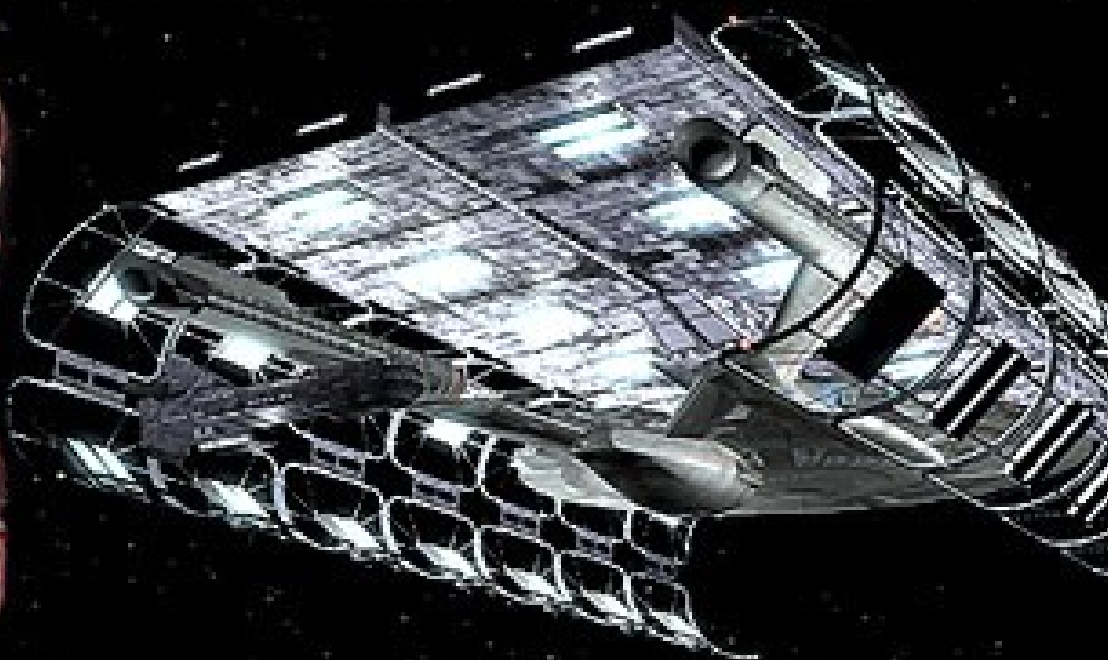


STAR TREK: ENDEAVOUR

PANDORA



BY

RIGIL KENT



Disclaimer: The only thing I own are my hopes and dreams ... although I did pawn both a while back for rent money.

Author's Note:

Major thanks (again) to **TJinLOCA** for being an awesome beta. I also want to thank both **Kevin Thomas Riley** being a very, very helpful sounding board. An immense thank you to **Chris1033** for his fantastic "covers" for the previous fics and of course, for this one as well.

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

This is the sequel to *Endeavour: Icarus*. 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)

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

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

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

SECFORCE - "ROUGHNECKS"

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

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

TEASER

She didn't know what to do.

The sharp smell of antiseptic filled the air around her, tainting the oxygen with a stench that she was slowly beginning to hate. A constant ping from the biobed's heart monitor sounded at regular intervals; under normal circumstances, the soft beep would be a welcome relief as an indication of his strong vitals, but after listening to it for twenty-nine hours straight, she had grown to loathe the repetitive chime. The room itself was exactly five meters by five meters; this she had determined by pacing the room and calculating the measurement based on her normal stride. Apart from the occupied biobed, there was only a single chair in the small room.

Her personal computer was atop the unused chair, powered down and untouched since she had arrived. The decision to bring it had been a logical one – she still had a lot of work to do, after all – but each time she attempted to focus on the equations, her mind would wander in the direction of the occupied bed and the frail-looking man atop it. Attempts to focus on anything other than his well-being were wasted efforts, and she had long since given up even trying to think of anything but him.

She frowned abruptly as she realized how terribly emotional that sounded. It was his fault, of course, but she couldn't find it in herself to be too angry at him for it. By nature, she wasn't a very emotional individual, preferring the cold logic of science and mathematics to the emotional pitfalls of interpersonal relationships. For more years than she cared to consider, she had been content to avoid such entanglements. Life had proceeded in a predictable and logical fashion.

And then, she met Charles Tucker.

He had fascinated her from day one and, despite her best efforts, she had been drawn to him. From the moment that he had first smiled at her, his charisma had attracted her, and his unnerving talent for evoking an emotional response in her never failed to annoy even as it excited. He had an uncanny ability to read her moods, and, somehow, some way, he always seemed to know what she was thinking, often before even she did.

Wake up, she commanded him as she stared at his unmoving form. Her stomach twisted in knots as the fear again resurfaced. What would she do if he didn't wake up? If medical science couldn't bring him back from the brink of death? Could she move on? Could she find another man such as this, one who could make her smile or laugh despite her instincts?

Somehow, she doubted it.

Drawing in another breath, she once more fought the crippling terror that lurked in the darkest corners of her mind. She'd always assumed that she would outlive him, but never before had she been *truly* forced to face the fact of that belief. The idea of being alone for the

rest of her life was repugnant, and she couldn't imagine someone ever taking his place. He was her life, and she had no desire even to face a day when he wasn't at her side.

Tears began to well in her eyes as her struggle with the fear and the growing grief overwhelmed her. Strong arms suddenly enfolded her and a familiar voice reached her ears.

“It's okay, Mom,” Trip Tucker whispered as he hugged her tightly, and Elaine Tucker began to cry.

Author's Note: Thanks to **Distracted** for some medical ideas. Any screw-ups here are my fault, not hers.

ACT ONE

The urge to cry had been firmly suppressed by the time Trip Tucker's brother arrived.

Seeing his normally composed mother on the verge of a complete emotional collapse had struck Trip with devastating force, and immediately brought to mind dark memories of her at his sister's memorial service immediately prior to the Expanse mission. In his thirty-six years, Trip could count on one hand the number of times that his mother had cried openly, and seeing her so visibly distraught had nearly undone him as well. Only the emotional control he'd acquired from T'Pol helped him to stay functional at the sight of his father's wan complexion; and, for perhaps the first time in his life, Trip realized that his parents looked ... old.

It was a sobering realization, particularly when he considered the fact that T'Pol was only a few years younger than either of his parents, but it struck him with such force that his knees nearly buckled. Modern medical science had extended the life expectancy of a human being well into the low hundreds, but the number of people who lived to reach that age remained few. As he held his sobbing mother in his arms, the thought that she had already reached the twilight of her life was an insidious thought that refused to leave him alone, and the glances he gave his father didn't ease his mind very much.

Officially, it was a case of acute myocardial infarction that had landed Charles Tucker Junior in the hospital and, as Trip learned, was likely to keep him here for a while. A fancy name for a heart attack, the condition was a culmination of a number of factors, not the least of which was Charlie Tucker's absolute refusal to retire from his job as a structural engineer, despite his doctor's recommendation. According to Trip's mother, the elder Charles Tucker had kept the results of his last doctor visit secret from even her and it was only lucky happenstance that found them at the hospital visiting a friend when the heart attack occurred. The attending doctor had been grim in his outlook: Charles Tucker was lucky to have even survived.

Trip tried not to think about how much his father's work ethic had influenced his own.

Though it had taken more persuasive ability than he thought he was capable of, Trip had finally managed to convince his mother to go home for several hours and get some rest. That she was physically exhausted had been clear the moment Trip arrived at the hospital, and it was his sincere hope that she would just collapse in bed for a couple of hours once she got home. A friendly neighbor had offered to make sure that Elaine Tucker got home without incident, which eased Trip's mind significantly. Even with the autodrive option on his parent's car, he didn't care for the idea of his mother driving home alone – not in her current condition, anyway.

Nearly four hours after his mother's departure from the hospital and over six since his own

arrival, Trip's younger brother William appeared in the doorway of Charles Junior's room. Billy was still bleary-eyed from his long flight but wore a somber expression that Trip knew was mirrored on his own face. Three hours from Dublin to Jacksonville was nothing compared to how long it had been in the early years of trans-Atlantic crossings, but making the trip in the dead of the night with no early warning was anything but easy.

“How's Mom?” Billy asked once their requisite back thumping hug had been exchanged, and Trip smirked at the hint of an Irish brogue now beginning to creep into his younger brother's accent. It was a curious thing, mixing a Gaelic accent with a Southern American one, and Trip could only wonder what his own dialect would sound like in fifteen years if he and T'Pol retired to Vulcan after the war.

“She's doing okay,” Trip replied with a heavy sigh. “As well as could be expected, I guess.” He stretched slightly, feeling his joints pop as he did so. “I managed to talk her into taking a break for a couple of hours. Aunt Linda said she'd swing by and check up on her when she arrives in town.” For a moment, he and Billy stood quietly before their unconscious father.

“Any word from Lisa?” came Billy's next question, and Trip frowned darkly at mention of his older sister.

“Not a word,” he growled, at once furious that their continuing feud had resulted in the eldest Tucker child apparently deciding to not even show up at what could easily be their father's death bed. “I left messages, but no one responded.”

The disagreement had started early in Trip's Starfleet career when Melissa accused him of abandoning the family for, in her words, “militant expansionism”. It had simmered for years afterward, ever a source of tension in their rare interactions, before finally exploding into a full out pique of fury when the Xindi attack resulted in Elizabeth's death. By the time *Enterprise* made it back to Earth, Melissa had convinced the rest of his family that Starfleet, and thus, by default, Trip himself, was responsible for the attack. No one aboard *Enterprise* had even been aware of the situation, nor even suspected that Trip had spent next to no time with his family before shipping out for the Expanse mission. In his anger and grief, Trip had even adjusted his personnel file to reflect only one sibling: the now-deceased Elizabeth Tucker.

“You know how she is,” Billy reminded him, and Trip nodded in annoyance. Having grown up with her, he knew *exactly* what she was like.

“Yeah, but you'd think she'd have the decency to at least show up,” Trip snapped. “I mean, this is Dad!” William gave him a knowing look, and Trip closed his eyes, focusing on his breathing and recalling the lessons that T'Pol had spent so much time drilling into him. This was hardly the ideal time to let his emotions flare and bring up old problems.

“So,” Trip asked after a long moment of silence, “how's Mary?” His brother smiled at mention of his wife's name.

"Pregnant," came the proud response.

