaned against the wall. “They wanted to use modern technology and science to recreate the successes that led to Khan Noonien Singh, but without the failures.”

“They were successful,” T’Pol stated, her tone partially questioning, and Hayes shrugged.

“Mostly,” he replied. “I’m faster, stronger and tougher than a human.” T’Pol nearly frowned at the implication that the lieutenant no longer thought of himself as human. “My reflexes are quicker, I process information at a rate better than most computers, and I heal really fast.” Hayes gave her a half smirk. “I also rate a five on the Vulcan intelligence test.” She nearly frowned at that: a five was the highest level currently listed, and less than one percent of Vulcans were capable of such high level thinking.

T’Pol only rated a four point five six.

“Your parents?” she prompted, not liking the implication that this human was potentially more intelligent than she was, and his smirk faded.

“My mom was recruited by the black ops team straight out of Boot Camp,” the lieutenant said, looking away from her as if he was embarrassed. “As far as I know, my dad was never told the entire truth.” That didn’t surprise her; from her interactions with Major Hayes during the Expanse mission, she had perceived him to be a rigidly honest individual who would have not been involved in something like this. “I’m pretty sure he suspected something, though,” Hayes continued, his expression turning sad as he recalled his lost parent. “He knew my mom went to a fertility clinic in Montreal, but he didn’t know that it was a cover for the program. And then he was always being deployed to hot spots so he wasn’t around enough to actually see many of my temper tantrums.”

T’Pol was silent as she studied the lieutenant, processing this new information; he squirmed under her gaze. Finally, she spoke again.

“The research team?”

“They were shut down by the Canadian government,” Hayes replied, shrugging. “My mom never told me the specifics, but I did some research a couple of years ago.” He began rubbing his hands together for warmth. “One of the researchers, a Doctor Castanaveras, started questioning some of the more unethical experiments that were being done, and he went to the government. There was a fire when the authorities came, and that started a fire.” Hayes shrugged again. “Or a fire was started. Either way, the complex was burned to the ground along with most of their records.” He smiled slightly. “Apparently, they never made digital copies of their work. Some sort of safety measure, I guess.”

“And Harris?” The lieutenant broke eye contact at hearing the man’s name, and glanced away once more.

“He recruited me during high school,” Hayes grimaced at some memory. “That was a difficult time for me. Teenage hormones and Augment fury don’t exactly mix well.” He looked back at her. “Harris saved a couple of lives when he brought me into the Section,” the lieutenant stated, and T’Pol made a mental note of the word: *Section*. “He gave me a purpose and a goal... one that didn’t include killing the captain of the football team because of an incidental slight.” It was said with such absolute conviction that T’Pol knew Hayes was not exaggerating.

To her surprise, she found herself experiencing something akin to sympathy for Lieutenant

Hayes. According to what she had learned about Augments, they were more like primitive Vulcans before Surak's Reformation than modern humans. Blessed with superior physical and mental gifts, they were also cursed with untamed emotions that could run wild at a moment's notice. Anger and hate were dangerous in a creature with such physical might as the lieutenant, and giving him something on which to focus his entire life was not only essential, it was familiar. For Vulcans, that focal point was Control; Lieutenant Hayes' focus was this mysterious Section.

A sudden beep sounded, and T'Pol felt the neural inhibitor activate. She slumped to her side, once again unable to force her limbs to answer her demands. Out of the corner of her eye she saw Hayes in a similar state and, judging from his grunts, he was struggling as hard as she to defeat the inhibitor.

The hatch opened with a hiss and a familiar-looking Orion male entered. Harrad-Sar stepped through the doorway, his face set in grim lines, and looked down at Hayes' limp form. At once his expression transformed into an angry scowl, and he turned upon the Orion male following him. Furious words were exchanged in their native tongue, and Harrad-Sar's aggressive gestures forced the second male from the room. With a final glare at Hayes, Harrad-Sar stepped through the doorway and sealed the door once more. Another beep sounded and T'Pol felt control return to her muscles.

"This is bad," Hayes said before T'Pol could speak. She narrowed her eyes, and he continued. "The big Orion was pissed that they got the wrong guy." The lieutenant speared her with a look and she was suddenly reminded that he understood Harrad-Sar's language. "They wanted you *and* Captain Tucker."

"Why?" she asked, although she already suspected the answer.

"Because the Romulans want you." Hayes was bleak. "Ma'am, we are in *deep* trouble."

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### **Denebris Freeport, 29 June 2157. 1710 Hours Earth Standard Time.**

He knew he was in trouble the moment Phlox entered his ready room.

The doctor paused at the open doorway and fixed Trip with a dark scowl that looked odd on his normally jovial face. Two hours had passed since Tucker had awakened in Sickbay with T'Pol's name on his lips and had made his way to the bridge against Phlox's wishes, and nearly an hour since Trip had last seen the Denobulan. Tucker leaned back in his chair at the doctor's approach, wincing slightly at the twinge of pain that lanced through his abdomen.

"You need to rest," Phlox declared without preamble. He crossed his arms and frowned, and Trip gave him an annoyed look.

"I've tried," Tucker replied sharply as he turned his attention back to the reports on his desk. "I can't."

"Captain." The doctor's voice was soft. "You can't keep doing this. Your body needs to

recover and if you keep pushing this hard, you could reinjure yourself.” Phlox's voice hardened. “And reinjury could lead to death.”

“I can't feel her, Phlox,” Trip said quietly. He slumped forward, dropping his head into his hands as pain and grief and exhaustion conspired against him. Never before had he felt this old and tired. “It's like I have a hole in my mind where T'Pol is supposed to be...”

“She's still alive, Captain,” Phlox stated confidently. Somehow, he had managed to come around the desk without Trip being aware of it. “The bond is still active even if you can't currently sense her. Distance is the most likely reason you can't connect with her right now.”

“You don't know that!” Anger exploded from him hot and fast, and Trip glared fiercely at the doctor. Phlox opened his mouth to respond but Tucker continued over him. “She could be dead right now and I'd never know...” The fury dwindled away into grief, and his head sank even farther into his hands. “She could be dead,” he repeated softly.

“Trip.” The Denobulan's voice was firm, and the feel of his hand on Tucker's shoulder was as unexpected as his form of address. Normally, Trip would be grinning broadly; he had been trying for years to convince his longtime friend to unbend and actually use the nickname, but now he was too confused, too grief-stricken, too pained to really notice. “We've been over this before. If Commander T'Pol were dead, you would know it. The bond is only active when both parties are alive and well.”

“Between Vulcans, yeah,” Tucker muttered as he pinched the bridge of his nose in an attempt to ward off a headache. “But I'm *not* a Vulcan. For me, it could be different. It could be like...” He paused in momentary reflection before continuing. “It could be like a comm signal. I'm transmitting but there's nothing there to receive.”

“Bridge to Captain Tucker.” Lieutenant Devereux's voice echoed through the ready room, preventing Phlox from responding, and Trip hit the transmit button on his desk comm-panel without hesitation.

“Tucker here.”

“Sir, Commander Eisler is returning to *Endeavour*. He wants to meet with you ASAP.” Hope started to well up within Trip, and he fought the urge to jump to his feet and head for the door. From the expression on Phlox's face, Tucker suspected that the doctor wouldn't approve.

“Send him to my ready room once he arrives. Did he say what it's about?”

“No, sir,” Devereux replied.

“All right.” Trip paused for a heartbeat. “And get me a status report from Hess on the repairs.” He hated pestering his ChEng, but he desperately needed to know what was going on. Phlox had already flatly forbidden him from even visiting the engineering deck and, even with the extra personnel that Hess had drafted from the civilian scientists, Trip knew that Anna Hess was working with a skeleton crew.

As it was, every single department aboard *Endeavour* was already operating with less than the normally required crew. The decision to refit the ship as a mobile R&D platform had come with the realization that an *Enterprise*-class starship already had limited crew space and couldn't handle such a significant increase in personnel; the addition of a platoon of MACOs for the Expanse mission had proven that. Starfleet Command, in their infinite wisdom, had decided to halve the serving crew to make way for the civilian scientists brought aboard, not even taking into account Trip's rather vocal complaints about the hazards of trying to operate a starship with such a significantly reduced crew. At the time of *Endeavour's* original deployment, there had been one hundred and twenty-five trained enlisted personnel, forty of which were Security Force, and fourteen officers; the refit had reduced the standard crew to a mere sixty-five enlisted, twenty of whom were security troopers, and eleven officers. It was nothing short of a scheduling nightmare.

The sixty civilians brought aboard answered directly to Doctor Laleh Jalali, a computer and sensor specialist who held a civilian rank equivalent to lieutenant commander; the rank existed more for the scientists' internal pecking order, as none of them were in the chain-of-command or allowed to interfere with shipboard operations. Unsurprisingly, the crew transition wasn't a smooth one. There had been some incidents early on when the scientists complained about the stringent policy of cross-training, and the Starfleet crew complained about what they perceived as special treatment for the civilians, but the integration had gradually begun taking place. T'Pol's presence in the research labs and Trip's own contributions toward warp theory had actually helped the transition a little bit; though Tucker still found it amusing that several of the civilians continued to dismiss him as a simple-minded hick because of his accent.

Ironically, it was many of those very civilians who were instrumental in establishing the rapid pace of repairs aboard *Endeavour*. Without the same sort of doctrinal training in engineering that Hess' teams had received, the scientists that had been drafted to assist had made suggestions that led to the discovery of a more efficient and faster way of effecting the necessary repairs.

The comm line went dead after Devereux acknowledged the command, and Tucker glanced up at Phlox. The doctor had moved back to the spot on the other side of Trip's desk.

"You need rest," Phlox repeated as if they had never been interrupted. Trip frowned as Phlox continued. "I don't think I need to remind you of Starfleet order one-oh-four."

"Section C," Tucker finished grimly as he again leaned back in his chair. "You'd do that to me?"

"If you keep pushing yourself like this, yes." The doctor fixed him with an unyielding look, his eyes unblinking. "You'll be no good to Commander T'Pol if you pass out from pain, or if I'm forced to relieve you medically." Phlox suddenly smiled. "Please don't make me involve security."

Trip couldn't help himself. He laughed.

"Remind me never to buy a car from you," he smirked at their private joke. His mirth faded quickly, however, as he glanced at the PADDs scattered on the desk in front of him. Phlox

seemed to notice his distraction.

“Status reports?” the doctor asked and Trip sighed.

“Condolence letters,” he corrected. “For Petty Officers El-Hamdani and Sharett.” Glancing up again, he frowned at the doctor. “I’ve been trying to figure out what to say to their parents beyond the usual stuff but ... I barely even knew either of them.” He looked away. “I didn’t *want* to know them...”

It was an admission that he’d made only once before, to T’Pol, and it was one that continued to bother him. For the first time, he truly understood why Jon had isolated himself so effectively during the Xindi mission. Nothing was quite as difficult as the knowledge that he, as captain, was expected to put the mission ahead of the personnel; and sometimes, that meant sending people to their deaths. Even now, Trip found himself struggling with the knowledge that at this moment, he was technically putting the needs of the mission behind the needs of the crew. Black had even pointed that out, here in this ready room, when he had asserted that Trip’s relationship with T’Pol was the driving reason behind their current actions. In part, Tucker knew that the admiral had been correct – he needed T’Pol and would do whatever it took to recover her. But Black hadn’t been prepared for the cold logic of Trip’s arguments for recovering the missing Vulcan: If Orions *had* taken her, the next step in that line of thinking was that they would either sell her to the Romulans or ransom her back to Starfleet. And when the admiral had still balked, Trip had fired his final broadside.

“If I give the order for my people to ignore you, Admiral,” he had asked calmly, “who do you think they’ll listen to?”

And, with those words, Tucker knew that he had made a lifelong enemy in the admiral.

The door chime abruptly brought Trip out of his moment of reflection, and he responded instantly.

“Enter,” he ordered. Lieutenant Commander Eisler, still wearing his black combat armor, walked through the open doorway with an air of grim satisfaction about him. He nodded once at the now-seated Phlox before offering a battered-looking PADD to Trip.

“We have it, sir,” he declared as he shifted slightly. “It *was* an Orion smash-and-grab. That’s the warp signature of the ship responsible.”

“How did you get this?” Trip asked, already cycling through the data on the PADD. Giddy excitement was racing through his veins.