"Again?" Trip didn't mean to sound aghast, but the idea of six children left him just a little freaked out. Billy grinned.

"What can I say?" he asked, a mischievous glint in his eyes. "I *love* my wife."

"At least six times," Trip snickered. He expertly dodged out of his brother's half-hearted attempt to hit him on the shoulder before quickly holding his hands up in a surrender pose. "Congratulations," he said, offering his hand. "Boy or girl?" A flicker of sadness crossed Billy's face and Trip knew that meant his brother would soon be having another son.

"What d'ya think?" Billy asked with a momentarily sour look on his face. "I love my boys to death but I really wanted a girl, ya know?"

Pain stabbed through Trip at the comment as a mental picture of an impossibly adorable girl with his eyes and T'Pol's ears flashed across his mind's eye, once more reminding him of what Terra Prime had stolen from him. He glanced away, barely noticing the sudden expression of anguish and embarrassment that crossed William's face. Anger warred with the constant sadness, and Trip clenched his hand tightly before drawing a steadying breath. With effort, he pushed the emotions down, burying them under a layer of rigid control that let him function normally. He wasn't surprised to see the remorse on Billy's face.

"Trip, I'm—" his brother started, an apologetic tone in his voice, but Trip waved it away.

"Don't worry about it," he interrupted, a forced smile on his face. "Got a name picked out yet?" It was clearly an attempt to shift the subject and, from the expression on Billy's face, the younger Tucker recognized it as such. Once more, discomfort crossed William's face and he hesitated for a long moment before replying.

"We were thinking about naming him Charles Anthony," he said softly, glancing away in an obvious attempt to avoid meeting his older brother's eyes, and Charles Anthony Tucker III smiled in understanding.

It was an entirely logical decision, and if T'Pol had been present, Trip knew exactly what her response would have been. It was, in fact, a feeling that he shared. The chances that she would actually bear his children so he could pass on his name grew smaller with each day, as the war with the Romulans continued to drag on and the list of casualties grew. They had been lucky so far, despite the deaths that had taken place around them and the injuries they had sustained, but neither harbored any doubt that their luck would hold out forever. Recent events had only served as a stark reminder that either of them could die well before the war ended and, though he'd never said it aloud, he simply knew that he wouldn't outlive T'Pol for very long in such an event. A discreet and surprisingly candid conversation with Soval had revealed to him just how traumatic the death of a bonded mate could be and, if it could

potentially kill a Vulcan, Trip sincerely doubted his human brain could handle it.

Not that he would *want* to live without T'Pol...

"That's a really good idea," Trip declared as he dropped a hand onto his brother's shoulder. He gave the younger man a sad smile and they exchanged a long knowing look, conveying more with their eyes than any words ever could. Finally, Billy nodded.

"I'll let her know," he said before returning his attention to their unconscious father. "Where's T'Pol, by the way?" Billy asked, the twinkle returning to his eyes despite the innocent-sounding question. Of everyone in the family, William Tucker seemed to have accepted T'Pol the most quickly, and Trip loved his brother dearly for it.

Not that he would ever admit such a thing.

"Finishing *Endeavour's* refit." Trip found himself frowning at thought of the work that remained unfinished on his ship and was, once again, glad to see that his brother still knew when to let things drop. For another long moment, they stood in awkward silence, neither really knowing what else to say. They had few common interests anymore, with William being a journalist-turned-newspaper editor and Trip an engineer-turned-captain. The necessity for operational security (OPSEC, for short) further made it essential for the elder Tucker to watch what he said when he wasn't aboard his ship. As a result, their already infrequent conversations rarely touched on anything Starfleet-related.

"New uniforms, huh?" Billy finally commented, and Trip gave him a slightly annoyed look.

"I hate these damned things," he grumbled to his younger brother as he readjusted the jacket for a better fit. "We're in a war for our very survival out there, and some idiot at Command thought it'd be a good idea to change our wardrobe." Trip glared at nothing in particular as he continued. He held out one arm and gestured to the command stripes that encircled the lower sleeve. "How the hell am I supposed to know what these damned things mean?" Billy's grin was growing by the second as Trip continued. "Who thinks about fashion at a time like this?" he asked.

"Some idiot at Command," came his brother's amused response. "Can I quote you on that? My readers would love to hear the official reaction to Starfleet's new militarized look."

"Oh God," Trip lamented softly, "not you too." He gave his younger brother a dark look before glancing at the biobed readouts above his father's bed. "Do you know how tired I am of hearing this nonsense about Starfleet being the military?"

"You *are* the military, Trip," Billy said softly. A hint of contempt was within the younger Tucker's voice, once more reminding Trip of how little he actually had in common with his family. It was depressing, actually.

With a sigh, he took a seat and began to wait.



Waiting was not his strong suit.

Fighting back a frustrated sigh, Jonathan Archer leaned back in his chair and steepled his fingers. When he had received the order from Starfleet Command to report to Earth immediately, he'd found himself hoping (and praying) that the idiots-in-charge had decided to reverse their previous decision regarding *Enterprise* and were finally going to put her back on the repair schedule. That hope had been dashed, however, the moment that he had arrived on Earth. Within minutes of his arrival, he'd learned about Admiral Gardner's decision to re-examine the strategic overview of the war with his senior officers.

And thus, Jon found himself in a sealed conference room along with eight other flag officers, seated before a holo-table.

The table itself was a technological marvel. Two meters long, it was rectangular in shape and had a glassed-over surface that covered the master holographic display imbedded within it. Before each seat was an integrated display console that would allow attendees to focus their attention on specifics related to their area of expertise or mission objectives. With the controls before him, Jon could zoom or pan anywhere on the master holographic image without affecting the rest of the briefing. Not for the first time, Archer wished that he had one of these holo-tables aboard *Enterprise*.

At the moment, though, both screens were dark as Commodore Alexander Casey droned on about the level of readiness of Security throughout the fleet. An ex-MACO who had risen to the highest levels of that organization, the commodore never let anyone forget his previous affiliations, nor did he conceal the fact that he had been stringently opposed to the integration in the first place. If Casey could get away with it, Jon assumed that the man would wear his old MACO uniform instead of the Starfleet one.

From the expressions on the faces of his colleagues, Archer suspected that his dislike for Casey was shared. To say that the man was a martinet was putting it kindly; on no less than four occasions, Jon had actually seen the commodore hide behind rules and regulations to avoid making a difficult moral decision. Given his own propensity for bending or outright breaking the rules if the situation called for it, Archer wasn't surprised in the slightest that he and Casey were constantly at odds.

“This revised two-branch system was proposed by Lieutenant Commander Eisler of the UES *Endeavour*,” Casey was stating, and Jon fought to restrain a sigh. He'd already read the Eisler proposal – Trip had sent it to him for his feedback before officially submitting it to Starfleet Command – and agreed that it was a good idea. What he wasn't looking forward to was the inevitable comment about how the lieutenant commander was an ex-MACO.

Archer let his attention wander and glanced around the room, noting without surprise the slightly bored expressions on the faces of many of his colleagues. Commodore Burnside Clapp, the Second Fleet commander, gave him a sidelong glance complete with an exaggerated eye roll. The Australian commodore's dislike of Casey was common knowledge, and their often loud disagreements were always amusing to observe.

At that, however, Admiral Hannibal Black, recently promoted to Vice Chief of Naval Operations, gave Archer a dark look before returning his attention to Casey's briefing. Through means that Jon admitted he did not understand, Black had suddenly shot up through the chain of command, displacing the previous VCNO following the success of the recent Icarus Project. Trip hadn't been very forthcoming about exactly what it was that the admiral had done while aboard *Endeavour*, but whatever it was, it had been very, very good for Black's career.

“This is all well and good,” Black abruptly interrupted, drawing Commodore Casey's darkest look, “but what does it have to do with the war effort?” The two men glared at one another for a moment, prompting Archer to wonder about the curious nature of their mutual antipathy. He supposed that the similarities in their personalities were responsible for their constant clashes: Black shared the commodore's unhealthy love of regulations and military etiquette. A memory from his time as *Enterprise's* commanding officer surfaced, and Jon let himself smile inwardly at the idea of the two men being mentally linked by that snot monster that had temporarily connected him and Trip. Almost immediately, though, he realized that he would have to be mentally linked with them also if he wanted to see their reaction, and he shuddered at the thought.

No, Jon decided, *it probably wouldn't be a good idea if some of these people knew what I actually thought about them*. He fought a smile at the surprise he'd felt when Trip's less-than-professional thoughts about a certain Vulcan sub-commander had flooded into his own mind, followed quickly by the embarrassment that Tucker had felt when he realized that Archer knew.

Almost instantly, that memory triggered a random thought and he spent another moment considering it. Prior to the cerebral linkage with Trip, however short a period of time it had been, Jon couldn't recall thinking of T'Pol in a sexual way. Afterwards, however, he'd found himself constantly being distracted by her looks, so much so that he eventually made an abject fool of himself when Porthos had been sick. Even now, many years after the fact, he couldn't help but wince at how juvenile he'd acted around her. It just hadn't been like him ...

The theory rattled around in his head as Black and Casey began to argue, and Archer found himself examining it from all angles. He freely admitted that T'Pol was a striking woman – he'd have to be dead or just plain stupid not to see that – but she had never really appealed to him on any level beyond that. Sure, she was a loyal friend and a more than effective first officer, but Jon simply couldn't envision living with – or loving – her.

So, could those thoughts, those feelings, have been Trip's? Even in the days after *Enterprise's* launch, Tucker had made no real attempt to hide the fact that he found the Vulcan sub-commander attractive. Many had been the time that Jon had noticed his friend's eyes wandering, usually to watch T'Pol departing from a room or to watch her discreetly when it seemed that no one else would notice. Even if Trip had been annoyed at her, or found her initial comments insulting or abrasive, he'd at least openly noticed her looks.

“That's enough,” Fleet Admiral Gardner snapped, ending the Black-Casey argument and bringing Jon back to the present. “You've made your case, Commodore, and we'll examine the merits of this proposal at a later time.” Casey glowered at the chief of naval operations, but made no further reply. “Captain Assad,” Gardner continued, directing his attention to the only standing member of this briefing, “is here to give us an overview of the conflict.” Archer straightened slightly in his chair and frowned at the captain's body language: it didn't bode well.