“Planetary authorities picked up some locals that they suspected to have links with the Orions.” Eisler rolled his neck slightly, causing it to pop loudly. Phlox frowned at that. “They let me take a crack at the prisoners.”

“Hope you didn’t kill anyone,” Tucker commented wryly.

“No, sir. Not this time.” Before Trip could think about that comment, the lieutenant commander gestured to the PADD and continued. “One of the locals was the Orions’ eyes and

ears on Denebris. When he got word of your presence, he contacted the interceptor.”

“My presence?”

“Yes, sir,” Eisler replied, once more grim. “You and Commander T’Pol were the targets.” That was information that Trip hadn’t wanted to know. Eisler continued, “Apparently, the commander of this Orion interceptor – one Harrad-Sar – has been lurking in this sector for nearly a month waiting for *Endeavour* to make an appearance somewhere.”

“Harrad-Sar?” Phlox asked, surprise in his voice. Trip exchanged looks with the doctor.

“You know him?” Eisler’s eyes darted between the two, and Tucker nodded.

“We’ve had dealings with him a couple of times in the past. He tried to capture *Enterprise* at least twice.” Trip looked up at his tactical officer. “How did this local know I was here? We haven’t exactly been advertising our presence.”

“A member of the Vissian crew sold the information, sir.”

Conflicting emotions warred within Trip, and he focused on keeping his ‘captain’s face’ intact. He supposed that it made a sick sort of sense that a Vissian had sold him out; the incident with Charles had led to something of a continuing internal problem within the Vissian culture, and the already rare Cogenitors had begun demanding better treatment. Part of him was glad that Charles’ death had actually had some meaning, but another part, the emotional part that bound him to T’Pol, growled with fury that that a Vissian had been responsible for his mate’s abduction.

“Pass that on to Admiral Black,” he ordered Eisler, his voice sounding calmer than he felt. “I’m sure that the Vissians might want to know about their security failures.” He offered the PADD back to the lieutenant commander. “You’ve already given this to Ricker?” Eisler nodded. “Good. What news there?”

“She’s working on it with Lieutenant Hsiao right now, sir. They should have the interceptor’s trajectory and probable course in a matter of minutes.” The tactical officer straightened slightly. “Sir, I’d like to request that we begin drilling the STAB teams for a combat insertion.”

“Granted.”

“Engineering to Captain Tucker.” Lieutenant Commander Hess’ voice cut off whatever else Eisler was about to say.

“This is Tucker. Give me some good news, Anna.”

“All boards are green, Captain.” Trip could hear the smile in her voice. “*Endeavour* is one hundred percent and ready for action.”

“Captain?” Eisler asked softly, gesturing to the comm panel, and Trip gave him a nod. “Engineering, Eisler. We need maximum warp for extended use. Can you provide?”

“Why, sweetheart,” Hess' voice mocked over the comm line, “I thought you'd *never* ask.” The tactical officer's expression hardened slightly even as he shifted uncomfortably, and Trip found himself smiling. He'd never quite been able to figure out the nature of the relationship between Eisler and Hess; Anna flirted constantly with him but neither seemed to take it seriously. Which was surprising, Trip mused, given Eisler's vocal disdain for officers who acted unprofessionally. If Tucker didn't know of Hess' orientation, he'd suspect that she was sweet on Rick.

“Warp factor six is available,” the chief engineer declared proudly. “We're rigged and ready for action down here.”

“Damn fine work, Anna,” Trip said into the comm panel. “Stand by for warp.” He released the transmit button and looked up at Eisler. “Rick, get us moving.”

“Aye, Captain,” the tactical officer replied, briefly straightening to a position of attention before about-facing and heading for the door. He was issuing commands to the bridge crew before the ready room door had closed. “Sound general quarters and rig for warp speed. This is not a drill.”

The door closed behind him and Trip gave Phlox a broad grin.

“You need to rest,” the doctor said and Trip sighed.

Moments later, the ship's ambient sounds changed as they broke orbit, and *Endeavour* went to warp.

Author's Note: The “Oolian System” appeared originally in **Ludjin's Clarity**, and is used with her permission.

## ACT FOUR

### **29 June 2157. 1830 Hours Earth Standard Time.**

The whine of *Endeavour's* stressed engines only worsened Marie Devereux's headache.

As she entered the mess hall, it felt as though someone had stabbed a burning spike through her eye and was maliciously twisting it around in her brain. The pain wasn't unfamiliar; she'd suffered migraines for most of her life and periodically experienced crippling headaches when she was feeling particularly stressed. This latest episode had started on the left side of her head but, at some time in the last hour, had gradually migrated to the right. It now seemed poised to envelop *both* sides. Wincing slightly at the too-bright illumination in the mess hall, she walked quickly to the machine near the self-serve area of the facility; counteracting the migraine with an “ice cream headache” had worked several times in the past, and she was silently praying that the unofficial, non-medical treatment would work once more.

She had no desire to visit Phlox and his menagerie for any sort of quick fix.

Glancing around, she noted the absence of the usual dinner crowd. It wasn't that surprising, though; most of the engineering crew had been pulling triple shifts to get *Endeavour* fully operational again. There were over half dozen people present, however, and she smiled at seeing Dan Hsiao at the far end of the mess hall. As usual, he was shoveling food into his mouth as if he were in a race to finish the meal and get out of the dining facility; it was a quirk of his that always amused Marie.

Her smile faded, however, as she noticed who was sitting with him.

Marie didn't know the research scientist's name or her specialty, but seeing the two of them together only reminded Devereux of how badly she had screwed up with Hsiao. She had been devastated after Drahn's death, and had retreated into grief. Dan had supported her every step of the way, alternately offering a shoulder for her to cry on or just being a silent pillar of strength. She had become so accustomed to his being there that she hadn't realized until too late that by taking him for granted she had pushed him away. Marie wasn't sure when it had happened, but Dan had apparently decided that he couldn't compete with an ex-lover who had died a hero. He was still there for her when she needed his friendship, but had clearly given up on any sort of romantic relationship ... ironically, just as she had seriously begun to consider it.

The sound of the mess hall door sliding open drew her attention, and she noticed the abrupt silence that fell on the dining facility as Captain Tucker limped in. Still leaning heavily on a cane, he moved slowly toward the executive mess, pausing only briefly to confer with Chef Killick. The senior chief petty officer, known for his normally caustic tongue and short temper, was surprisingly non-combative now, and shot the captain a worried look as he turned away. His concern wasn't too surprising, Marie mused; Killick had been with Tucker since *Enterprise* originally launched, even during the dark days of the Expanse mission.

Marie sank down into the nearest chair and took a spoonful of the vanilla-flavored ice cream. As she worked the cold dessert onto the soft palate at the back of her mouth, Marie again focused her attention on the slow-moving form of the captain. He stopped twice at tables that were on the way to the captain's mess, offering a wan smile or some kind words before pressing on. It was poignant, she thought, that even now, when he was obviously in considerable physical and emotional pain, he would take the time to reassure his crew.

Thinking of Tucker inevitably led her to concern about the missing Commander T'Pol. Devereux wondered how the captain would respond if it turned out that T'Pol was, in fact, deceased, as many feared. An expert in many forms of communication, Marie had watched in quiet fascination as the two senior-most officers tried to find their way as a couple while still serving in Starfleet. Despite shipwide rumors that the two were no longer involved, Marie knew enough about Commander T'Pol's species to recognize that she and the captain had instead merely adopted a more Vulcan propriety regarding their relationship. Observation and additional research into the untranslated text of the *Kir'Shara* had also convinced Devereux that the two possessed a Vulcan mating bond, and that meant they were together for the long haul.

Just imagining Charles Tucker without T'Pol at his side seemed wrong.

The small bowl of ice cream was nearly empty and, to her annoyance, the migraine was still pounding through her skull. Sighing melodramatically, she realized that a visit to Phlox was probably unavoidable if she wanted to operate normally tomorrow. Experience had taught her that failing to deal with the migraine before going to sleep would lead to her being almost completely useless the next day.

“Hey,” Dan Hsiao said as he plopped into the chair across from her. She nearly jumped at his abrupt and unexpected appearance, and shot him the most evil look she could manage. Glancing at the mostly empty bowl, he frowned. “Migraine again?” he asked.

“Yes,” she snapped in response, regretting her tone almost at once as that red-hot poker finally took up residence in both lobes.

“Seen the doc yet?” Dan's expression was sympathetic, and Marie felt her stomach lurch slightly. She closed her eyes and rubbed her temples.

“Not yet.” Her reply was soft and he gave her another smile. “I'm always afraid that his solution will be some hideous concoction,” she admitted. Once more, Dan grinned.

“What? You don't like the idea of drinking a glass of elvabird spit? I hear it's great for migraines *and* insomnia.” Her expression must have revealed her disgust at the idea, and he laughed slightly. “Or there's the Rigellian brain worms. I hear they work wonders.” Dan snickered at the look on her face before growing more serious a moment later. “I can't make the poker game tonight,” he said grimly, glancing again at the table he had left behind to join Marie. “Commander Eisler has me working with Sun-Hi and Ricker on the sensor receivers.” He sighed. “We're still trying to figure out how to tie them into the navigation relays for an extra boost.”

“That sounds like a good idea,” Marie commented.

“It is a good idea.” He grinned. “If we can extend the range by even a couple more AU, that'll give us the tactical advantage we need to smash these buggers.” Devereux almost smirked at the curious slang coming from Dan's mouth; the term 'tactical advantages' had to come from Lieutenant Commander Eisler, and 'buggers' was very much a COBism.

Before Hsiao could speak again, the door of the mess hall slid open with a hiss and Admiral Black entered, his expression as dark as always; the man seemed to be in a perpetually bad mood. Dan's face twisted into a fierce glare and he looked away from the admiral, tightening his hands into fists. The admiral didn't pause as he walked toward the captain's mess and seemed oblivious to the many hostile looks directed at him.

“*Bastard*,” Hsiao muttered under his breath in Korean as he observed the admiral disappearing from the mess hall.

“*You need to watch that*,” Marie replied in the same language, prompting a sharp look from Dan. He always seemed to forget that she was fluent in his native tongue. She lowered her voice and continued in English. “You may not like him, but he's still a superior officer and calling him names could get you into some serious trouble.”

“Yeah,” Dan grumbled. He stood up. “I've got to go. Supposed to meet Commander Eisler in the command center for an update on our status.” He turned to leave.

“How long do we have?”

“Until intercept?” Hsiao asked. Marie nodded. “No idea yet. Sometime tomorrow at the earliest. They've got a pretty big head start even if we're a lot faster.” Dan's expression was surprisingly grim as he continued. “And the worst part is, they'll know we're coming. No way to hide that.” He gave her another quick smile before heading toward the exit, hesitating for the extra seconds it took for his research scientist companion to catch up. Another spike of pain hammered through Marie's skull, and she sighed.

She was going to have to see Phlox about this damned headache after all.



### **30 June 2157. 0145 Hours Earth Standard Time.**

His head was killing him, but Hannibal Black refused to let it show.

Tucker's call had awakened him from a light doze and, as he stepped out of the VIP guest quarters that he had been assigned, Hannibal wished he had thought to grab some water. He frowned at the security trooper waiting for him outside his quarters and briefly wondered how long the young woman had been standing there.

“Admiral,” she said by way of greeting, and he gave her a noncommittal nod. “Captain Tucker sent me to show you the way to the command center.” At Black's look, she offered a sheepish smile. “When they refitted *Endeavour*, they moved some stuff around, sir. If you're not here

every day, it can get kind of confusing.”

“Thank you for the escort, Petty Officer,” Hannibal said with a tight smile of his own. He wondered briefly if this was Tucker's way of reminding him whose ship this was, but he discarded the notion the moment that it occurred to him; from what he'd seen of Charles Tucker III, Black was fairly confident that the man was aggressively honest.

It was a trait that Hannibal intended to use to his advantage when he crucified the man.

Fury still bubbled within Black's stomach as he reflected on the incident hours earlier. Never before in his twenty-plus years of service within Starfleet had he wanted to physically strike a junior officer, but the urge to do so had nearly been overpowering when Tucker stood in front of him.

“If I give the order for my people to ignore you, Admiral,” the younger man had asked, an eerie intensity burning in his eyes and a complete lack of emotion in his voice, “who do you think they'll listen to?”

Hannibal knew exactly whom they would obey; and the humiliation that had come on the heels of that realization had been even more powerful than the anger. When he had been promoted to admiral and offered the job as COTEF, Black had seen it as the next step in his career. All of Starfleet's research and development fell under his auspices, and it was to him that Command looked for the next big discovery, the long hoped-for weapon that would reverse the fortunes of this war. And yet, all it had taken was a single comment from a combat commander to remind Hannibal what he really was.

A REMF.

It was an old acronym, one that had originated within the American military during the twentieth century, but had only recently entered the Starfleet lexicon after the MACO integration. A term of derision used by front line soldiers to describe those who held less dangerous jobs far from where combat actually took place, it stood for “rear-echelon mother fucker”. For a man like Hannibal, who could trace his family line all the way back to the French-Indian War by the conflicts in which they had served, it was a sobering realization. He wasn't a special forces operator as his great-grandfather had been, or the commander of an infantry battalion like his great-great-great-grandfather, or even a ballistic submarine captain like the Hannibal Black whose name he now bore.

He was an administrator, a pencil pusher who wasn't trusted to serve on the front lines or to command a fleet. That job went to upstarts like Archer, or that damned Australian Burnside Clapp of the Second Fleet, or Admiral Wang of the Fourth. Until that moment in the captain's ready room aboard *Endeavour*, Hannibal had been perfectly content with that fact; he had been simply glad to be doing his job. The unspoken contempt he had sensed behind Tucker's comments, however, along with Commander Eisler's refusal to obey Black's orders, and even the master chief's decision to side with Eisler, had hammered the point home. The MACOs had a saying that Hannibal had heard: if you're not a MACO, you're not shit.

Apparently, the same held true for Starfleet combat crews.

Tucker had been witness to that moment of clarity, and Hannibal hated him for it even as he felt an unexpected sense of gratitude toward the man. Whether he had intended to or not, Captain Tucker had, with a single comment, forced Black to re-evaluate every career goal he had ever harbored.

Hannibal still intended to see Tucker stripped of his rank and dishonorably discharged from the service, though. Gratitude only went so far.

The lift from G Deck – flag country, as it was commonly called – did not go past F Deck, so they were forced to transfer to a second lift. Upon entering the second, Black was surprised that the female petty officer pressed the destination button for B Deck; according to the information that he had perused, the command center was on D Deck and had been a reconverted cargo bay. Seeing his confused expression, the petty officer spoke.

“One of the Cultural Anthropology labs was turned into the command center during the refit, sir. More room and we don't exactly need a CA lab right now.” Black nodded in understanding and waited patiently for the ride to be over, desperately trying to ignore the pounding headache that raged at the back of his skull. The lift finally slowed and, following the petty officer without a word, Hannibal let himself be led through the corridors. As they rounded a corner, he frowned at the sight of Captain Tucker limping toward them.

“I'll take it from here, Pollock,” the captain said to the young woman, and she gave him a crisp nod before turning away. “Hope I didn't wake you, Admiral,” Tucker remarked as he gestured toward a door.

“You did,” Hannibal responded irritably, and the captain hesitated before triggering the door release. He gave Black a measuring look.

“Correct me if I'm wrong, Admiral,” the younger man said softly, “but you *did* insist on being present at every one of the briefings.” Once more, Black found himself gritting his teeth but, before he could respond, Tucker continued. “Lieutenant Commander Eisler told me that this was important, so I thought you might like to be here.” They stood for a moment, eyes locked; Finally, Hannibal broke eye contact, annoyance and frustration once more swimming in his gut. There was nothing he hated more than having his own words used against him.

“You thought correctly, Captain.” He nodded to the door. “Shall we?” Tucker triggered the door release and walked through the open hatch.

“Report,” the captain demanded as he limped into the command center. A half step behind him, Hannibal studied the four officers at the master display with a critical eye as they turned toward the captain. Three of them he immediately recognized – the tactical officer, the chief engineer, and the helmsman – but the fourth was a young female lieutenant wearing the blue of Science that Black did not think he had seen before.

“The Orion ship has changed course, Captain,” Lieutenant Commander Eisler said at once, gesturing to the large display before them. “They've also experienced a substantial increase in velocity.”

“A warp highway?” the captain asked as he sank into the one chair present with a wince.

“An unmapped one, yes sir.” Eisler almost glared at the display before continuing. “Based on their current trajectory and speed, we've also isolated the Orions' destination.”

“They appeared originally to be heading for the Oolian system,” the female lieutenant – Ricker, according to her nametag – declared at Tucker's questioning look, bringing up a regional star chart that was far more detailed than any Hannibal had seen for this sector before, “but in the last hour, they seem to have altered course for the Anoaat system.”

“Anoaat system? Not much there,” Hannibal muttered with another frown, and the lieutenant nodded in agreement as she brought up the system readout on the master display.

“Three rockballs, two gas giants and an asteroid field,” she elaborated. “The Vulcan Science Directorate flagged it as 'Explored and Unsuitable.' Our theory is that the Orions plan to hide in either the asteroid belt or within the upper atmosphere of one of the gas giants.”

“Or they're going to meet someone there,” Hsiao added ominously.

“According to the information we have on this class of ship,” Eisler abruptly declared, “*Endeavour* is faster and more heavily armed.” He nodded to the science lieutenant and the display shifted to a tactical analysis of the Orion craft. “It's highly probable that their captain is aware of this fact and is attempting to maximize his chances of survival by hiding.”

“How much faster?” Tucker asked, and Eisler glanced at the helmsman.

“Sir,” Lieutenant Hsiao replied quickly, a trace of smug pride in his voice, “we can fly rings around that tub. It can't even top warp four.” At the contempt in the young lieutenant's voice, Black nearly smiled despite his dark mood: he remembered a day when warp four had been just a pipe dream.

“Intelligence puts their offensive capability at slightly above the *Enterprise* at launch,” the tactical officer elaborated with a sour glance at the junior officer. “Estimates place their weapon payload as low-yield torpedoes and Mark III disruptor cannons.”

“It doesn't even have any shields,” Hsiao added in an almost disgusted voice.

“However,” the tactical officer continued over the helmsman, once more sending the younger officer a look that Hannibal interpreted as annoyed, “it is equipped with a very efficient hull polarization system and has remarkably heavy armor for a ship its size.” Eisler drew a breath and looked Tucker in the eyes. “Sir, I'd like to have the Remoras rigged as Immobilizers.” Black felt a flash of surprise wash through him.

Based on the Remora torpedo delivery system, the Immobilizer – officially the Remora Mark II – replaced the shaped explosive charges in each of the warheads with a micro-electromagnetic pulse generator. The brainchild of Commanders Eisler and Hess, the Immobilizer had been extensively field tested, but so far had been used only with limited success in actual combat operations. Synchronizing the detonation of the EMP generators remained the primary problem; too often, a premature triggering of the pulse would render the other generators inert and would barely affect the intended target.

Tucker's eyes shifted to the chief engineer and even Black could read the unspoken question there. Lieutenant Commander Hess straightened fractionally as she responded.

"I'm pretty sure we've got the detonation problem beaten, sir," she stated firmly, and the captain raised an eyebrow in a distinctly Vulcan mannerism.

"How sure?" he asked softly. "There are at least two lives at stake here, Anna."

"Eighty percent," Hess replied after a moment of consideration and Tucker gave her a long considering look.

"Immobilizers are a go," he declared to Eisler. The tactical officer nodded brusquely, his face as devoid of emotion as any Vulcan's. "Continue, Mister Eisler."

"Lieutenant Hsiao has calculated an intercept time of zero five thirty based on the Orions' velocity and the estimated adjustment of the warp conduit." Once more, the display was changed to the regional star chart, now with the two ships identified. "We should reach the conduit in two hours, at which time our own velocity will increase."

"Intercept point?" the captain asked, and Eisler grimaced.

"The Anoaat system," he stated flatly. At the tactical officer's glance, Lieutenant Ricker changed the image to the system overview once more. "The Orions should reach the system at zero five twenty-five."

"That's cutting it pretty damned close," Tucker remarked grimly, and all four of his officers shared his dark expression.

"Yes sir." Silence filled the room for a moment before the captain nodded for them to continue.

Again, Lieutenant Commander Eisler looked to the science lieutenant manning the display console, and the viewscreen shifted to a deckplan layout of the Orion ship. Blinking in surprise, Black realized that he had never seen such detailed schematics.

"Do I want to know how you got these plans, Rick?" Captain Tucker asked wryly, vocalizing Hannibal's thoughts.

"These are the two beam-in points," Eisler announced, ignoring the captain's question as he pointed to two highlighted locations on the deckplans. "Once the Orion ship has been disabled, both STAB teams will deploy." Hannibal frowned at the unfamiliar acronym but said nothing as he studied the display. "Team Two will concentrate on capturing the bridge while Team One will move to secure Engineering. As soon as One has control of Engineering, Commander Hess and her team will transport over to neutralize any additional ... surprises in the master controls."

"If the situation on *Endeavour* requires my attention," Hess picked up the explanation without pause, "Lieutenant Riggs will replace me aboard the Orion ship. I've already briefed

him and he's ready to go.”

“Both SEAL teams will also be on alert status in the event that reinforcements are required,” Eisler pointed out, once more using an unfamiliar acronym, and Black bit back his frustration. “My teams are already prepping for the assault and Chief Gray will replace me on Weps.”

“You're planning to lead the assault?” Black asked in surprise. He knew about Eisler's background in MACO special ops, but the idea of a man of his rank volunteering to put himself in harm's way was surprising. The tactical officer fixed Hannibal with an unblinking look.

“I don't ask my troopers to do anything that I wouldn't do myself, Admiral.” It was a simple statement, one that Black had heard dozens of times by fellow flag officers, but in Eisler's German-accented English, Hannibal sensed a stark honesty that he had never heard before. In the past, the phrase had seemed like meaningless words from senior officers who hadn't served in the field for ten or more years, but coming from the ex-MACO, it was ... humbling.

“Is Gray fully checked out?” Tucker inquired, acting as if it were a foregone conclusion that his 3IC would lead the assault. At Eisler's nod, the captain studied the display again, and Black found himself actually curious as to what the younger man was thinking. Finally, Tucker pushed himself to his feet with the cane. “All right. We have three and a half hours before intercept.” He looked each of his officers in the eye before continuing. “Make sure your departments are ready for combat operations.” Four quick nods were his response. “We have two officers on that ship, and they're relyin' on us to bring them home.”

“And two bodies in the morgue demanding justice,” Eisler said softly, his voice a menacing rumble. Tucker gave him a pointed look.

“Let's worry about bringin' our people home first,” he replied. From his tone, it was clear that he wasn't making a request. The tactical officer nodded, with no hint that he had taken the unspoken rebuke personally.

“Aye, sir.”

“I don't need to emphasize the importance of this operation,” Tucker said after a moment, authority ringing in his voice. “Nor do I need to tell you how to do your jobs.” He looked at each of his officers in turn. “You're the best in the Fleet, and now it's time to prove it.”

“*Semper Optima*,” Eisler growled, quoting the inscription on *Endeavour's* dedication plaque. *Always the best*, Hannibal translated from Latin. It was an audacious motto, one that Black had considered to be mildly arrogant when he had originally read the proposal. But judging by the looks in the eyes of these officers, it was a motto that they tried to live up to. Once again, Hannibal found himself re-evaluating his outlook; clearly, he had been among flag officers for too long. He mentally began planning how to rectify that situation.

“Let's go to work,” Captain Tucker ordered, his tone brisk. Seconds later, the command center was silent.



**30 June 2157. 0445 Hours Earth Standard Time.**

A beep echoed through the silent cell, immediately interrupting their plans for escape.

The sudden activation of the neural inhibitor came as a surprise and, with a startled grunt, T'Pol collapsed. Her head bounced off the metal deck as her body ceased to obey her, and she closed her eyes tightly against the pain that lanced through her skull. The hiss of the pressurized door as it opened and closed again echoed loudly in the small storage-room-turned-cell. Boots appeared in T'Pol's line of sight, followed by a familiar face, and she struggled against the limpness of her muscles. Her stomach lurched in fear at the raw lust in the Orion male's eyes.