“We lost two more ships last week,” Assad said without preamble, his expression bleak. “The *Hawking* and the *Valiant* were destroyed on 2 September. There were no survivors.” The disgruntled murmur that rumbled through the briefing room was understandable. “No other ships in the *Atlantis* strike group suffered significant damage, and Rear Admiral Khanolankar reports that three Romulan drones and one bird of prey were destroyed in the engagement.” Assad shifted slightly. “As has every other disabled Romulan ship,” the captain declared, “the bird of prey self-destructed before it could be captured.”

“This is getting out of hand,” Black interjected as he glared at the captain for a moment. Transferring his hot look to Gardner, he continued. “We're losing this war because you won't let us fight it!”

It was an old refrain, one that continued to make the rounds each time a new setback occurred. Despite himself, Jon found himself grudgingly agreeing with Admiral Black, even if he didn't agree with some of the more extreme measures that the admiral had proposed in recent weeks. Dark memories of the decisions that Archer had made in the Expanse resurfaced, reminding him that success could sometimes come at too high a cost. If they defeated the Romulans, but lost their souls in the process, would humans be any better than those they were fighting? Unexpectedly, an old proverb came to mind, one that he could not recall the origin of: *The man who fights too long against dragons becomes a dragon himself.*

Jonathan Archer didn't want to become that man.

“Do you have anything *new* to add, Admiral?” Gardner asked, his expression and voice tight. The dislike between him and Black was old news and, if the rumors were true, was responsible for Gardner's decision to park his disliked colleague in the Vice Chief of Naval Operations position. Since the war started, five admirals had held that job and all five had ultimately resigned; a discreet betting pool had sprung up inside Command regarding how long the current VCNO would last.

“Operation: Pandora,” Admiral Black replied, and Jon frowned at the unfamiliar name. From the confused expressions on the faces of the assembled officers, he wasn't the only one who didn't recognize it.

“Elaborate,” the CNO demanded. At Gardner's tone, Archer fought another frown; it seemed pretty clear that the admiral wasn't even aware of this operation, and that rarely went over well.

Black, however, appeared unconcerned at his commanding officer's barely concealed anger. Instead, he was connecting a PADD to his viewer control with an air of eagerness and excitement. A moment later, the master display within the table snapped to life, revealing the image of an unfamiliar binary star system.

“This is the Zeta Reticuli system,” Black announced as he began manipulating the controls. Archer blinked in surprise. Contact with the Acheron mining colony there had been lost months ago and, as thinly stretched as Starfleet already was, no ships had been available to re-establish contact. The image continued to zoom in on Zeta 1 Reticuli before resolving into what appeared to be construction facilities. Romulan warships, both the birds of prey and the larger ones that had been classified as Warbirds, patrolled the area, as well as dozens of smaller ships that Jon recognized at once as drones.

“As you can see,” Admiral Black continued, “the Romulans have set up shop less than forty light years away and are building more ships.”

“How did you get these images?” Rear Admiral Washko, the commander of First Fleet, demanded.

“That information is classified,” Black replied, almost snidely. His comments drew several dark looks, but he ignored them and continued. “Based on this new intelligence, it is essential that we strike with everything we have and destroy this complex before they can get it operational.”

“There are at least thirty ships there,” Admiral Wang of Fourth Fleet pointed out. A grizzled old veteran, he had a reputation for being capable of squeezing blood out of a stone. “This will need to be a joint operation...”

“Two fleets, at least,” Burnside Clapp agreed. His attention was now focused on the images on the table display, and the frown on his face was bleak.

“Three,” Admiral Black declared. He paused, as though for dramatic effect, before continuing. “I recommend Second, Fifth and Sixth Fleets.”

Instantly, the room degenerated into an argument as the commanders of First, Third and Fourth Fleets began debating their own combat effectiveness, but Jon's attention had already shifted. He began manipulating the controls on his personal viewer and zoomed in on two

ships that were distinctly *not* Romulan. The image itself was grainy, and the resolution wasn't high enough to make out specific details, but Jon would have recognized them anyway. With a frown, Archer stared at the familiar-looking craft for a long moment.

“You have something to add, Commodore Archer?” The sharp question from Admiral Gardner cut through the din and brought the arguments to an abrupt end. Jon looked up, meeting the admiral's eyes with his own.

“These are Xindi ships,” he announced. He expanded the image onto the main display. “Reptilian, by the looks of it.”

“Are you sure?” Admiral Wang asked, and Jon gave him a flat look in reply. “Of course you're sure,” the old admiral smiled, shaking his head at his own stupid question. If anyone in the room would recognize a Xindi ship, it was Archer.

“We've suspected some cooperation for a while now,” Black reminded Archer, once more wearing an insufferably smug expression. “This doesn't change anything.”

“With all due respect, sir,” Jon retorted, “it changes everything.” He eased back in his seat slightly. “The Xindi utilized FTL that made their ships nearly impossible to track or pursue, and if they've given the subspace corridor technology to the Romulans—”

“He's right,” Burnside Clapp interrupted, a tense expression on his face. “They were able to drop in behind our defenses with that weapon of theirs, and we couldn't even detect their arrival until the *Kumari* showed up.” Jon gave the commodore a glance, recognizing the guilt behind the man's words. The Australian had been in command of one of the perimeter defense ships.

“And the Xindi have transporter technology,” Archer pointed out. The memory of the stomach lurching fear he'd felt when Hoshi was beamed off of his bridge churned within his gut; though she'd never said anything about it to him, Jon had read Phlox's medical reports and knew that she still struggled with nightmares.

“Then it's more important than ever to hit this facility,” Black urged. “We need to strike *now!*”

As the arguments resumed, Jon fought to keep from sighing. It was going to be a long day.



The day had barely begun and he was already exhausted.

His muscles groaning with protest, Malcolm Reed eased himself out of the shower and reached for the nearby towel. Glowering at the effort it took to do something as simple as dry himself off, he slowly limped toward to the sink. In mid-step, his legs nearly buckled and he

quickly grabbed the sink's edge to steady himself. Anger pulsed through him at his continuing weakness, and he silently determined to increase the pace of his continuing physical therapy, regardless of what the physicians recommended. After a long moment, he regained his balance and straightened. Using the towel, he wiped the condensation from the mirror and took a moment to study the reflection he saw there.

The facial scar he'd become accustomed to, despite Harris' repeated “suggestions” to have it covered up with synth-flesh; Malcolm couldn't quite explain why he kept refusing to have the scar concealed, although simply being contrary was as good an explanation as any. As long as the scar was present, it barred him from ever participating in field work again, but he didn't harbor any delusions that he would ever be a field operative again; the injuries alone were too extensive for him to be an effective agent, and his official status as “killed in action” made any such field ops even less likely. A moment passed as he studied his eyes in the mirror and, not for the first time, he found himself frowning at the deadness he saw there. He hated seeing this look, hated knowing what it meant for him.

He took another moment to study his image and glowered at the scars that now decorated his body. Only his left arm was without apparent damage, but the too smooth skin was an immediate giveaway that it wasn't the same limb that he had been born with. With the artificial prosthetic, he traced the massive scar that ran down the length of his chest as he tried to fight the memories that inevitably flooded his mind's eye.

The last clear memory he had of New Elysium was of *Enterprise* shuddering under Romulan fire as the bird of prey loomed closer in the sensor feed. Even the moment of impact was a hazy blur of light and sound and smells. The taste of blood in his mouth, the scream of protesting metal, the stench of scorched flesh: all of it came back to him in spurts of jumbled memories that didn't make sense no matter how hard he tried to comprehend them. And then – a darkness that seemed to last for an eternity, broken only by momentary glimpses of consciousness. He had no idea how long he drifted in that emptiness before he found himself waking in a hospital somewhere on Earth, to the face of a man he hated. Never before had Malcolm experienced such despair as he did when he learned that the life he'd made for himself was over.

“You had a lovely funeral,” Harris had told him with a smirk on his face. “Full honors, complete with a 21-gun salute.” The smirk grew into a smile. “Captain Tucker gave a moving eulogy. There wasn't a dry eye present.” The smile began a malicious grin. “Welcome back, Malcolm.”

It had taken some digging but, during his extended recovery, Malcolm had finally pieced together some of the unlikely tale of how he'd survived Elysium. The discovery that the chief medical officer of *Columbia* was one of Harris' operatives shouldn't have surprised Reed as much as it did; more than most members of the Section, he was quite aware of how extensive the organization actually was. In the chaos following *Columbia's* arrival at Elysium, she had placed Malcolm in stasis even as the official record classified him as KIA; how he survived his injuries to that point remained unclear to him. Following their return to Earth, his body was

then transferred to a Section hospital where judicious amounts of surgery had been necessary. Esoteric solutions had even been utilized, including the memetic symbiot process that Phlox had used in the Expanse to save Trip's life.

Malcolm didn't want to consider that it was *his* reports that led to the Section learning about that process.

Limping out of the bathroom, he paused at the threshold that opened up into the giant room that was now his home and his prison. Octagonal in shape, it was a high tech utility apartment, complete with living quarters, integrated kitchen and working space. There was a protein resequencer in the kitchen, an emergency transporter, and thirty-three hand weapons scattered throughout the apartment in concealed locations. Everything he needed to survive was here.

Everything but Hoshi.

With another frown, Malcolm limped toward the desk and lowered himself into the seat. The integrated sensors on the computer suite detected his approach and activated the monitors before he had even situated himself in the chair. He glanced over the data displays quickly, a dark expression on his face, before inputting a new command. Instantly, the main monitor switched to a realtime image of a massive English church and Malcolm spent a few minutes watching silently, hoping that Hoshi would make an appearance. The wedding party was already beginning to file into St. Michael's Cathedral, and Reed drew in a sharp breath as his parents hobbled into the image. He smiled slightly at the sight of his mother carrying his son. For a moment, the urge to contact them was nearly overwhelming, and he swallowed at the memory of his father's anguished expression at the funeral.

“Your previous life is over, Malcolm,” Harris had said grimly after showing Malcolm a recording of the funeral with unnatural glee. “If you try to contact *anyone* from that life, they will be killed.”

“Why are you doing this?” Malcolm had demanded, furious and terrified at the same time.

“Because I can,” was the cold reply. “And because *no one* leaves the Section.”

Additional digging had eventually revealed that Harris had not been bluffing. Electronic paper trails disclosed the presence of mercenaries or semi-retired Section operatives within striking distance of Reed's family and loved ones. A number of realtime images of Hoshi or Maddie had mysteriously appeared on Malcolm's computer screen; these images could only have come from a rifle scope. Recorded images of Trip, Commander T'Pol or Commodore Archer showed up periodically in his “in-box,” along with additional proof that they weren't safe either. Each example was an promise of implied violence designed to dissuade him from seeking escape.