The Orion smiled darkly as he knelt. As he began to stroke her face with his meaty hands, T'Pol swallowed the anger and terror that threatened to smash through her veneer of calm dispassion. Over the pounding of her heart, she could hear Lieutenant Hayes' grunts of effort intensifying as he recognized what the Orion intended; the lieutenant sought desperately to defeat the inhibitor's effects. With effort, T'Pol closed her eyes and focused on detaching herself from the moment. As the Orion male's hand began caressing her breasts, fury welled up within her, washing away the fear, but she forced it down. *Trip must never know of this*, she told herself as the Orion once more touched her face.

Foreign emotions trickled into the periphery of her mind and her eyes snapped open as a sudden thought came to her. Vulcans were touch-telepaths and, from her research into the *Kir'Shara*, she knew the contact points on the face were used primarily as a means of intensifying the telepathic connection for a meld.

But they weren't entirely necessary.

Narrowing her eyes, T'Pol *pushed* with her mind, feeling the brief sensation of motion without movement as her mind stretched out to touch another's. The Orion's eyes flared in muted surprise at the mental assault, and he started to pull his hand free from her face. Ruthlessly, she *pushed* again, focusing every atom of her being into seizing control of his neural pathways and demanding his obedience. She could almost feel the shift in balance, see the fear that swam in his eyes, and smell his sudden terror.

His hand did not move.

Harder she pressed and, with a gasp, she felt his resistance begin to crumble. It didn't surprise her too terribly that he yielded as easily as he did; evolution had already hardwired the Orion male for subjugation. His right hand seemingly welded to her face, he reached down with his left and took her wrist. Pain began pounding through T'Pol's head as she strained her untrained telepathic gifts to the breaking point. She had read about theoretical applications of Vulcan telepathy such as this; but in her admittedly limited research into the subject, she had never discovered actual reports of such a meld. Blood began to trickle from her nose as long moments crept by, and she could sense her strength beginning to wane.

Up went the Orion's left hand, trembling in a vain attempt to resist her telepathic demands, and he placed her right hand on the side of his face. Her eyes narrowed once more as her fingers rested limply near the contact points. The placement of her digits was not entirely correct but, in this moment, was close enough for her needs. *Our minds, one and together*, she mentally recited, focusing once more on the failing telepathic connection between them. To her surprise – and his as well – he mouthed the ritualistic words at the same time and, like a torrent of water released from a dam, her thoughts thundered into his psyche, demanding control. For less than a nanosecond, he struggled; then his primitive defenses collapsed under her onslaught.

Once more, she focused her will on him, and, this time, he responded without hesitation. Still holding her hand in place on the planes of his face, he reached down with his other hand and pulled a small device from his belt. With a flick of his thumb, he deactivated the neural inhibitors.

Hayes was on him almost instantly.

Gasping for breath, T'Pol didn't move for a long moment as her system struggled to recover from the horrific strain she had put on her fledgling telepathic gifts. She had melded with Trip numerous times since Elizabeth's death, but never before had she felt so totally drained and exhausted afterwards. The pain in her head thudded in time with her heartbeat and she fought to regain control of herself. Bile surged up from her stomach and she rolled over mere seconds before retching upon the floor. Again and again, she vomited and her muscles quivered spasmodically as she purged herself. Finally, long moments after the last of her dry heaves subsided, control returned.

A rhythmic pounding drew her attention to Lieutenant Hayes, and she froze in surprise at the sight of the raw emotion that contorted the young man's face. Fury and hatred rolled off the lieutenant in waves as he repeatedly slammed the Orion's face into the wall of the small cell.

Or rather, what was left of the Orion's face.

“Lieutenant,” T'Pol called out, her voice ragged from retching. Hayes didn't react, and continued to smash the visibly dead Orion into the wall. “Lieutenant!” she repeated loudly, and slowly he looked toward her. Had she been standing, T'Pol would have likely taken a step back from the murderous wrath in Hayes' eyes. “He is dead,” she pointed out calmly.

With a shudder, Hayes dropped the corpse and staggered several steps away before sinking to his knees. Burying his face in his bloody hands, he trembled in what appeared to be a fight for control. Twice, he slammed his fists onto the unyielding deck with brutal force that would have dented lesser alloys. The hollow booms from the impacts echoed through the cell and sent a shiver of fear through T'Pol; the idea of someone as dangerous as Hayes being out of control was not something she had ever had any desire to witness. Finally, he looked back at her, his expression black but his eyes swimming with an emotion that she could not identify.

“I'm sorry,” he said in a hushed voice. Hayes glanced away, once more turning his eyes on the unmoving body. “I didn't mean to lose control...”

T'Pol said nothing as she rose and approached the corpse. Very little was left of the Orion's

skull, and she wrinkled her nose at the overpowering stench of blood. Putting aside her distaste, she quickly searched the corpse, placing the disruptor pistol and several unfamiliar pieces of technology in a small pile. After a moment of consideration, she stripped the corpse of its clothes as well.

“You should wear those,” Hayes abruptly stated, his eyes still full of emotion, and T'Pol gave him a quirked eyebrow in response.

“I intended to,” she replied smoothly as she began pulling on the trousers. They were far too large to be entirely comfortable, but she was able to adjust the waist so they would not slip. The Orion jacket reeked of blood and spilled brain matter; T'Pol set aside her instinctive response as she donned it.

“Keep the disruptor,” the lieutenant muttered, still kneeling. He looked up at her. “I don't have a sense of smell, but if I'm affected...”

“I will shoot you,” T'Pol finished calmly as she holstered the disruptor. Hayes exhaled slightly, as if in relief. “At the highest setting,” the Vulcan added, as a memory of Malik's Augments surfaced. According to records, Klingon disruptors had barely slowed those Augments down. She frowned at that implication; it was highly unlikely that Orion weapons were superior to those of the warlike Klingons.

“Go for the eyes,” Hayes stated as he stood, “or the groin. Those are the only chances you'll have at stopping me if it comes down to that.” From his tone, he sounded as if he was speaking from experience. T'Pol wondered if the mysterious Section that he worked for had tested his limits in that area as well. Hayes knelt before the pile of discarded pieces of technology. “I don't recognize any of this stuff, ma'am.”

“Nor do I.” T'Pol raised an eyebrow in annoyance as she picked up the device that had deactivated the inhibitors. In his rage, the lieutenant had smashed it. “This device apparently served as a door release as well,” she stated as she turned back to Hayes.

To her surprise, the lieutenant was using one of the foreign pieces of technology – now smashed – to slice open a scar on the underside of his right forearm. The cut must have been painful, judging from his expression, but he made no sound. Incredibly, he then began to extract a flexible tube of some sort from within the limb.

“Monomolecular wire,” he commented when he saw her expression. “I can use it to cut the hinges off the door.” She inclined an eyebrow at the logic in that decision: Monomolecular wire – or monowire as it was often called – was considered to be among the keenest of weapons, consisting of a single strain of strongly bonded molecules similar to carbon nanotubes. Tests had proven that very few objects could withstand the cutting edge of such a wire, and the material was often used in delicate mining or gem cutting. Many were the rumors of military applications of monowire, but this was the first time that T'Pol had seen such a thing in use.

T'Pol said nothing as she silently observed Hayes extract the wire from the curious-looking tube. To the Vulcan's eyes, the monowire appeared to be more of a garotte than a tool, and she frowned at the ease with which Hayes manipulated the lethal object; additional questions

surfaced about the nature of the lieutenant's "training" from this Section organization, but T'Pol set aside her reservations for the moment. The lieutenant began sawing through the top door hinge carefully, moving slowly enough to prevent risk of damaging the wire. Time crept by as he worked, and T'Pol spent the long minutes studying the undamaged technological tools acquired from the dead Orion. Abruptly, the Orion ship shuddered; T'Pol felt her breath catch.

*Endeavour* had arrived.

It was an entirely illogical assumption as she had no way to ascertain its accuracy but, somehow, she knew that Trip was nearby. She still couldn't feel him through the bond, and quickly theorized that her early telepathic exertion had left her in a state where she wouldn't be able to sense him at this distance. Yes, she decided without a shred of evidence, but with more emotion than she'd like to consider, *telepathic fatigue is why I cannot feel him*.

"That was weapons fire," Hayes identified as he finished slicing through the lowermost hinge. He shot her a glance. "*Endeavour?*"

"Unknown," she replied as she drew the disruptor pistol and stood ready, "but that is a likely assumption." Hayes shrugged as he searched for a place to put his fingers. Again, the ship rocked; the lights flickered briefly.

"Ready?" the lieutenant asked as he worked his fingers into an open spot and braced his left foot along the wall. At T'Pol's nod, he began to pull. The tendons in his neck were clearly visible as he strained against the door. The groans of protesting metal were matched by his guttural grunts of effort.

The door did not budge.

Hayes abruptly leaned forward, shaking his head in frustration. He gave T'Pol a defeated look.

"The vacuum seal is still intact," he grumbled. "There's no way we can break it this way."

"Stand aside," T'Pol commanded as she approached with the disruptor. Working the barrel of the weapon into the handhold that Hayes had carved with the monowire, she carefully wedged it in place before tampering with the energy cell. Seconds later, the loud hum emitting from the weapon made her plan clear, and Hayes gave the weapon a sinister grin before backing away. As she and the lieutenant crouched in the far corner of the room, hopefully safe from any potential shrapnel, T'Pol found herself curious as to why setting the disruptor to override brought Malcolm Reed to mind.

The disruptor self-destructed with a fierce explosion, ripping great chunks of the metal door free and sending them flying through the air to smash harmlessly against the opposite wall. Her ears ringing, T'Pol glanced up from her huddled position and looked at the door. With a boom, it toppled to the deck.

Hayes was already on his feet and heading toward the door, pausing only long enough to make sure that T'Pol was behind him. To her annoyance, her movements were still stuttered and

erratic, an after-effect of the meld that she had been forced to conduct; but she gave him a nod that carried her unspoken command to continue forward. Alarms were sounding throughout the long corridors and a male voice – it sounded like Harrad-Sar's – was issuing urgent orders in Orion via the shipwide comm channel. A surprised shout snapped her attention toward their left and a trio of rapidly approaching Orions. The three males were reaching for their weapons as, without hesitation, Hayes sprang forward.

There was no subtlety in his maneuvers, neither grace nor beauty, as was common in many martial arts. He relied on brute strength and incredible speed as he simply hammered his fist through the abdomen of the first Orion that he reached. Without even pausing he kicked out at the second, the side of his foot slamming into the other male's knee with a sickening crunch. As the second Orion collapsed with a shriek, his leg bending in a direction that nature had never intended, the last of the Orion trio turned and bolted, dropping his drawn sidearm in his mad scramble to get away. Hayes pursued, pouncing on the man with a bonecrushing tackle. Two quick jabs into the downed male's back were accompanied by the sound of smashing bone, and T'Pol tried not to wince at the dark satisfaction the Augmented human seemed to derive from the violence.

“Lieutenant,” T'Pol said sharply, a hint of annoyance leaking into her voice and concealing the flash of disgust she felt at the almost feral enjoyment on his face. “We *do* have an objective.” Hayes nodded in embarrassment and started to reply, but paused and glanced away. His eyes abruptly swam out of focus and he half-turned, a look of staggered awe slowly appearing on his face. Four meters away, Navaar stepped out of a turbolift.

“Most impressive, Lieutenant,” the Orion female said with a sultry smile. T'Pol darted toward the first Orion, pushing back the panic that tried to surge within her. Sliding to a stop over the corpse, she ripped the disruptor free of its holster.

“Kill her!” Navaar bellowed and Hayes twisted toward T'Pol, insane fury clouding his face as he sprinted toward her. There was no hesitation in the Vulcan's actions as she lifted the disruptor and fired.

An instant later, a body slammed into her.



### **30 June 2157. 0530 Hours Earth Standard Time.**

The impact of something striking the hull of *Endeavour* boomed through the ship and sent a shiver of alarm through Charles Tucker. Mere seconds had passed since their transition from warp and, not for the first time, the captain found himself unaccountably glad for Starfleet's standard operating procedure that now required shields to be raised before returning to impulse.

“What the hell was that?” he demanded as he leaned forward in his command chair. Behind him, clinging to the railing above the captain's chair, he could hear Admiral Black mutter something under his breath, but he didn't waste time trying to decipher what the older man had said.