Malcolm got the point.

It didn't stop him from trying, though. In the weeks since Reed had assumed the duties of a Control officer, his continuing search for a way out of the Section had turned into something of a chess game with Harris. Malcolm's discreet inquiries were met with counter-moves by Harris, and investigation into potential avenues of escape revealed poorly concealed traps or assassins waiting. Frustrated, Reed had been forced to re-evaluate his plan and adjust his tactics. It would take time and patience, but Malcolm was confident that he would be successful.

Providing he could sway the Augment operative to his side.

Exhaling softly, Reed keyed in new commands, minimizing the live data feed of the wedding and spending several minutes studying the status reports from his agents in the field. Currently, there were only twelve of them active, but coordinating their mostly unrelated operations had proven to be more difficult than he would have expected. The sheer amount of paperwork necessary was staggering, and, as the workload continued to grow, Malcolm began to wonder if that was also part of Harris' plan. A distracted enemy was a vulnerable enemy, after all.

Reed leaned forward as a Starfleet data packet crossed his screen. With *Endeavour* still being refit for combat operations, the fact that Trip was on emergency leave came as something of a surprise. Within seconds, Malcolm had accessed the hospital records and was glancing over the medical files of a Charles Tucker, Junior.

The computer beeped again and Malcolm quickly maximized the image as the wedding party began to file into the cathedral. Smiling broadly, the groom exchanged anxious looks with his best man as the wedding march began to play. Reed found himself smiling slightly at the man's anxiety; though he had never met the man, Malcolm had thoroughly investigated him before grudgingly admitting to himself that the man was worthy of Maddie.

His breath caught as Hoshi entered the image. A moment later, he tore his eyes away from her as Maddie appeared, resplendent in her bridal gown and glowing with happiness. Anger mixed with glee as Malcolm watched his sister and her fiancé drink in one another's appearance. He should be there, in person, to watch Maddie's big day. If nothing else, he desperately wanted to tease her about having a month for a last name now...

As he watched the wedding, his attention inevitably drifted to Hoshi and he spent several minutes studying her. She was a little thinner than was probably healthy, but there was no trace of the sadness that had been on her face for the last several months. It was the first time in a long time that he'd seen her look so happy.

“A lovely ceremony,” Harris' voice abruptly echoed from Malcolm's computer suite. Seconds later, a realtime image of the man appeared on a different monitor, and Reed gave him a dark look. “Your sister looks quite happy, Malcolm.”

“What do you want?” Reed asked, once more focusing his attention on the wedding. This was his sister's day, dammit, and he wasn't going to let Harris ruin it.

“Just passing on some information to you that I thought you'd appreciate.” Harris' expression was impossible to read as he continued. “You've heard about Tucker's father?”

“Yes,” Malcolm replied hesitantly. This was already touching on his “old life” and he didn't quite know where the other man was going with it.

“Terra Prime knows about him also. We're getting an increase of chatter among several of their known cells, and I suspect they're going to try something.” Annoyance flashed across the older man's face. “Those fanatics are starting to turn into a problem. A problem that will need to be dealt with.” Harris abruptly smiled. “See to it, Malcolm. But remember ... no contact with anyone from your old life.”

The monitor blanked out and Reed studied the wedding image for a moment longer. With a sigh, he minimized it once more and began re-examining his available assets. Local authorities would need to be informed, but given the current state of affairs on Earth, it was entirely possible that Terra Prime had sympathizers present. Given Trip's propensity for getting himself injured, Malcolm reflected that Tucker would need a bodyguard to keep him out of trouble. Reed sighed again as his head began to hurt.

Harris had quite thoroughly ruined his day.



Her day had already been thoroughly ruined.

A slight frown on her face, Commander T'Pol studied the incoming reports with a growing sense of frustration. According to the timetable that she had drawn up months earlier following Starfleet Command's decision to restore the NC-06 to an active role in the war, *Endeavour* should have been at full combat status by now. As was all too often with humans, however, Trip and Lieutenant Commander Hess had conspired together and made an abrupt change in the repair schedule without even consulting her, all to make an adjustment based on Trip's “gut.” Sometimes, she wondered if the inability to follow a plan without alteration was a racial deficiency in humanity or if it was simply one of Trip's character flaws. Admittedly, this unscheduled innovation would result in additional energy output, but the fact that the first officer had not even been informed of the change was frustrating.

But then, dealing with humans was *always* frustrating.

Leaning back in the chair, T'Pol exhaled slowly and focused on controlling the unruly emotions that were coursing through her. She grudgingly admitted that the anger she was experiencing had as much to do with the current situation as it did with her current

annoyance at her mate. Less than a week earlier, he had issued a new ship-wide standing order without consulting her or any of his other senior officers. It was now common knowledge among the officers and crew of *Endeavour* that, unless the captain specifically stated otherwise, she was barred from *all* away missions or landing parties.

T'Pol frowned once more as she grimly acknowledged that she should have anticipated this from him. When they were alone, he'd made no attempt to conceal how terrified he had been during her brief captivity aboard Harrad-Sar's ship, and, as she had discovered in the years since she'd first met him, Trip often allowed his emotions to dictate his actions. This was no different and should not have come as a surprise.

But knowing how he thought didn't make his actions any easier to stomach.

Despite her annoyed anger, she found herself partially amused at Trip's over-protectiveness. Though he cloaked it behind the annoying machismo that all human males seemed intent on cultivating, she knew that he cherished her very much, and his desire to keep her from harm was oddly endearing. Had he explained his decision-making process in a logical and unemotional way, she might even have been willing to accede without complaint. After all, the drive to protect one's mate was at the heart of the telepathic bond that connected them. True to form, however, he remained unresponsive toward her entreaties and refused even to discuss the order.

It was, she mused angrily, quite annoying.

The chirp of a door annunciator broke the silence, and T'Pol straightened slightly in her chair as she glanced toward the door.

“Enter,” she said loudly. A moment later, Lieutenant Commander Eisler appeared in the doorway, a PADD in one hand. He entered the ready room and approached the desk, offering the data device.

“The progress report you wanted on Commander Hess' repairs, ma'am,” he announced. The tactical officer placed the PADD on the desk before assuming a parade rest stance. “Weapon and defensive systems are both at one hundred percent, but navigation and engineering are still running behind schedule.”

“Thank you, Commander,” T'Pol replied as she glanced over the PADD. Another sigh threatened her normal poise at the numbers she saw there. At least four days would be required before *Endeavour* was fully combat operational and, based on the rumors coming out of Starfleet Command, that was unacceptable. “What is the delay?” she asked tightly and Eisler shrugged slightly.

“I don't know, ma'am,” the lieutenant commander responded. “I'm not an engineer.” T'Pol gave him a glance, wondering if she'd imagined his slight emphasis on the word “engineer,” but Eisler's expression didn't change. “If you want me to, I'll ask Commander Hess to draft

another report.”

At that, T'Pol nearly frowned once more. If Trip were here, she suspected that he would already know what was taking so long. Knowing him as she did, she also theorized that he would have some unnecessarily risky yet ultimately effective “short-cut” in mind that would halve the repair time. And, if previous experience was any judge, that short cut would have a better than fifty percent chance of putting him in Sickbay.

“That will not be necessary, Commander,” she declared, deciding that it was probably for the best that Trip was Earthside. The tactical officer nodded and turned toward the door. He paused at the entryway and T'Pol glanced up to find him studying her with a curious expression on his face. She quirked an eyebrow at his look.

“Have you heard anything about the captain's father, ma'am?” Eisler asked in response to her unspoken question.

“Acute myocardial infarction,” T'Pol said calmly. “I do not know the prognosis.” The tactical officer's expression shifted to one that she didn't quite recognize and she narrowed her eyes in mild confusion. Despite her familiarity with Trip's body language, she still found herself struggling to comprehend the gestures of other humans. Eisler gave her a nod and ducked through the doorway, leaving her alone with her thoughts once more.

Inevitably, her thoughts drifted toward Trip's father, and she spent a moment staring at the drydock struts beyond the viewport. Though it was an illogical waste of time, she found herself hoping that Charles Junior would make a recovery. She had only met him four times, but each time he had displayed an easy charisma and friendliness toward her that was welcome. To her surprise, the elder Charles Tucker had accepted her into their family without question or hesitation; Trip had even accused his father of “flirting” with her on their second meeting during a curious human tradition called a “barbecue.” It was not difficult to see where her mate had inherited his charm and outgoing nature.

Elaine Tucker, on the other hand, remained an enigma. When she had first met Trip's mother, T'Pol had been amazed – and slightly uncomfortable, if she were entirely honest – at how unlike other humans the woman was. Reserved but confident, Mrs. Tucker seemed to be the antithesis of all things Terran. Though she clearly cherished her own *adun* and offspring, the human woman kept her other emotions and thoughts tightly concealed behind a veneer of composure that reminded T'Pol of her own mother. The similarity between Mrs. Tucker and T'Pol's own personality had even been a source of amusement to the rest of Trip's family.

“My God, Trip,” William Tucker had exclaimed when they first met. “She's just like Mom!”

The observation had been made with feigned shock and had been spoken in a jesting manner, but had actually caused a considerable amount of discomfort for Trip. It was, T'Pol supposed, the first time that her mate had actually examined the similarities between her and his mother, and had caused him unnecessary emotional distress. Using ship's business as an

excuse, he had even gone out of his way to avoid her while coming to terms with the unexpected discovery. On the tenth day, however, T'Pol had tired of his avoidance of her and had taken steps to rectify the situation. Using her superior mastery of their bond, she had bombarded him with amorous thoughts and sensations all day; confused and so aroused that he couldn't think straight, Trip hadn't even sensed her presence in his cabin when he retired for the evening. Creative explanations had been required to explain to then-Captain Archer why his chief engineer needed a day off to recover.

Despite her residual anger toward Trip for his recent actions, T'Pol smiled slightly at the memory.

An hour passed as T'Pol worked on the voluminous paperwork that would normally be part of Trip's job. Most of it was routine: promotion papers for enlisted personnel, additional requisitions for parts and equipment from the quartermaster, or even signing off on awards for exceptional crewmen. With a barely noticeable sigh, T'Pol placed her thumb on the small optical scanner; serving as a digital signature, the scanned thumb print officially acknowledged that Lieutenant Junior Grade Elizabeth Cutler had been reassigned to Starfleet Medical on Earth. The lieutenant would be missed, T'Pol noted, particularly by Doctor Phlox, who had been almost entirely responsible for her battlefield commission in the wake of the Expanse mission.