“Unidentified explosion on the port side!” SCPO Gray announced from the TAC board. “Shields holding at seventy-two percent!”

“Multiple displacements!” Lieutenant Ricker declared at the same time, her eyes locked on the Science holo-viewer. “Sir, I think they're mines!”

“All back,” Trip ordered immediately. He tried to avoid glaring at the main screen as *Endeavour's* ambient sounds changed sharply in pitch. “What do we have, Liz?” From her place at T'Pol's station, the young woman straightened, and Tucker tried not to think about the uncomfortable emotions that still welled up within him at the utterance of the lieutenant's name. In the years since the Xindi assault, he had discovered that there were far, far too many human women named Elizabeth for his comfort.

“Captain, Orion ship is making a run for the fifth planet. I'm detecting seventeen ... correction, eighteen objects of indeterminate origin within five and thirty kilometers of our position.” Glancing at the data displays on the sensor feed installed in front of his chair, Trip frowned at the familiarity of the readings. At least this explained why the Orion ship hadn't made an immediate run for the gas giant upon arriving in-system...

“Those are Romulan mines,” he identified abruptly before leaning forward again and inputting commands into the console. “Lieutenant Ricker, try the gamma spectrum, phase variant point zero zero seven five.” Trip paused, hoping that his memory about those readings was correct. Following *Enterprise's* incident with the Romulan minefield, he had spent several months working with Malcolm Reed and T'Pol to find a way to penetrate the sensor countermeasures that had made the mines virtually impossible to detect. Their various encounters with Suliban cloaking technology from the future had given them an advantage that the Romulans obviously hadn't anticipated and, within weeks, they had managed to discover a way to negate those countermeasures completely. T'Pol had even updated this research with new information after the holoship incident several years later. This data had proven to be invaluable against Romulan deployment of additional holo-technology; the battle of Pacifica had, so far, been the last time when the Romulans had utilized their holographic cloaking devices. Three birds of prey had been destroyed before the Romulans, realizing Starfleet was able to penetrate the holo-cloak, had abandoned the practice.

Trip hated to think what the Romulans could do with an honest-to-God cloaking device.

“Got it, sir,” Ricker said, surprise tingeing her voice. “Tricobalt explosives, magnetic attractors, estimated yield ... two kilotons.”

“They've upgraded,” Tucker mumbled. Again, he could hear Black's noisy exhalation behind him, and nearly frowned at the admiral's position; never before had Trip experienced someone quite literally breathing down his neck. “Chief Gray, have Remoras uploaded with Ricker's sensor readings. Lieutenant Hsiao, stand by for full impulse.” A chirp sounded from the tactical board, an indication that the new data had been uploaded, and Trip found himself tensing with anticipation.

“Standing by to fire, sir,” Senior Chief Petty Officer Gray stated as a second beep sounded, and Trip leaned back in his seat.

“Helm, pursuit course, maximum impulse.” Tucker glanced to Gray. “Weps, stand by to fire on my command.” Trip inhaled slowly, using the breathing techniques that T'Pol had taught him to enhance his sense of calm. Panic was starting to creep into the edges of his consciousness as a single question thundered through his brain: why couldn't he sense T'Pol? They were close enough! Experience had proven that: during their last visit to Sol, he'd been able to feel her while she was at Jupiter Station and he was on Earth. “Comm, sound collision. Execute.”

*Endeavour* leaped forward, engines growling as the starship abruptly reversed direction. Flickers of movement could be seen as the holographically concealed mines became active; equipped with magnetic attractors and stripped-down maneuvering thrusters, they were unerringly drawn toward the approaching starship that now bore down upon them. Proximity alarms began shrieking, and Tucker heard Black draw in a sharp breath; Trip almost smiled at that.

“Fire!” he ordered.

Three torpedoes roared from *Endeavour's* missile tubes, breaking apart into multiple warheads almost instantly. Streaking toward their individual targets, each warhead slammed into the partially concealed mines and detonated upon impact, immediately triggering a counter explosion that ripped the mines apart. Wreathed in explosions that didn't actually touch her, *Endeavour* raced forward.

“Weapons range in thirty seconds,” Gray declared as the last of the mines exploded harmlessly nearly a dozen kilometers away from the hull of the Starfleet vessel.

“Orion craft entering upper atmosphere of fifth planet.” Lieutenant Ricker was bent over the holo-viewer and Trip nearly smiled at her attempt to emulate T'Pol's calm dispassion. Any amusement dissolved before it actually manifested, though; it should be T'Pol standing there, not Lieutenant Ricker. Anger warred with panic inside him, and Trip gripped the armrests of his chair to hide the fact that his hands were shaking.

“Lieutenant Devereux,” Tucker said, struggling to conceal his growing worry. “All frequencies.” She gave him a nod as her board chirped. “Orion craft,” Trip stated loudly, “this is the United Earth Ship *Endeavour*. Stand down and prepare to be boarded. You have ten seconds to comply.”

“Energy spike!” Ricker declared. “They're firing!”

A pair of torpedoes spiraled up from the gas giant even as the Orion ship dove deeper into the swirling atmosphere. The distinctly shaped incoming warheads were a far cry from *Endeavour's* photonic torpedoes or even Orion standard warheads.

“Kill all optics!” Trip ordered sharply as he leaned forward in his command chair. “And slow to one-quarter impulse!” He ignored the startled expressions on the faces of his bridge crew, and silently thanked Lieutenant Commander Eisler for instilling in them the fear of God as they reacted instantly. Trip knew that they had to be confused, knew that they were questioning whether he had temporarily lost his mind, but, to their credit, they obeyed

without question. The main viewer went dark as the external cameras deactivated.

“Captain?” Black asked, not even bothering to hide his own confusion, and Tucker wondered if the admiral had even bothered to read the mission reports that had been sent to Starfleet Command.

“Harrad-Sar used those torpedoes against *Enterprise* the second time we ran into him,” Trip revealed as he kept his eyes focused on the sensor feed. “Upon detonation, they screw up optical relays. We never got ahold of one of those torpedoes to reverse-engineer it, so we don't know how they work or why they mess up the optics.” Tucker tried not to think about how it had been T'Pol who had discovered a way to aound the weapons, or that it had been Malcolm who had realized it was a diversionary tactic to prevent *Enterprise* from discovering that the Orion ship was planning to board them. He glanced at Ricker.

“Twin detonations, sir,” she announced, and Trip nodded.

“Bring the optics back on-line,” he said, “and resume full impulse. Weps...”

“Weapons range now, Captain,” SCPO Gray declared.

“Fire.” The order rolled off of Tucker's tongue before he was aware of it, and the panic that still swam in his stomach abruptly transformed into a simmering fury. His *mate* was on that ship, and if he had to rip it apart centimeter by centimeter to retrieve her...

Salvos lanced out from *Endeavour's* phase cannons, slicing with brilliant flashes into the thick armor plates that encased the Orion interceptor. Incandescent lightning danced across the hull of the craft as it rocked under the onslaught, and the interceptor instantly retaliated; a viridian stream of fire pulsed from the swirling atmosphere, briefly sketching an outline of the invisible force screens that surrounded the Starfleet vessel.

Still spinning along its horizontal axis to avoid the incoming fire, the Orion interceptor abruptly banked away from the strangely hued gas giant and dove toward the ring that surrounded the massive planet. A second pair of torpedoes flashed from the interceptor's launch tubes and Trip found himself smiling: so far, Harrad-Sar was using the very same tactics that he had used against *Enterprise*.

“Countermeasures!” he demanded, tension and continued pain from his injury making his tone sharp.

*Endeavour* twisted into a spiraling climb as automated countermeasures were deployed at once from the Starfleet ship. Twin streaks of light raced into the void before detonating with a dazzling display of pyrotechnics that acted as an anti-torpedo measure; blanketing the area with an array of infrared, radar, ladar, and gamma ray bursts, the countermeasure was intended to confuse the targeting sensors of the incoming ordnance. One of the torpedoes was immediately fooled and it shifted targets, exploding harmlessly many kilometers distant. The second warhead, however, continued forward.

Point-defense weapons, newly installed aboard *Endeavour* and designed to fire completely independent of the main phase cannons, activated almost instantly. Based on the close-in

weapon systems (CIWS) of centuries-old naval warships, the P-Def lasers were entirely automated and equipped with tracking software that allowed them to differentiate between hostile and friendly targets. Within the span of a nanosecond, the targeting computers identified the threat posed by the rapidly approaching ordnance, cycled through all available resources, and reoriented the x-ray laser-based P-Defs. A stream of invisible laser pulses spat at the incoming warhead.

In mid-flight, the second torpedo seemed to shudder before exploding.

“Status,” Trip demanded as he observed the second torpedo detonate a safe distance from *Endeavour*. From his station at the tactical board, Chief Gray glanced up as he directed a second barrage of fire at the fleeing Orion ship. The scarlet phase cannon beams stitched crippling scars across the port nacelle even as a quartet of older Mark IV torpedoes flashed from *Endeavour's* launch tubes and detonated with hull-crushing force. Streams of warp plasma exploded out from the ravaged nacelle.

“Standing by to deploy Immobilizers,” Gray announced as the Orion ship banked into a dive toward the gas giant, debris trailing from the damaged hull.

“Deploy,” Tucker ordered, once more gripping the armrests of his command chair. A loud *thrum* echoed through the bridge as a trio of the modified Remoras shot from the torpedo tubes, splitting apart into independently tracking warheads mere seconds from launch. Twisting and spiraling toward the Orion ship, the micro-EMP generators latched onto the outer hull without facing even a single burst of counterfire.

A flash of light abruptly enveloped the interceptor for the briefest of seconds, and Trip fought the urge to smile as the fleeing ship's power systems seemed to fail completely. The starboard nacelle flickered and faded, and the impulse drive of the Orion ship sputtered before dying completely. Suddenly without power, the interceptor continued unabated toward the gas giant, now relying entirely upon its previous velocity and the gravity of the massive planet.

“Massive systemic failures detected,” Lieutenant Ricker declared before glancing up. “Target vessel is *immobilized*, sir.” Trip rolled his eyes at the pun.

“Ready tractor beam,” he said, leaning back in his command chair. “And give Commander Eisler a green light.” His pulse pounded in his ears and Trip focused on trying to sense his mate through the bond. *Why can't I feel her?*

“You have a functional tractor beam?” Admiral Black asked in surprise and, despite himself, Trip smiled slightly.

“Yes, sir,” he replied as he tried to ignore the empty spot in his soul where T'Pol was supposed to be. *Bring her home, Rick*, he silently urged his tactical officer. *Bring her home.*

Author's Note: The candle-holder thing was proposed by **Kevin** in his *Soval's Awakening*. It's such a fantastic idea that I've incorporated it into my own continuity.

## ACT FIVE

**Anoat System, 30 June 2157. 0536 Hours Earth Standard Time.**

“Bring her home.”

The captain's last command rang in Rick Eisler's ears as reality re-materialized around him. His breath came in ragged gasps and Eisler flexed his fingers, still experiencing the uncomfortable tingle that always accompanied a transport. No matter how many times he had to use the damned thing, or how much the flag officers of Command insisted that it was perfectly safe, Rick knew that he would never get accustomed to the idea of being disassembled at a molecular level and then reconstructed somewhere else.

It just wasn't a natural way to travel.

A quick glance around revealed that the members of STAB Team Two were all accounted for, and Rick checked the digital readout in the top corner of his helmet HUD. Aside from some slightly elevated heart rates, everyone was good to go. His features concealed by the armored helmet, Eisler allowed himself a discreet smile: no member of the Security force really liked using the transporter but, to their credit, the STAB teams were the least vocal about their complaints.

“STAB Two green,” he declared into his helmet comm before giving a hand signal to his team. CPO Mitchell took point at once, his weapon primed for combat as he moved toward the cargo bay hatch. Relatively isolated from the high traffic areas, this particular cargo bay was also on the same level as the command deck, which made it ideal for this operation. “Moving to secure bridge,” Rick continued before issuing other nonverbal commands, using hand and arm signals that had remained unchanged for centuries. PO3 Hoffman and Wakulich responded immediately and took up cover fire positions in front of the hatch as Petty Officer 3rd Class Hernandez approached the hatch controls.

“STAB One green,” came the voice of the Team One commander across the intersquad comm seconds later. “Moving to secure engineering.”

On Eisler's go signal, his team spilled out of the cargo bay and into the corridor beyond. As always, Mitchell was in front, with Crewman Victrim covering his six. Angry red lights flashed through the corridor, providing the only source of illumination for personnel not equipped with the light enhancement technology in their helmets. Rated for EV operations, the armor was another holdover from MACO black ops that Rick had insisted on acquiring when he joined *Endeavour*. After reading the reports of the MACO teams that had been assigned to *Enterprise* during the Expanse mission, Rick had seriously considered tracking down and having some words with the idiot who had assigned Major Hayes to the NX-01 without appropriate equipment.

Sometimes, he still thought about doing it.

“Contact,” Mitchell whispered across the team comm-channel seconds before he opened fire with his rifle. Caught completely by surprise, a pair of startled Orions toppled to the ground. A part of Rick vaguely wished that Captain Tucker hadn’t mandated the use of the stun setting.

A pulse of disruptor fire suddenly whined past him, slamming into the corridor bulkhead in a shower of sparks and explosion of debris. Rick didn't hesitate; instincts honed by years in combat sent him into a dive away from the incoming fire even as the rest of the team oriented themselves toward the unseen target. Orders weren't necessary: this sort of reaction had been drilled into the teams so harshly that they responded without real consideration of the actual danger that it put them in. Each trooper assaulted forward, spraying the corridor with such a volume of fire that anyone who dared pop out to return fire would have been dropped instantly. Crouched at the corner of the corridor, Eisler took aim with his rifle and paused.

“Cease fire,” he grunted across the team channel. Seconds after the team obeyed, an Orion male scrambled from his cover and tried to flee down the corridor, away from the aggressive STAB team. Rick exhaled softly as he squeezed the trigger of his rifle and dropped the man.

“Reading Vulcan life signs in that direction,” Crewman Victrim quietly announced, gesturing with his hand-held scanner in the direction that the male had been heading.

“Can you confirm?” Eisler asked instantly, swallowing the sudden urge to contact the captain and relate the good news. It wouldn't do if they discovered Commander T'Pol was mortally wounded.

“Negative.” Victrim fiddled with the scanner briefly, muttering a soft curse under his breath that he clearly didn't think would be broadcast over the comm line. “Too much interference, sir.”

“Mitchell, take point,” Rick ordered without a second thought. It would mean heading away from the bridge, but retrieving the commander and Lieutenant Hayes was still their primary objective. “Stay alert,” Eisler muttered.

“Stay alive,” came the instinctive response from the rest of the team, clearly imitating his own accent as they finished the almost ritualistic comment. Rick smiled wryly to himself. *In other words, shut up and let us do our jobs.* For long minutes, they crept down the darkened corridor with barely a sound.

“Uh, Commander...” Mitchell sounded unexpectedly anxious, and Eisler felt his amusement dissolve. Two steps later, he understood the chief petty officer's unease.

They paused just outside an empty room that appeared to have once been used for storage. Face up in a pool of his own blood, the corpse of an Orion male drew their immediate attention, primarily for the fist-sized hole that seemed to have been punched through his abdomen. Less than a meter away, a second body was collapsed along the corridor bulkhead, its leg bent backwards as if his knee had been inverted and now bent in the opposite direction. Two meters beyond that was a third male body, this one facedown and unmoving.

“Holy shit,” Hernandez muttered with something approaching awe in his voice, “That guy has

a *hole* in his stomach! The XO must have been seriously pissed off!” Rick found himself nodding as his eyes locked onto the hole in the first Orion's chest. He knew that Vulcans were stronger than Humans, but he hadn't realized that they were *that* much stronger...

“Got a fourth one,” Hoffman commented from several meters away. He crouched to examine the body that was sprawled out in front of what appeared to be a turbolift. “This one's female. Ouch.” The petty officer straightened with a visible wince, letting the corpse fall back. “Disruptor shot to the face. Not a pretty way to die.”

“Vulcan readings in that direction,” Victrim relayed, and Rick frowned.

“Move out,” Eisler growled. Less than a step later, they heard the sound of disruptor fire. “Go!” Rick ordered and the team quickened their pace. It wasn't quite a run, but it was more than a walk and ate up distance quickly.

They passed two opened doorways and three more bodies on the way, one of which had been stripped of its clothes. Once more on point, Mitchell suddenly stopped at a corridor intersection and held up a fist; a half second later, he tapped his helmet and then gestured toward the corner. Kneeling at once, Rick glanced in Victrim's direction. The crewman held up two fingers in response to the unspoken question before pointing to the Starfleet symbol emblazoned upon the back of his scanner. Keying his helmet comm to external broadcast, Eisler spoke.

“Commander T'Pol,” he said loudly, “this is Lieutenant Commander Eisler.” A heartbeat later, a familiar voice answered.

“Authenticate,” came the unflappable voice of the Vulcan commander. “Bravo Zulu X-Ray.” Rick smirked under his helmet; why wasn't he surprised that the commander had the Roughneck security verification codes memorized?

“Yankee Foxtrot Echo,” he replied before standing and lowering his rifle. Lieutenant Hayes was the first around the corner, his face burned and a disruptor pistol held in one hand. He was dressed in ill-fitting Orion clothes splattered with blood. Several steps behind him, Commander T'Pol approached, limping slightly. At any other time, Eisler would have found her appearance almost comical: pants meant for a male significantly larger than she had been tightly cinched at her waist, and a jacket that on her looked like a tent hung off her shoulders. She too was armed with a disruptor pistol.

“Commander,” she said in greeting, acting as though she were in uniform and he was reporting to her on the bridge. “May I presume you're here to assist us in capturing the bridge?” A snort of laughter escaped CPO Mitchell from where he crouched to cover the empty corridor.

“Aye, ma'am,” Rick replied without a trace of amusement in his voice. “It's that way, though,” he finished, gesturing toward the command deck. She inclined an eyebrow.

“Curious,” was her only comment before she looked back at Rick. There was a frown on her face as she continued to speak. “It is essential that we capture the commander of this vessel.” She pinned Eisler with an unyielding look. “Harrad-Sar was acting for the Romulans.”

“Mitchell, take point,” Rick said quickly, noting that Lieutenant Hayes had already accepted a rebreather from PO3 Wakulich and was securing it on his face. It would protect the lieutenant from any potential pheromones in the atmosphere should they encounter additional Orion females. Eisler blinked in sudden surprise at the dried streak on the back of Hayes' hand. It was blood.

Orion blood.

Rick said nothing as they retraced their steps past the dead Orions, made no comment as he observed the lieutenant shying away from the corpses in the corridor, and swallowed the questions that he wanted to ask as he again glanced at the brutal hole in the Orion's chest. He frowned, studying Lieutenant Hayes through narrowed eyes as a theory began racing through his brain.

It was a dangerous thought.



**Anoat System, 30 June 2157. 0558 Hours Earth Standard Time.**

He wasn't sure what to think.

Standing outside the primary starboard docking hatch, Hannibal Black found himself frowning as he took in Captain Tucker's appearance. In the minutes since Lieutenant Commander Eisler had commed *Endeavour* with the information that his teams had not only located Commander T'Pol and Lieutenant Hayes, but had also secured both the bridge and Engineering without suffering a single casualty, the captain had appeared on the verge of physical collapse. It was as if the inner fire that had been driving Tucker for the last fifteen hours had abruptly burned out, leaving behind a fragile shell that seemed poised to fall.

At the same time, there was an eerie sense of strength about the man that Black couldn't explain. The set of Tucker's jaw, the way he held himself, and just the way his eyes narrowed slightly when someone even gave the appearance of mentioning his need for rest – all of it lent Tucker the image of an unyielding force of nature despite his obvious injuries and physical frailty. Twice in the last several minutes Doctor Phlox had cleared his throat and given the captain pointed looks, but Tucker had responded with glares so dark that Hannibal almost pitied the Denobulan.

Though he didn't want to admit it, Black found himself revising his initial opinion of the young captain since encountering the Orion craft. Contrary to how they had originally appeared when he came aboard, the crew of the *Endeavour* had displayed a sense of professionalism during the engagement that Hannibal hadn't seen in a long time. There had been no panic from the younger enlisted personnel or officers, no indication that the civilian scientists aboard the starship had been anything but effective members of the crew, and the entire operation had been planned with no input from the commanding officer.

Tucker, it seemed, ran a very tight ship after all.

Once more, Phlox cleared his throat as he crossed his arms; Tucker, now leaning heavily on the cane that had been at his side since his discharge from Sickbay, glowered at the sealed docking hatch before speaking.

“No,” he said, clearly intending the word as a reply to the doctor's unspoken comment. Tucker shifted his weight slightly as the light above the airlock access changed to green. With a loud hiss, the door opened and Black thought he heard the captain draw in a sharp breath.

Two security troopers were the first to emerge, encased in their distinctively dark armor. They were intimidating by their very presence, and both moved with a frightening grace that Hannibal recognized of men long accustomed to zero gee operations. Immediately behind them was Lieutenant Commander Eisler; his rifle now slung, the tactical officer bore a grim expression of triumph that bordered on a smile.

Commander T'Pol was two steps behind him.

This time, Black did hear a sudden intake of breath from Captain Tucker, and the admiral frowned. He glanced at the captain, but was startled to see no indication that Tucker was greeting anyone but his missing executive officer. The Vulcan commander, unsurprisingly, gave no hints as to her mindset aside from a single incline of her right eyebrow.

“Commander,” Black greeted with a nod as he studied her curious clothes with a flicker of amusement. T'Pol returned the salutation with a slight incline of her head before turning her full attention to Tucker.

“You appear unwell, Captain,” she said flatly, ignoring Phlox's snort of amusement as the doctor conducted a less than subtle scan of her.

“Long day,” Tucker replied with a hint of a smile on his face. “How're you doing?”

“Early stages of hypothermia,” Doctor Phlox announced before she could reply, his eyes and fingers still on the hand-held medical scanner. “Not to mention severe bruising that could indicate some internal bleeding. And that neural inhibitor needs to come off as soon as possible before it causes permanent damage.” He lowered the scanner and pinned the Vulcan with a flat look. “Sickbay. Now.” Again, her eyebrow climbed.

“In a moment, Doctor.” T'Pol glanced away from the outraged expression on the Denobulan's face and addressed Eisler. “Secure the prisoners in the brig. Twenty-four hour guard rotations.” The tactical officer nodded as she continued, this time directing her comments to Tucker. “Apparently, Harrad-Sar was working for the Romulans, Captain. You and I were his primary targets.”

“What?” The words tumbled out of Hannibal's mouth before he could stop them. “You're saying that he had direct contact with a Romulan?”

“Evidently,” came the commander's reply.

Ambition abruptly burned brightly in Black's stomach, and he swallowed the lump that

suddenly tightened his throat. If they could subvert this Harrad-Sar and use him to feed false intelligence to the Romulans, the entire fortunes of the war could be swayed. Failing that, this Orion was a vital intelligence asset: he had actually *seen* a Romulan. Starfleet Intelligence had yet to find a single individual with similar experience. This was what Hannibal needed to catapult him to the job that he wanted. This was what he needed to win the war...

What Earth needed, that was.

“Can *Endeavour* travel at warp with that tractor beam operational?” he asked, mentally calculating what favors he would need to call in to head up the team that would work on this Harrad-Sar person. Admiral Gardner would be the hardest to convince, and it was unlikely that Commodore Leonard would back down without a fight...

“Not indefinitely,” Tucker replied. “But we do still have the grapplers and I'm sure Hess' team can get that tub runnin' again.”

“Do it.” Hannibal exhaled slightly, not even caring that Tucker was standing too close to T'Pol to be considered entirely professional, or that it had been the Vulcan who had moved that close in the first place. “Get us underway ASAP, Captain. Set a course for Earth.”

“Aye, sir,” the captain said, a slightly sardonic tone in his voice. Black glanced at him, ego still smarting from their earlier confrontation, and frowned at the younger man's expression. Tucker was paler than usual, his complexion verging on pasty, and his jaw was clenched so tight that Hannibal thought he could hear teeth grinding. Black opened his mouth to comment.

And, in that moment, Tucker's legs buckled.