“Bridge to Commander T'Pol.” Lieutenant Devereux's voice emerged from the comm panel, interrupting the Vulcan's study of additional reassignment orders. Without shifting her eyes from the datasheet before her, T'Pol reached for the 'Transmit' button on the panel and depressed it.

“This is T'Pol,” she declared.

“Incoming transmission from Starfleet Command,” Devereux announced. “It's marked 'Eyes Only, 'ma'am.” T'Pol raised an eyebrow at that.

“Transfer it to the ready room, Lieutenant,” the first officer ordered as she minimized the transfer orders on her screen.

“Aye, ma'am. Stand by.”

A moment passed before the screen before her changed to the United Earth Space Probe Agency seal. T'Pol frowned; *Endeavour* was still in drydock over humanity's homeworld, so the transmission should have been instantaneous.

“Commander T'Pol,” a heavily distorted voice abruptly stated, and the Vulcan quirked an eyebrow in reaction. Whoever the owner of this voice was clearly did not wish to be identified. “Per your agreement with Achilles, I am contacting you with important information.” T'Pol froze, recognizing the codename instantly as the program that had resulted in Lieutenant Junior Grade Nathaniel Hayes' illegal genetic augmentation. Use of that name could only

mean that this voice was a member of Hayes' mysterious “Section.”

“Do not attempt to trace this transmission,” the modulated voice ordered even as T'Pol was inputting commands for that very purpose. She ignored the suggestion. “You will find that I am not where your trace tells you I am.”

“And who are you?” she asked as the trace program began working.

“Call me ... Lazarus,” the voice replied, and T'Pol frowned at the unfamiliar name. She was inputting the name into *Endeavour's* computers even as the voice continued. “Captain Tucker is in mortal danger.”

Time seemed to freeze as T'Pol drew in a sharp breath. Her desire to identify the mysterious benefactor was forgotten as her Vulcan instincts began screaming to protect her mate. Nothing else mattered.

“Do I have your attention?” the voice of “Lazarus” asked, and T'Pol instinctively nodded, barely aware of the human trait that she'd adopted so readily.

“You do,” she replied quickly. “Elaborate.”

“Terra Prime is initiating an operation against him in retaliation for his actions on Mars.” Anger pulsed through T'Pol at that, and she glowered at the screen before her. “Specifics are unknown and local authorities are of ... dubious character,” the voice continued. “Counter-operations are being planned, but protection for the captain is out of our mandate.”

“I understand,” T'Pol responded as she began to plan her next move. “I will see to it personally.”

“Of course you will.” Lazarus sounded almost amused, despite the electronic modulation, and the Vulcan frowned slightly at that. “I do not recommend that you involve Starfleet Security either, Commander. Terra Prime influences have not yet been fully purged.”

A chirp sounded as the transmission disconnected. Less than a second later, T'Pol's trace program announced success, and she grimaced slightly at the results; somehow, she doubted that Commodore Archer was this Lazarus person. Glancing quickly over the results of the name search, she quirked an eyebrow at the data. Based on a human religious parable about a man being restored to life by a supernatural messiah figure, the name gave her no immediate insight into the identity of the man or woman behind the voice. It was, for the time being however, irrelevant. She reached for the comm panel once more.

“Commander Eisler to the ready room,” she ordered with more calm than she actually felt. For a moment, T'Pol wondered how much she should tell the lieutenant commander about the threat against Trip's life before realizing that she couldn't tell him anything without compromising the source of the intelligence. Another quick moment of reflection made the

situation even more starkly clear: Lieutenant Hayes was planetside, attending a mandatory training school for his job as *Endeavour's* weapon system officer, and Phlox was on personal leave.

It was up to her.

Author's Note: Some notes on back story – I have officially adopted **Ludjin's Moonrise** as part of my continuity. The only change in the latter is that it takes place one year earlier than originally stated (2155, not 2156). The poor night vision of Vulcans was originally put forward by **Blackn'blue** in his fic *In the Cold of Night*; I liked the idea so much that I've incorporated it into my own continuity with his permission.

ACT TWO

If it were up to him, hospital food would be banned as a weapon of mass destruction.

Standing before the beverage dispenser, Trip hefted the small cup of coffee and sniffed it once before taking a sip. Almost instantly, he grimaced at the foul taste and quickly reached for the artificial sweetener. *Tastes worse than warp coolant*, he reflected bitterly as he dumped several packets of the sugar substitute into the cup. Glancing around, he fought back a frown as he became aware of the numerous eyes on him.

It wasn't a new sensation, but it was definitely one he didn't care for. Popular opinion on the ongoing war remained sharply divided, with vocal minorities on both sides of the issue desperately trying to dictate policy. The warhawks – usually made up of men and women who had never fired a weapon in their lives – were loud in their demands that even more aggressive action be taken; in their eyes, Starfleet should be fielding starships bristling with weapons and the captains of those vessels should be shooting first. Questions, if absolutely necessary, could be asked later.

At the opposite end of the political spectrum were equally radical voices opposed to war, regardless of the reason and no matter how necessary. To these people, the wounds from the seven million dead Xindi assault were still healing, and they insisted that, despite clear evidence throughout history to the contrary, violence did not solve the problem. In the eyes of this group of radicals, Starfleet *was* the problem, and they clamored for complete disarmament, convinced that the Romulans were only attacking out of a perceived threat from humanity, ignoring the mounting evidence that the mysterious attackers were interested only in conquest.

The lack of a coherent political will at the very top of United Earth's government only served to make things even more difficult for members of Starfleet like Trip. As the number of casualties grew and colonies were lost, the UE government was paralyzed with indecision. In a move that mirrored the previous administration's solution to the Xindi attack, Earth turned to Starfleet and gave them free rein to wage the war as they thought appropriate.

Unexpectedly, an organization devoted to peaceful exploration of space had been transformed almost overnight into a military. Scientists were suddenly expected to become soldiers and diplomats at the drop of a hat with little new training. The focus on sensors and scientific equipment shifted toward weapon suites and defensive networks. Now, instead of eagerly looking forward to achieving greater warp velocities and flirting with T'Pol in front of Jon, Trip found himself having to give orders that would send young men and women to their

deaths.

Cognizant of the eyes on him – or, more accurately, on his uniform – Trip approached the order window, wondering if the lady manning the register would react in the same way the previous attendant had. Never before had he been as disgusted with his fellow humans as he had six hours earlier.

“Murderer!” the pimply-faced boy had called him, before launching into an ill-informed and emotionally-charged diatribe about Earth being ultimately responsible for this war. It had taken every gram of Trip's self-control to keep from responding with a right cross. Instead, he had politely thanked the young man and returned to his father's room.

“Can I help you, Captain?” the girl manning the register asked, her voice devoid of the anger he'd faced earlier. For a heartbeat, he was surprised at her accurate recognition of his rank, but he pushed it away and smiled slightly, hoping that she was sane. After the day he'd had already, Trip didn't think he had the strength to deal with another argument about the war.

“I'd like a cheeseburger and fries,” he replied as he fished out his cred-chit from his pocket. “Extra mustard, no ketchup, no onions.” As the cashier input the order, he momentarily let himself imagine the look of horrified disgust that would have crossed T'Pol's face at his choice of food if she were present.

“Please have a seat, and I'll bring your meal to you, sir,” the young woman remarked as she returned his cred-chit. With a nod, Trip carried his cup of faux-coffee to an isolated table near a wall monitor and sat. Several minutes passed in relative silence as he sipped from the cup and watched the newsfeed, and in those minutes, his mood continued to darken. A pair of news anchors pontificated loudly over the various operations being conducted by Starfleet, operations that Trip knew for a fact were supposed to be classified. He quietly shook his head in disgust at the blatant misrepresentations that were poorly disguised as news. It sounded more like propaganda to him.

When his meal arrived, he gave the attendant another smile, noting almost instantly her curious hesitance. Suspecting that she wanted to ask him something, he gave her his full attention. Under his look, she swallowed and blushed slightly.

“Could I ask you a question, sir?” Trip smiled at the formality, even as he wondered if he'd ever been this young or naive.

“You can ask,” he replied with a twinkle in his eyes, “but I can't promise to answer.” Once more, she flushed, and Trip glanced at her nametag. His stomach lurched instantly. *T'Pol is gonna kill me*, he reflected with morbid amusement.

“I'm just curious about Starfleet, sir,” the young girl declared and Tucker blinked in mild surprise at that. “About the training. Is it as hard as they say?”

"That depends," Trip replied. "I don't know who *they* are, or what *they* say." She gave him a cautious smile and he decided to abandon humor. "It takes a lot of guts to think about signin' up with the war goin' on." Another flush darkened her features. "How old are you, Amanda?" The young woman gave him a startled look when he used her name, and he smiled as he tapped the nametag on his own uniform.

"Sixteen, sir." Inwardly, Tucker grimaced at that. The memory of the two eighteen year-old engineering crewmen who had died with Lieutenant Commander Drahn flashed across his mind's eye, and he winced.

"You've still got a couple of years before Starfleet will accept you," he pointed out, and she nodded.

"Yes, sir." She stood up straighter. "But I want to join, sir. My brother is aboard *Columbia* under Captain Hernandez and his stories are exciting!" Trip almost asked her to identify her brother in the offhand chance that he knew the man, but quickly decided against it. After all, it wasn't his job to recruit.

"Finish school, darlin'," he drawled before giving her a grin. She returned the smile with one of her own. "We only take the best," Trip continued, "so I'm sure you'll do fine."

As she returned to her register, now smiling brightly, Tucker returned his attention to the newsfeed on the monitor. His good mood vanished almost instantly as the casualty list continued to scroll along the left side of the screen, and the newscasters reported a clash between anti-war protesters and supporters of the conflict. Suddenly, the burger and fries weren't that appealing any more.

Twenty minutes later found Trip back at his father's room, no longer hungry but still in a lousy mood. He'd lost track of how long he'd been in the hospital as he sat in one of the uncomfortable chairs. William was gone, having taken an autocab to their parents' house several hours earlier, and Trip's mom was still at home, hopefully sleeping. At the moment, it was just him and his father.

Once more, boredom began to set in, and Trip pulled the PADD he had brought with him out of his jacket. Switching it on, he spent several minutes reading the translated *Kir'Shara* in a possibly vain attempt to understand the woman he loved. He'd read the entire thing four times already and, despite his best efforts, a number of the precepts continued to elude comprehension.

As it always did, reading the *Kir'Shara* brought T'Pol to mind, and Trip grimaced at the coming headache. Though she'd never admit it to him, he knew that she was pissed off at him for barring her from landing missions and, for once, he admitted that she was right. He *was* acting emotionally; but dammit, he wasn't going to let her get killed.

Rubbing his temple with his free hand, he glowered at the same screen as if it were Surak's

fault that T'Pol was so damned frustrating. Normally, he enjoyed it when they argued. It was, as Hoshi had once joked, their own personal foreplay, and nothing got him quite as fired up as T'Pol did. This was different, however. Ever since her trellium addiction, T'Pol had struggled with control, and when she was genuinely angry, Trip could feel it through the bond.

Most of the time, the resulting psychic backlash that occurred when T'Pol's emotions flared was manageable. Sometimes, it even had enjoyable benefits, especially when they were experiencing the same emotions; sex, for example, was absolutely mind-blowing, and Trip was happily convinced that she'd ruined him for life in that department. But when she was having a bad day, he occasionally had to visit Phlox for analgesics. Afterwards, though, she was always impossibly sweet and loving as she tried to make up for the pain she'd put him through.

He usually milked those moments for all they were worth.

With a frustrated sigh, Trip set the PADD aside and stood. He walked to the window and studied the Jacksonville landscape beyond. Night was approaching, and he made it a habit to watch the sun set whenever he was planetside.

Abruptly his communicator chirped, and he drew it in an easy, practiced motion that was almost second nature now. Flipping it open, he spoke as he watched an ambulance shuttle lift off the tarmac.

“This is Tucker.”

“Hey.” Commodore Archer's voice emerged from the small device, oddly distorted but still recognizable. It was a measure of their friendship that the older man didn't even identify himself, trusting Tucker to know who he was simply by the sound of his voice. “How's your dad?” Archer asked.

“Sleeping,” Tucker replied as he returned his attention to the flashing lights of the medical shuttle. It was rapidly disappearing downtown. “The doctors say he's gonna make it, but they wanna keep him here for a couple more nights.”

“That's great news, Trip!” the commodore exclaimed and Tucker nodded absently as he dialed down the volume on the communicator. He gave his father a quick glance, hoping that they hadn't woken him, and was relieved to see the older man still asleep. Evidently, the drugs he'd been given were good ones.

“Yes, sir,” he replied before sighing again. “Are you still flyin' in tonight? Mom would love to see you.”

“I can't make it tonight, Trip,” Archer said, and Tucker smirked at the annoyance in Jon's voice. “Staff meetings,” the commodore continued, making no effort to conceal his disgust. “The *usual* problem.”

Trip's smirk vanished at Archer's emphasis of the word "usual." In recent weeks, it had become their code word for Admiral Black since he was, *usually*, the problem. A sour expression crossed Tucker's face as he recalled the less than diplomatically worded order that Jon had been forced to relay from Fleet Admiral Gardner: "The non-frat policy has *not* been suspended for any member of Starfleet, and officers who violate it will be disciplined."

Black's fingerprints were all over that order.

To make matters worse, Trip had then been informed that Lieutenant Commander Eisler would not be considered for promotion until he had completed several key UESPA training schools. Given the state of the ongoing conflict, however, and the fact that Eisler was irreplaceable aboard *Endeavour*, that effectively eliminated the chances of his being promoted.

"Understood," Trip said into the communicator. "Let us know when you're arrivin', sir, and we'll have the spare bed rolled out."

"Will do," Jon replied, the annoyance replaced by amusement. "Archer out."

With a sigh, Tucker returned the communicator to his pocket and spent several minutes staring at the skyline. He watched the city come alive with lights as the sun slowly dropped below the horizon. It was always an inspiring thing to watch, and he wished T'Pol were here to see it.

"An agreeable sight," came her soft voice, and he jerked his head around in surprise to find her standing less than two meters away. For a long moment, he stared at her, too startled at her unexpected appearance to even comment. She was dressed in civilian clothes that reminded him of what she had worn on their first ill-fated trip to Vulcan, but her hair, once more trimmed to its normal length, was brushed over her ears. Aside from her eyebrows, there was nothing to immediately identify her as a Vulcan.

"You cut your hair," he blurted before mentally kicking himself at the stupidity of the statement. In reply, she quirked an eyebrow and glanced toward his father.

"How is your father?" she asked, giving the window an almost uncomfortable look. In deference to her greater sense of privacy, he closed the blinds as he began to explain his dad's condition.

For a moment, he almost forgot that she was mad at him.



She was mad at him.

As he manipulated the controls on the shuttlepod, Jon Archer struggled to keep the smile off his face at the absurdity of the situation. When he had contacted Erika to tell her about the sudden change of plans, he had known she wasn't going to take it well. After all, they hadn't seen one another in nearly three months.

"I'm sorry," he apologized as he adjusted his heading slightly. "But I promised Trip that I'd stop by and see how his dad is doing."

A long moment passed in relative silence, and Jon gave the comm panel a quick look to make sure that it was still transmitting. His amusement faded as he realized the extent of her annoyance; instinctively, he sighed softly in frustration. Why did dealing with women always have to be so damned complicated?

"And how is Captain Tucker's father?" she asked, her voice slightly distorted over the communication line but still tighter than normal.

"I think he'll make it," Jon replied as he studied the incoming flight data and once more adjusted his heading. Most pilots would have long since let the autopilot assume control for the relatively short trans-continental trip, but Archer missed flying so much that he had maintained a hands-on approach the entire time. "The doctors are keeping him under observation for a few more days, but I promised..." He trailed off, hoping she'd let it go. After all, getting away from the idiots at Starfleet Command before he went on a shooting rampage was nearly as important as checking up on Trip's dad.

"All right," Erika stated after another long moment of silence. "I'll forgive you this time." Her voice was teasing, and Jon smiled even though she couldn't see it. "I should be planetside in a few hours," she continued. "Call me later?"

"I've got a better idea," Archer said in response. "Why don't you fly out here? Trip would love to see you again and there's this fantastic steak place I'd love to take you."

"We'll see," she said in response, and he could hear the smile in her voice. "I've got to go, Jon. Love you," came her final statement before the comm-line went dead, and Archer smiled broadly. Despite the dark days still ahead of them, he was surprised to discover that he was happy ...

And it was all because of Erika.

It had been her constant presence and support that got him through the difficult weeks after Elysium. There had already been a connection between them even before then, but it had deepened as he struggled with his difficult recovery. Try as he might, Jon couldn't imagine life without Erika in it, and he found himself smiling at the mental image of what her expression would be when he popped the question.

Banking the shuttlepod slightly, Archer studied the approach profile being uploaded from the Jacksonville International Starport with growing annoyance. He sighed at how long he was going to be parked in a waiting profile. Briefly, he wondered if he should exercise his rank and land at the Naval Air Station instead but, almost at once, decided against doing so. There were already enough civilian complaints about Starfleet personnel getting preferential treatment in aerospace matters, and Jon didn't want to add any more fuel to the fire.

Nearly two hours passed before he was finally on the ground and heading toward the Tucker residence. As he wasn't that familiar with the Jacksonville area, he input the address and let the car's autodriven function take over before turning his attention to the status reports that never seemed to end. Glumly, he reflected that the amount of paperwork one had to sift through seem to multiply exponentially as one rose through the ranks.

Manpower shortages were the continuing bane of Starfleet Command, and had been the driving reason behind the *Daedalus*-class being as heavily automated as it was. With a small but extremely vocal segment of Earth's population actively dedicated to opposing the war with the Romulans for reasons that defied Jon's comprehension, recruitment continued to be a problem. The media, ever a problem in times of war, only exacerbated the problem by focusing on the setbacks, and updated the casualty lists on an hourly basis. Sometimes, Jon was afraid that Earth would actually need to be attacked again before humanity would wake up.

Setting aside the PADD for a moment, he glanced through the windshield and studied the massive buildings of Florida's most populous city. In the weeks after the Xindi attack, Jacksonville had been flooded with refugees who had survived the attack but no longer had a home to return to. Already the largest city in the state, the sudden influx of people from Miami and Tampa, both rendered nearly uninhabitable due to environmental damage, came close to destroying the local economy. Even now, Jon could still see the aftermath of the sudden population boom as the car cruised through the streets; never before had he seen as many homeless as he did in that moment.

It was a sobering realization as the car merged onto Interstate 10 and accelerated to match the speed limit. Reclamation efforts and social programs continued to struggle under the weight of the damage wrought by the attack, and it wasn't much of a surprise that many anti-war activists made Florida their base of operations. Nothing was quite as effective as protesting a war in front of the massive canyon that had once been Gainesville, or Ocala, or Orlando.

Ironically, new recruits from the Florida-Georgia area seemed to outnumber any other location on the globe per capita, almost as if in direct response to the anti-war protesters.

Another twenty minutes passed before the car slowed and exited the interstate. Looking up from the paperwork that he'd been focused on, Jon blinked in surprise at how much the area had expanded since he'd last visited here. Dozens of new homes had been built, and twice that number were in various states of construction. A massive billboard announced the future location of a mega-store, and Archer found himself shaking his head in staggered awe at the

tenacity of human beings. Despite the nearly crippling wounds inflicted by the Xindi attack, people were moving forward with their lives in defiance of the damage.

He took over from the autodrive and turned onto the street leading to the Tucker residence. Three vehicles were parked in the small driveway, and Jon parked next to another rental vehicle that he presumed to be Trip's. He glanced at his overnight bag before deciding to leave it where it was; after all, it was entirely possible that the Tuckers might be overwhelmed with visiting family and he didn't want to presume that he'd be staying here.

Billy Tucker met him at the doorway, looking so much like a younger Trip that Jon had to smile. They shook hands.

“Glad you could make it, Commodore,” the younger man said, a smirk on his face.

“It's Jon,” Archer reminded him as he followed the man into the two-level house. “You know that.” Billy's refusal to use his name had turned into something of a running joke between the two of them, one borne of tragedy. It had been to William that Jon had turned when Archer was working through how to cope with Trip's reaction to baby Elizabeth's death. Acting against Starfleet orders, Jon had contacted the younger man and relayed the extent of Trip's loss in the hopes that Billy could rally the rest of his family to help him get over the latest Tucker loss.