Commander T'Pol caught the captain before he could fall to the deck and Doctor Phlox was at their side nearly at once. His hand-held scanner buzzing, the doctor scowled fiercely at Tucker.

“I warned you,” the Denobulan said, anger in his voice. Hannibal looked on in slight surprise; he hadn't known that the normally ebullient doctor was capable of getting angry. “But you wouldn't listen, would you?” Phlox continued, now openly glaring at *Endeavour's* commanding officer. “As of this moment, I am exercising my authority under Starfleet order one-oh-four, section C, to officially relieve you of duty.” He gave the Vulcan an identical look. “You as well, Commander. Both of you are to report to Sickbay immediately.”

“Phlox...”

“No,” the doctor said sharply, cutting off the captain's argument before it could get under way. Phlox pointed down the hall toward Sickbay, his expression imperious. “Go,” he ordered, “before I have to involve Security.” For a long moment, Captain Tucker studied his chief medical officer with a blank expression on his own face. Being held upright by his Vulcan first officer, however, did nothing for his air of command. Finally, he sighed heavily and tried to pull free of Commander T'Pol's hold.

“Rick,” the captain said as the Vulcan shifted her grip on him but did not let go, “you're in

command.” With another sigh, Tucker draped his arm over the petite commander and Hannibal watched the pair briefly before glancing away.

“Aye, sir,” Eisler replied as he turned back toward the docking hatch. Phlox stood nearby, his hand-scanner still buzzing as he ran it over the rigid form of Lieutenant Hayes. For a brief moment, the lieutenant locked eyes with the doctor and Black frowned at the curious interplay. When the doctor next spoke, there was an unusual undertone to his voice.

“Lieutenant, report to Sickbay.”



### **Anoat System, 30 June 2157. 0919 Hours Earth Standard Time.**

Gaining release from Sickbay had not been easy, but Commander T'Pol found herself illogically glad to be free of the medical facility.

Dressed in a spare uniform devoid of command pips, the Vulcan walked slowly through the corridors of E Deck. At her side, still relying heavily on the cane that Phlox had provided, Trip limped forward. Every step sent a jolt of pain through his abdomen, and T'Pol winced as the flashes of agony lanced through their bond. It was sheer human stubbornness that kept him placing one foot in front of the other.

Following their discharge from Sickbay, predicated on their agreement to go straight to their respective quarters for a period of not less than twenty-four hours, Trip had insisted on escorting her to her cabin. Unable to convince him of the illogic of that desire, T'Pol had grudgingly acquiesced and had spent the entire walk watching her mate for further signs of distress. He made no mention of the discomfort he felt, but she had long ago realized that Trip rarely complained when he was in actual pain.

To their surprise, a Medical quarantine lock had been placed on her quarters. T'Pol recognized Phlox's handiwork at once and made a mental note to have a conversation with him regarding the boundaries that he was not allowed to cross in the future. Sensing Trip's flagging stamina, she made the suggestion that she escort him to his quarters where she could use the comm system to sort out the quarantine lock. It was an indication of how much pain Trip was in that he agreed without arguing.

“Ladies first,” Trip said with a poorly concealed grimace once they reached his quarters. She gave him a concerned glance before quickly stepping through the open doorway. Almost instantly, a wave of very agreeable heat washed over her and she breathed in the warm air. The door hissed shut behind Trip and she turned to face him.

Almost instantly, she found herself wrapped in a tight embrace. Trip clung to her, burying his nose in her hair, and she instinctively brought her arms up to reciprocate the distinctly human gesture. Shared emotions bounced between them at the speed of thought as the bond, no longer hampered by the neural inhibitor, sang within them. T'Pol relaxed at the sensation of safety she experienced within Trip's grasp.

“I couldn't feel you,” he whispered and T'Pol could feel the overpowering fury and terror that had filled him in the hours when she had been absent from his mind. Never before had he been as filled with wrath as he had in those horrifically long hours. He had wanted to kill anything that stood between them, wanted to sear planets to ash, to exterminate entire populations until she was returned to him. “You weren't there,” her mate emphasized, his entire body shaking with the pent-up emotions that he had been forced to conceal from his crew. “And I couldn't feel you!”

“I know, Trip,” T'Pol replied softly, looking up at him as he held her. The doubt and fear in his eyes was still there, and she offered him a slight smile, knowing that it would lighten his mood as it always did. “But I'm here now,” she said as she once more rested her head against his chest. “And I'm not going anywhere.” The steady beat of his heart was soothing and she inhaled his familiar scent. Had it been possible, she would have remained standing there forever with his arms around her. But a wave of exhaustion suddenly washed over her, and she looked up at Trip in surprise, recognizing instantly that it originated from him. He offered her a sheepish grin that did not hide how tired he was.

“Phlox's meds are startin' to kick in,” Trip muttered as he struggled to keep his eyes open. His jaw cracked with a sudden yawn and T'Pol carefully hid the smirk that threatened to spoil her Vulcan poise.

“Then you should rest,” she stated as she began backing him toward his bed. He only made a half-hearted attempt to resist.

“Wait. We need to talk,” he slurred as she maneuvered him across the cabin. “This isn't workin'...” T'Pol quirked an eyebrow at that and he continued. “This,” Trip said, gesturing toward the both of them. “Us not bein' together. 'S not workin'.”

“We can talk later,” T'Pol assured him as she pulled the blanket back. Swaying on his feet, he looked at her through unfocused eyes.

“Promise?” Trip asked and she gave him her half-smile once more.

“I do not lie. I am Vulcan.”

“*My* Vulcan,” he smiled as he dropped onto the bed, pulling her with him. Caught off guard, T'Pol gave an indignant squawk as she hit the mattress, but Trip was too far gone to notice. “My pretty, pretty Vulcan ...”

Within seconds, he was sound asleep and T'Pol found herself still entangled in his embrace. After a moment of consideration, she readjusted her position slightly and drew the blanket over the two of them; after all, she decided, attempts to extricate herself from his hold would likely wake him, thus interfering with his rest. Remaining at his side was the course that logic dictated. Satisfied at the complete lack of emotion in her decision-making process, she rested her head on his chest and let herself listen to the constant drum of his heart. Sleep overtook her moments later.

When she next opened her eyes, T'Pol immediately realized that several hours had passed. The ambient sounds of *Endeavour* had changed and she recognized that they were now

traveling at warp speed. Glancing at the wall chronometer, she started in surprise at the time: over six hours had passed since they arrived in Trip's quarters. She couldn't recall the last time she had slept this long, and she deduced that the bond must have been at work; mated pairs were known to heal more quickly while in one another's presence, but it was news to her that they apparently slept more soundly as well. She suppressed a flicker of embarrassment as she noted that neither she nor Trip had shifted even a centimeter.

Long minutes passed as T'Pol let herself simply luxuriate in the welcome sensations of being alongside Trip again. It had been too long since they had been together like this, and she silently lamented the necessity for their enforced separation. With another look at her mate's sleeping features, she silently agreed with his assessment: This *wasn't* working. Though it was unspeakably emotional of her, she was tired of not sleeping in the same bed as her mate.

Chastising herself for the illogic of her musings, she rose from the bed, wrinkling her nose at the smell of antiseptic and decontamination gel that still clung to her skin. As she divested herself of the uniform in preparation for a shower, T'Pol abruptly noticed a medical kit resting atop Trip's desk. She frowned at its presence: it had not been present prior to their arrival. A PADD was inside the case and she activated it at once. Skimming the contents, she raised an eyebrow at Phlox's curious instructions; phrased in such a way as to sound like standard medical protocol, they effectively made her part of the medical team necessary for the captain's well-being and provided an excuse for her presence in his quarters. Once again, T'Pol found herself hiding a slight smirk as she saluted Phlox's inappropriate but welcome duplicity even as she fought another flash of embarrassment that she hadn't even heard the doctor enter.

She spent more time in the shower than was necessary, but the feel of the hot water against her bare skin was pleasant. The towels smelled like Trip, and she was amused to discover that he hadn't even touched the hygiene products that she had left behind. Dressed in one of his large robes, she emerged from the bathroom to discover her mate still deeply asleep. Another long moment passed as she quietly watched him slumber.

Meditation was her next goal, and she sank into the appropriate trance-like state before Trip's candle-holders. These meditation accessories had originally belonged to her father, and had been a gift from T'Les following Trip's first disastrous visit to Vulcan. At the time, he hadn't been aware of the symbolism behind T'Les' gift to him and, by the time that he discovered its significance, T'Les was already gone. Once more, T'Pol briefly acknowledged her still unresolved emotions involving her mother's passing before she focused on restoring control.

To her surprise, a ghostly half-image of Trip was present in her whitespace. He was sprawled out, still asleep, but the physical manifestation of her mate brought to mind additional questions that she decided to forward to T'Pau at the earliest opportunity. A smile crossed her lips as she listened to Trip begin snoring lightly and she made no effort to school her features to stoicism. Here, in this place, she was free to let her emotions show.

Nearly an hour passed as she rebuilt the fractured mental control within her meditative state. Her decision to shoot Navaar instead of Lieutenant Hayes didn't trouble her in the slightest, and T'Pol decided that her logic had been flawless in that decision; there had been no time to familiarize herself with the weapon, and it could hardly be considered her fault that the disruptor did not have a stun setting. Neutralizing the origin of the pheromones had,

fortunately, resulted in the lieutenant recovering his self-control a half step before he reached T'Pol; but his speed had been too great to allow him to adjust his momentum before he had knocked her to the deck. T'Pol considered it a significant improvement over being killed, however. His apologies afterwards had been profuse but unnecessary.

Her telepathic abilities had also been greatly strained by the incident with the Orion male and she was particularly careful to examine the entire situation from every conceivable angle. It was essential for her sanity that she be assured that her actions had been the logical ones and had not been rooted in emotion. Accepting that the emotion of fear had played a part in her decision but was not the driving factor in it, she opened her eyes, satisfied that she had acted in a way worthy of Surak.

From her sense of him, T'Pol knew that Trip would be waking soon and would likely be hungry. Rising to her feet, she studied the contents of his closet before extracting one of her older jumpsuits. It was scarlet in color, and she decided that the circumstances were such that wearing it once more would not be untoward. After all, she was still recovering from the early stages of hypothermia, and the thermal-lined jumpsuit would assist in that regard. That Trip had often called it his favorite had nothing to do with her decision.

Quickly donning the jumpsuit, she was satisfied that it still fit perfectly. Pausing briefly before the comm panel, she watched Trip sleep for a moment longer before deciding against contacting Chef Killick. The risk of waking her mate with the conversation was too great and he needed all of the rest he could get. For a moment, T'Pol wondered if Trip would be opposed to her placing him in another healing trance to further accelerate his recovery. Brushing her lips against his forehead in an illogical gesture that she didn't even try to explain to herself, she quietly exited his cabin and proceeded to the galley.

Surprisingly, Killick was cordial when she asked him to prepare a meal for her and the captain. In the past, the chef had not been afraid to speak his mind about whatever he thought and had been one of the loudest sources of complaints during the Expanse mission. Today, however, he seemed oddly eager to please.

Sensing eyes upon her, T'Pol glanced briefly around the slowly filling dining facility. Almost at once, she found herself looking at Lieutenant Hayes.

Seated at a table near the back of the facility that was often called a "mess hall" (for reasons that completely defied T'Pol's understanding), the lieutenant was studying her with an unblinking gaze. The large burn on the side of his face was mostly gone, due to one of Doctor Phlox's curious treatments involving some sort of leech that emitted a surprisingly disagreeable stench. Dressed in gym clothes, the lieutenant appeared alert and healthy. Once again, T'Pol made a quick decision and approached the young man.

"Lieutenant," she said by way of greeting, noting immediately the tension in his expression and body language. Without asking permission, she seated herself across from him, quirked a slight eyebrow at the uncomfortable expression that flitted across his face.

"Ma'am," Hayes responded as he refocused his attention on his tray of food. He gripped the fork tighter than was absolutely necessary.

“Doctor Phlox has released you to active duty?” T'Pol asked, and the lieutenant glowered at his food.

“Not exactly, ma'am.” He glanced up. “Medical leave for another twenty-four hours and he'll make a judgment call afterwards.” Hayes looked away before lowering his voice. “What happens now?” he asked softly. T'Pol lifted an eyebrow.