“Mom's at the hospital, and Trip and T'Pol are in one of the spare bedrooms,” Billy revealed, and Jon started in slight surprise; he didn't know that the Vulcan had accompanied Trip. With another grin, the younger Tucker explained. “She just got in last night. I don't know the specifics.” He gave Jon a questioning look. “You want a beer?”

“Love one,” Archer replied before nodding toward the hall. “But bathroom first.” Billy nodded as he and pointed toward the hall. As he passed in front of the spare bedroom, he gave it a glance...

And froze in surprise.

Still dressed, Trip and T'Pol were asleep together on the bed. They were facing the doorway, with Trip spooned behind the Vulcan and one hand draped over her body in an almost possessive embrace. His nose buried in her hair, Tucker looked more peaceful than Jon had ever seen him. T'Pol was equally sedate in appearance as she shifted slightly, her hand instinctively seeking out her mate's. As the sleeping couple interlocked fingers, Archer was startled to see the hint of a smile cross T'Pol's face.

His mind whirling, Jon quietly pulled the door shut in deference to T'Pol's sense of privacy. Unexpectedly, he found himself smiling broadly, and he fought to keep a chuckle from emerging as he considered the scene that he'd just witnessed. This was, as far as he could remember, the first instance in which he'd actually *seen* that the two were a couple... in human terms, that was.

There had been many instances of Trip and T’Pol displaying Vulcan affection in the past, after all. Jon remembered seeing them do the curious two-finger caress that he’d observed other Vulcan couples perform on numerous occasions, but he had never asked about it. Even though he’d always suspected that it was the equivalent of a kiss, he had been afraid to ask in the event that he found out it was much, much more than that.

Seeing them together in a very human fashion finally washed away the last of Archer’s preconceptions about T’Pol. If he was entirely honest with himself, Jon had always wondered if an expressive person like Trip could handle not being able to display his affection in a public manner. After seeing them together, however, Archer suspected they more than made up for it in private settings. Glancing in the bathroom mirror, he found himself grinning like a fool and struggled to wipe the goofy look off his face.

He was still grinning when he rejoined Billy in the living room, and the younger man gave him a funny look. In reply, Jon took his beer and downed a healthy swallow.

“It’s nothing,” he said in reply to William’s unspoken question. “Good beer,” Archer remarked, as he looked around the living room. Mementos of the Tucker family were everywhere, whether they were newer digital captures or ancient photographs from years gone by. He drew in a sharp breath at an unexpected image of baby Elizabeth on one of the mantels; anger came at once, hot and fast, and he clenched his glass tightly as he looked away. He closed his eyes and exhaled slowly, taking a moment to regain his calm.

“So, how’s Ireland?” Jon asked Billy as he took a seat on one of the couches. A dog person, he barely paid attention to the Tucker’s cat as it leaped down from the couch and stalked away with an angry hiss.



The hiss of a door opening was his only warning.

Acting purely on instinct, Soval rolled from his bed, striking the floor with a heavy thump and putting himself between the bed and the far wall. Less than a second later, the distinctive whine of a disruptor pierced the silence and an emerald beam of light flashed from the doorway, burning into the bed with lethal fire. A second burst of energy immediately slashed into the room, carving a fiery chunk out of the plasticerete wall.

Even as a third and fourth stream of light flashed out, Soval was reacting. The hand disruptor that he kept concealed on the far side of the bed fell into his hand, and he struck another hidden release. Instantly, the floor opened beneath him and he rolled into the small tunnel below the floor. Soval had never before utilized the escape tunnel, a relic of his past as an intelligence operative.

The tunnel slid downward at a sharp angle, and Soval hit the floor of the underground cellar feet first. Adrenaline was pounding through his body, stripping him of the infirmities of old age, and he darted toward the armored cabinet at the far end of the small cellar. He put his hand on the scanner and, a moment later, the door popped open. Moving quickly, he discarded the hand disruptor and reached for the larger pistol within.

Spinning in place, he drew a bead on the exit tunnel even as a body slid into the cellar. Without hesitation, Soval squeezed the trigger and sent a pulse of lethal fire into the chest of the newcomer. There wasn't a sound as the figure crumpled into an unmoving heap. Heart pounding, Soval didn't move for a long moment, his aim unwavering as he aimed into the mouth of the tunnel.

When no one else appeared, Soval gave the armored cabinet another look and frowned. On the inside of the small door was a sensor display keyed just to his home. Five bio-signatures were detected on the upper level of the house, and Soval made a rapid decision. The likelihood of his surviving an extended firefight with five unknown individuals was minimal at best. He was too old for such extended physical activity, and the skills he had learned as an intelligence operative had long since atrophied. Logic dictated an immediate retreat until he had a better idea of whom and what he was facing.

Speed was of the essence, but Soval nevertheless forced himself to slow down. He couldn't afford to become careless in his urgency. Snapping a tactical vest over his underclothes, he checked the charge of the two smaller disruptor pistols in the cabinet before holstering them and pulling a loose-fitting robe over the vest. As he adjusted his feet in a pair of old but comfortable boots, he glanced once more at the sensor display and frowned again. Seven signatures were now present, and two of them were in his bedroom. He was running out of time.

Yuris warned me that something was wrong, he reflected bitterly as he began inputting an old code into the computer array. He recalled the poorly suppressed fear that had been on the other Vulcan's face when they had spoken via comm earlier, and Soval wondered briefly if placing the two children rescued from Vigrud Station in the disgraced doctor's care had been a mistake. It was a decision that had plagued Soval's meditations afterwards, one that he now questioned. Though he was loath to admit it even to himself, guilt had played a significant factor in his illogical choice of seeking out the doctor's aid. After all, it had been Soval's own ward who had been partially responsible for Yuris' disgrace.

The computer display flashed in acknowledgment of his command, and he hefted the heavy pistol once more.

“A'fic: tu'ash,” he said as he approached the concealed exit. Without a sound the wall slid open, revealing a ladder leading down, and Soval quickly began to climb down. He spared only a single glance at the fallen figure and frowned at the unexpected ridges on the Vulcan's forehead; they were all too reminiscent of those on the faces of the two children currently in Yuris' care.

Overhead, the concealed door closed and, twenty seconds later, Soval could feel the explosion rumble through the rungs of the ladder.

The explosive charge was negligible, sufficient only to destroy the cellar and potentially collapse a portion of his home, but it would hopefully slow any further pursuit. Another side benefit would be to alert the local authorities and emergency services – providing that they weren't already compromised.

By the time Soval reached the bottom of the ladder, his body was screaming in protest and his breath came in ragged gasps. The adrenaline surge had long since faded and he was once again an old Vulcan, too near his final days to be engaging in late night firefights and narrow escapes. He wanted his tea and meditation candles.

The ladder ended in a small tunnel that opened up into a wider complex. A small anti-grav sled was waiting, concealed under a heavy tarp, and Soval gave it an appraising look. When he had purchased it, the sled had been state-of-the art and equipped with every trick he could envision. It had cost him a small fortune, one that he hadn't hesitated to pay. With a wry look at the vehicle that was easily three years older than T'Pol, the ambassador sighed at the foolishness of youth.

Fortunately, the grav-sled was still functional and the engine engaged on the first try. Activating the onboard navigation system, he allowed the autodrive function to take control so as to avoid having to illuminate the head lamps. It was an uncomfortable trip, traversing the absolute darkness of the tunnel without being able to see anything, but he swallowed his unease and waited.

Originally a part of an underground sewer system, the tunnels had been abandoned over three centuries earlier, but, as a testament to those who had constructed them, they remained intact and traversable. Many were the Vulcan children who had discovered these lost sewers over the years, and Soval didn't want to theorize how many had used them to escape from their parents for a time.

It was, after all, how he had originally discovered them.

Twenty long minutes passed before he reached a safe exit point. Quickly programming the grav-sled to continue to another, more distant point in an attempt to throw off any additional pursuit, Soval stared at the ladder before him with distaste. His muscles immediately began protesting as he started his climb, but he calmly disassociated the sensation and focused on his breathing.

The ladder ended a half meter above a sealed hatch and Soval fished an access key out of his pocket. Without a sound, the hatch retracted, allowing the ambassador to climb up onto the alleyway. He resealed the hatch before drawing the hood up over his head and starting toward the street beyond.

Like most streets on his homeworld, the avenue was brightly lit to compensate for poor Vulcan night-vision. As he stepped out of the alleyway, Soval took a moment to study the few inhabitants who walked along the narrow streets. Unsurprisingly, there was little to hear beyond the ambient sounds of passing vehicles or the hum of the electronic street lamps. Equally expected was the wide berth that Soval was given; that was, after all, what he had intended.

Although his robe was relatively normal in appearance, the broad sash that he wore over it was a distinctive one. Dark red in color, it bore traditional Vulcan symbols in bright gold stitching. This sash marked him as someone bearing the *katra* of another and, by Vulcan tradition, meant he was not to be spoken to or interfered with so as to avoid potentially tainting the *katra*. Though wearing the sash had fallen out of practice as the *kash-nohv* was made illegal, most Vulcans still recognized what it meant and honored the tradition.

And it made an ideal disguise for someone on the run.

Walking slowly through the streets, Soval kept his hands together, concealed under the sleeves of the robe, and his head down. Under the sleeves, he gripped the disruptor tightly with one hand, hoping that he would not have to use it again. He slowed his pace at a street crossing and lifted his eyes to study the street address.

A muted siren caught his attention and he glanced to the right, instantly frowning at the sight of emergency vehicles turning onto the street that would lead them to Doctor Yuris' residence. Soval pushed down an uneasy feeling and followed, once more grateful for his disguise as no one seemed interested in questioning his presence. Rounding the corner, he stopped at the sight of a fiery blaze that had engulfed Yuris' home.

Inching closer to the circle of emergency workers, Soval looked among them for indication of the mysterious cranial ridges, but he found none. Three covered bodies were present and Soval felt almost certain that they were Yuris and the two children. As he considered the best way to gain access to the bodies to verify that, one of the emergency workers lifted the cloth covering the larger corpse; Soval exhaled softly in sadness at the charred features of the doctor before he turned and strode away.

An hour passed as he walked toward the human sector. In that time, the ambassador deduced a number of things. First, whatever Yuris had discovered was more dangerous than Soval had expected. When he had placed the two children in the doctor's care, Soval had also asked that Yuris conduct a genetic scan of them and their dead mother in hopes of identifying why they bore the cranial ridges. As time passed and his duties in T'Pau's administration continued to demand his time, Soval had briefly allowed himself to forget the children and the dangerous theory that he had about them.