“Elaborate,” she instructed. The lieutenant's likely concern was about his own career, but T'Pol intended to avoid any of the miscommunication that was inherent in speaking with humans.

“About me,” Hayes muttered, once more giving her a look. “About the ... things ... you know about me.”

“You are a security risk,” T'Pol stated bluntly, ignoring the slight wince her words evoked from him. “And your loyalty to *Endeavour* is questionable at best.” An outraged expression crossed his face at that but she continued. “According to Starfleet regulations, I am required to report potential security threats to my commanding officer.” The tightness in the lieutenant's face was clear to anyone who might have looked at him as she continued. “I have done so, and Captain Tucker has agreed with my suggestions.”

“And what are they?” he asked, tension in his voice. “Turn me over to Starfleet Command?” The contempt in his voice revealed exactly what she expected to hear; without saying a word, he was letting her know that if she ordered this, he would disappear from custody. It was to be expected, she momentarily mused, since this mysterious Section organization had such unexpected penetration of Starfleet.

“No,” T'Pol replied, fixing him with her most resolute expression. She and Trip had made this decision together while in Sickbay, even though neither of them had been entirely comfortable with it. “You will continue in your capacity as commander of the security force.” Hayes was surprised at that and it showed on his face. “And as Gold Shift officer of the deck.”

“Why?” The lieutenant leaned forward slightly, giving discreet looks to assure himself that no one was eavesdropping on their conversation. “You don't trust me.”

“No, I don't,” she responded, frowning slightly as she spoke. “But you have access to vital intelligence assets that neither I nor Captain Tucker possess.” Understanding flashed in his eyes. “You will put those assets at our disposal for the duration of this crisis.”

“I can do that,” Hayes declared as he gave her a smile. “We're on the same side, after all.”

“Are we?” T'Pol's question hung in the air and Hayes' light expression faded. “You will further cooperate fully with Doctor Phlox for a complete physical.” She raised an eyebrow at his disgruntled frown. “I have little doubt,” she remarked coolly, “that any classified information gleaned from such an examination will be lost due to computer failure should the circumstances warrant it.” It was a less than subtle reminder of his earlier illicit computer activity, and he nodded sharply in acknowledgement.

“Is that it?” the lieutenant asked, voice flat.

“No.” Hayes exhaled and gave her a dark look. “If by your action or inaction,” T'Pol continued, her own expression unyielding, “Captain Tucker comes to harm, I will spare no effort in bringing you and your organization to justice.” She stood.

“I thought vengeance was illogical,” Hayes muttered, and she turned on him with a hot look.

“It is,” she replied, and departed the dining facility.



## **2 July 2157. 1815 Hours Earth Standard Time.**

The door that led to the mess hall slid open, and Charles Tucker glanced up from the work he had spread across his table.

Had T'Pol been present, Trip mused, she would likely have been impressed by the blank expression he displayed as Admiral Black entered the Captain's Mess. Though it had been difficult, Tucker had successfully managed to avoid that admiral all day, and had been looking forward to a quiet dinner alone that would allow him to get some work done. That hope, unfortunately, had just been dashed.

“Admiral,” he greeted as he started to stand, knowing the older man's unhealthy appreciation of the protocols that most officers in Starfleet loathed. To his surprise, however, Black waved off the standard courtesy.

“As you were, Captain,” the admiral said as he walked to take his place at the far end of the dining table. “Will Commander T'Pol be joining us?”

“No, sir. She's in the command center going over some sensor telemetry from the Anoaat system.” Trip frowned at that. “She thinks that she may have discovered indications of a Romulan ship hiding in-system during the battle that observed the whole thing.”

“What?” Black's expression darkened as he glared at Tucker. “How the hell did you miss that?”

“We were a little busy at the time, sir,” Trip replied flatly, feeling his own temper starting to flare at the admiral's intimation of incompetence. “And Lieutenant Ricker isn't as qualified to identify sensor readings as T'Pol.” Once more Black frowned, and Trip spoke before he could comment. “I don't think I need to remind you, sir, but my people are spread pretty thin right now. I can't spare Ricker for additional training.” That was putting it lightly: off the top of his head, Tucker could name four jobs that Ricker did above and beyond being T'Pol's Science department 2IC.

Silence descended on the Captain's Mess, and Trip returned his attention to the technical schematics laid out in front of him. It was difficult to concentrate when his annoyance with the admiral continued to simmer in his stomach, but Tucker forced himself to focus. That it gave him something to think about beyond the possible court-martial waiting for him back at

Earth was an added bonus.

“Those are the schematics for the *Gagarin*,” Admiral Black commented moments later, and Trip looked up. “Why are you looking over them?”

“Because *Endeavour*'s current configuration isn't good enough for a sustainable warp six, sir.” Tucker hated to admit that, hated to think that the *Enterprise*-class was already close to becoming obsolete, but the numbers didn't lie. “Our engine can't put out enough power, so I'm looking at this engineering hull as a solution.” Originally planned to be the NX-07, the construction of the UES *Gagarin* had not gotten beyond the mostly finished engineering hull before the war had necessitated that it be set aside. Trip now found himself trying to determine if they could refit *Endeavour* again, this time with *Gagarin*'s engineering hull. By his calculations, such a refit could be completed in a couple of months... maybe less if things went well.

“We held warp six for several hours...” The confusion in Black's voice reminded Trip that the admiral wasn't an engineer by trade, and Tucker nodded.

“Yes, sir, but the core readings were fluctuating the entire time.” Trip glanced toward the door, wondering where Killick was. “The power output for a *stable* warp six is beyond what our current warp core is capable of.” Trip sighed and gestured to the schematics before him. “So engineering needs to be bigger and this appears to be the most logical solution.” Too late, he heard the “L” word slip past his lips and mentally rolled his eyes. He could easily imagine T'Pol's barely-there smirk had she been present.

Black, however, didn't seem amused, and Trip sighed. He placed the schematics aside and looked into the admiral's eyes.

“I want to apologize for my comments to you earlier, Admiral,” Tucker started. There was little chance that Black would overlook the incident, even if the situation had turned out as positively as it had. “I was concerned for my missing crewmembers, but that doesn't excuse my comments. I was out of line.”

“Yes, you were,” Black replied grimly. “But you were also right.” Trip blinked in surprise and wondered if he had heard correctly. “Commander T'Pol is an irreplaceable asset to Starfleet, and allowing the Romulans to gain access to her would not only have been a disaster for Earth, it would have been an abrogation of our duty as officers.” The admiral looked away for a moment before returning his gaze to Tucker. “Your decision to pursue the Orions was the correct one, even if your ... relationship with the commander affected that decision.” Exhaling slowly, Trip fought to keep the frown from his face.

“That had nothing to do with it, sir.” The struggle to keep his voice even was more work that Tucker had expected. “I would have done the same thing for any member of my crew, regardless of rank or position.”

“Don't try to bullshit me, Tucker,” the admiral snapped, his own voice sharp. “It's not exactly a secret that the two of you are sleeping together.” Black glared as he continued. “If it was up to me, both of you would be drummed out of Starfleet.” He abruptly shook his head. “But,” the admiral pointed out, “it isn't up to me.”

*Thank God for small favors*, Trip reflected. His attempt to conceal what he was thinking apparently wasn't as effective as he would have liked; Admiral Black gave him another dark look before glancing toward the viewport.

“So, if you're wondering,” Black said, eyes fixed on the streaking stars, “I won't be pressing for a court-martial.” He sighed heavily, as if he was tired or worn out, before speaking again. “We've got enough problems with the Romulans right now and you have too many damned advocates at Command for it to even be worth the trouble.” Trip frowned at that; aside from Jon, he wasn't aware of anyone really being on “his” side at Starfleet Command.

“Thank you, sir,” Tucker said honestly. He glanced toward the door and briefly considered paging Killick to find out where dinner was, but decided against it; if there was one thing he wanted to do even less than sit across from Admiral Black, it was to anger his chef.

“Don't thank me, Captain,” Black responded. He continued to stare at the viewport. “If Starfleet didn't need every resource at its disposal right now, I would make it my mission to have you brought up on charges.” Finally, he looked back at Trip. “I *do* intend to mention my concern about the command structure of *Endeavour* when I issue my official report.”

“As I recall, sir,” Trip said through clenched teeth, “you were the principle opponent of our command change proposal.”

“Because it shouldn't be necessary!” the admiral retorted, anger once again surfacing in his voice. “She's your goddamned first officer, not your girlfriend!”

*No, she's my wife*, Trip corrected mentally as he concentrated on maintaining his poise. *Don't screw this up*, he told himself. If Black found out about the bond, there was no way of knowing what he would do. Once more, Tucker found himself glad that he could tap into T'Pol's control when necessary.

“Then back my recommendation to promote Eisler to full Commander,” Trip suggested. “He could replace T'Pol as the first officer.” Black's eyes narrowed.

“Even then, she would outrank him according to time in grade,” he pointed out. Tucker shrugged.

“So? She was the first officer on *Enterprise* after the Expanse mission and I outranked her by time in grade *and* time in service.” The admiral grunted in acknowledgment of that point and Trip pressed on. “She's a scientist, sir, and would gladly turn the administrative duties over to someone else.” Black gave him a wry look.

“I suppose you've already suggested this to her?” he asked, not entirely hiding his distaste at the idea, and Trip gave him a tight smile.

“Actually,” Tucker revealed, “it was her idea.”

“Why doesn't that surprise me?” Black muttered under his breath. As the door finally slid open to reveal Killick bearing dinner, the admiral looked at Trip and frowned. “I'll consider it,

Captain.”

“That, sir,” Trip said with another slight smile, “is all that I ask.”



**Aschaffenburg, Germany. 12 July 2157. 0336 Hours Earth Standard Time.**

Asking for better directions might have been a good idea.

Dressed in unremarkable-looking civilian clothes, Nate Hayes ducked into a darkened alley, eyes and ears straining to detect any pursuers. Long moments passed in silence before he discreetly checked the hand-scanner that he kept concealed in his jacket pocket. Capable of tapping into the CCDTV network scattered throughout the small city, the modified scanner allowed him to quickly identify any potential threats to his anonymity.

Satisfied that he wasn't being followed, Nate jogged down the narrow alley and paused at a nondescript side entrance. A covered keypad was hidden to one side of the door, and he quickly entered his access code before glancing around once more. The door opened silently and he entered without hesitation. Soundlessly, the door slid shut behind him.

Complete darkness surrounded Hayes, and he breathed in calmly. There was no way for him to tell exactly what sort of surprises might be waiting for him should he appear anxious or tense. A soft beep sounded, and he recognized his cue.

“One scanner,” he stated to the darkness, “and a phase pistol in a shoulder harness.” Attempting to hide what he was carrying was a quick way to get identified as a threat; and threats never walked out of a Section safehouse. “I'm also carrying three blades in concealed holsters and one in my left boot.”

A second beep sounded, this one louder than the first, and Nate winced at the sudden light that briefly blinded him. Blinking his eyes in an attempt to clear them of the spots that danced in his vision, he took a step forward.

“I told you not to contact me,” came a soft voice to his left. Hayes glanced in that direction; he could just make out the shape of his Control.

“I'm sorry, sir,” he replied, making sure to keep his hands away from his body. “I needed to report that my primary objective was completed.”

“So soon? That's unexpected.”

“Yes, sir,” Hayes nodded. “I was forced to accelerate the time table based on circumstances.”

“But T'Pol agreed?”

“With conditions, sir.” Nate frowned slightly at the memory of that uncomfortable discussion. “She's willing to look the other way as long as I put the Section's intelligence assets at her

disposal.” He offered a tiny smirk. “Frankly, sir, I think she was more worried about Captain Tucker's welfare than anything else.”

“Not surprising.” The older man stepped forward, his expression unrelenting and cold. “Continue with phase two, Lieutenant.” Hayes drew in a sharp breath at that: phase two was recruitment. He hadn't expected to be put in charge of that. “Keep a low profile for a few weeks.”

“Yes, sir.” Nate turned to go. “Will there be anything else, sir?” he asked, and the older man smiled tightly. It was an odd expression that he wore – an almost-smile that somehow appeared devoid of any human warmth – and it stretched the hideous scar that covered the man's face.

“Not at this time,” Lieutenant Commander Malcolm Reed replied calmly.

**END**