Two days earlier, Yuris had contacted Soval and requested a meeting. At the time, the ambassador had been too busy to respond immediately and it had only been after the doctor's

second, more urgent communique earlier this morning that Soval had agreed to meet with him.

“I’ve discovered something, Ambassador,” Yuris had declared, worry visible on his face. “About the children. I cannot transmit this; I need to see you in person.”

The second thing that the ambassador had determined was that Vulcan was no longer safe for him. An assassination attempt in his house was sufficient cause for worry, but the destruction of Yuris’ house, and his and the children’s murders, made it perfectly clear that someone didn’t want Soval to know what the doctor had discovered. Equally troubling was the fact that only a member of T’Pau’s senior cabinet had the command codes to gain entrance into Soval’s home.

Several blocks away from the human sector, Soval ducked into a nondescript building, a shop that traded in pre-Surak artifacts. The proprietor took in the ambassador’s expression quickly, only an uplifted eyebrow betraying his surprise before he stepped aside to allow Soval entry into the back room. They had not interacted in over sixty years, but, to the proprietor’s credit, no questions were asked.

The small safe house room was stocked with modern equipment and Soval stripped off the robes and tactical vest. He wondered briefly if the proprietor was still in the service of the Ministry of Intelligence, before putting it out of his mind. From one wall cabinet, the ambassador pulled out a newer version of the vest and, from another, he extracted more functional clothes. Once he was dressed, he approached the integrated wall computer and activated it.

“*Burun ifis-tor*,” he ordered, frowning at the possibilities that flashed across the screen. “*Komihn ifis-tor*,” Soval amended. Vulcan transports, after all, would be monitored, and few would think to look for him aboard a human craft. One craft leaped out as nearly ideal. According to its flight plan, the ship was scheduled to depart within the hour and was bound for Earth. Soval mentally translated the human ship name to his native tongue: *Tesmur Sa-fu*.

It was a good sign.



It wasn't a good sign.

Clutching the clipboard he was carrying tightly, Terrence Bailey busied himself with a pretend task to avoid notice. When he had accepted this task, his Terra Prime contacts had insisted that the target would be undefended. As a result, Bailey hadn't even bothered to request backup, instead spending the last several days establishing himself as a nurse in the hospital.

Contrary to the assurances he had received, however, the Vulcan whore was not only present but never left the target's side. Her eyes were rarely still, and she studied everything with a cold analytical expression that reminded Terry of the frightening rumors he had heard about Vulcan psychic abilities. Excitement and fear pulsed through him as he approached to within two meters of the pair, and he concentrated on filling his mind with mundane minutiae in an effort to stave off any telepathic assaults.

The primary target – who bore the unlikely codename “Ben Arnold” in Terra Prime correspondence for reasons that defied Bailey's understanding – gave Terrence an uninterested glance before returning his full attention to the PADD he was studying. His Vulcan companion, however, watched Bailey with a stoic expression on her face as she sat at the captain's side. With a forced smile on his face, Terry checked the IV drip as well as the biobed readings with practiced ease. It was ironic, he reflected, that his normal job made him such an ideal assassin.

From where she sat, the Vulcan – “Lilith” according to Terra Prime codes – shifted slightly, her unblinking eyes fixed on Bailey. If he didn't know better, she could easily pass as human in this moment; her hair was combed over her unnaturally shaped ears and she was wearing civilian clothes that wouldn't look out of place on Terrence's own sister. She even went so far as to hold the traitor's hand in public!

His duties complete, Bailey quickly departed the room, conscious of the Vulcan's eyes on him the entire time. Once back in the hallway, he drew in a steadying breath and glowered at the floor in frustration. The Vulcan's presence seriously complicated his initial plan; no longer could he jump the traitorous captain with a hypospray loaded with a deadly poison. He sighed as he began to evaluate other options.

“The Tucker room?” a voice asked, and Terrence jumped in slight surprise before turning wide eyes to one of his fellow nurses. Carla Espinosa gave him an understanding smile as he nodded. “You get used to her,” she commented as she turned her attention back to the paperwork in front of her.

“I don't know about that,” he muttered darkly. “She creeps me out.” Espinosa gave him another smile, before glancing around to see if they were alone. Once assured that no one was near them, she leaned toward Terrence.

“She's Vulcan,” the nurse whispered, and Bailey gave her a sharp look. “I've seen her ears,” Espinosa continued, now smiling at the shared gossip. Forcing the disgust that he felt for the whore's race from his face, Terrence gave Espinosa a wide-eyed look of surprise.

“But she was holding his hand! Vulcans don't hold hands!” he declared in feigned surprise, swallowing the contempt that surged forward at the look of distracted envy that crossed Espinosa's face. She sighed.

“Isn't it adorable?” she asked with a sigh. “It's like ... a star-crossed Romeo and Juliet!” Still

wearing the bemused expression, she turned away.

Stomach rolling, Bailey watched her walk away, eyes narrowed in disdain. Even in this place, so close to the damage wrought by *aliens*, humanity had become tainted. He snorted softly in disgust at the notion that the Vulcan could even experience an emotion like love. Anyone with eyes could see that she was manipulating Tucker.

Placing the clipboard in the appropriate place, Terrence glanced at the wall chronometer and frowned. His shift wouldn't end for another two hours and, if he wanted to maintain his cover, he couldn't simply leave to contact his Terra Prime associates for additional instructions. For a moment, he toyed with the idea of finding an unused vid-phone and calling from the hospital, but just as quickly discarded the notion as too dangerous.

Over an hour passed during which time two patients coded and one passed away. Bailey almost managed to forget his disgust over Tucker and his Vulcan whore during that time, but the sudden appearance of Commodore Jonathan Archer, dressed in civilian clothes, served as a stark reminder. At one time, Terra Prime had considered attempting to recruit Archer into their ranks, especially once he was named as the commander of *Enterprise*, but had ultimately decided against doing so as Archer's reputation for being actually interested in alien cultures had circulated. And when his damning testimony condemned Paxton to four subsequent life sentences, any thought of recruitment vanished.

“I'm looking for the Tucker room,” the erstwhile hero of the Xindi war said, a friendly expression on his face.

“Three three six, sir,” Terrence replied smoothly, gesturing to the appropriate door as he gratefully noted that his shift had nearly ended. As he spoke, Tucker and the Vulcan emerged from the room, and Archer started forward once more, a broad smile on his face. The three stood outside the door, speaking softly to one another, and Bailey struggled to keep the glower from his face. *Two traitors and an alien whore*, he angrily reflected. An idea occurred to him, and he wondered how hard it would be to smuggle an explosive charge into the elder Tucker's room. If they planned it right, they could take out all three at the same time...

As if sensing his thoughts, the Vulcan abruptly turned her eyes toward him, and Bailey quickly looked away. He could almost feel her alien gaze on him as he busied himself with paperwork. *I'm no one important*, he recited over and over before hefting another clipboard and heading toward the elevator. Shooting a glance over his shoulder, he found the Vulcan's eyes still on him.

Emerging from the elevator at the ground level, Terrence hesitated just long enough to determine that there weren't any law enforcement officers waiting for him before heading toward the main exit. Still holding onto the clipboard, he exited the hospital and strode toward the public transportation stop. He paused several times in the short trip to give handouts to several particularly destitute-looking citizens. Looking into the eyes of these victims of alien aggression, Bailey found his anger resurfacing. If the Vulcans had not held

Starfleet back, Earth would have been ready for the Xindi incursion and the seven million wouldn't have died. His parents wouldn't have died. His brothers wouldn't have died.

His wife wouldn't have died.

Forty minutes later, he was entering his safe house, fury still simmering within his heart. It was little more than a rental apartment, but its placement in proximity to the hospital made it perfect for his needs. Once assured that he hadn't been followed, Bailey tossed the clipboard onto the table and sat before the vid-phone. His call was answered on the first ring.

"You're early," his contact said with some surprise, and Terry frowned.

"There's a complication," he replied coolly. "Lilith and Loxley have joined Arnold at the hospital." Terrence frowned as he spoke Archer's codename, wondering briefly where it came from and why it was necessary. On the heels of that, however, he chastised himself. After all, it almost seemed as though Earth's various security forces were intent on waging all-out war on the organization.

"I see." The contact, a heavysset man with a vaguely Asian cast to his features, leaned back in his chair for a moment before exhaling sharply. "Do you still have access to Arnold's father?"

"Yes."

"Very well. Continue intelligence operations." The contact offered a sinister smile. "I will dispatch additional resources to assist," the other man continued before ending the transmission with a flick of his wrist.

"Terra Prime forever," Terrence muttered under his breath as he stared at the blank screen. With a frustrated sigh, he rose from his seat and walked toward the bathroom, hoping to wash off the stench of human traitors.

Ten minutes later, dreams of fire and vengeance comforted him as he drifted off to sleep.

ACT THREE

Sleep finally gave up its hold on him, and Trip Tucker opened his eyes.

For a moment he let himself remain in place, smiling slightly at the gentle memories that washed over him as he inhaled the familiar smells of home. Even thoughts of Lizzie brought no pain in that brief interlude as he lost himself in recollections of the many years he had spent in this house. If he tried, he could almost hear her and Billy bickering over who got the last bowl of cereal, or Lisa whining about her latest social cause that no one else in the house cared about, or even his dad teasing his mom over breakfast.

It was a good feeling.

After a long moment, he pushed himself up from the bed and gave the room a quick glance. Unsurprisingly, T'Pol was seated before a lit candle, her eyes closed as she meditated. For a heartbeat, Trip studied her, admiring how the candlelight danced across her exotic features. Glancing at her lap, he nearly snorted with laughter at the sight of Flodot, his mother's house cat, curled up in the Vulcan's lap.

The feline's unlikely name came with a story that was almost too strange to be true. Discovered by Charles Junior when he was aiding the Florida Department of Transportation in determining whether a number of the state bridges were still safe for use, the cat had been half starved and suffering from a variety of ailments. Ever a big softie for stray animals, Trip's dad had spent a great deal of time and money in nursing it back to health instead of turning it over to Animal Control. Displaying his odd sense of humor, Charlie Tucker even named the cat after the very organization that he worked for.

“This way,” the older Charles Tucker had joked, “I'll never forget who to blame for dropping the damned cat into my life.”

Even more amusing, however, was how absolutely fascinated the cat seemed to be with T'Pol. Ever since she had first entered his parents' home, the Vulcan had found herself stalked by the feline or under its curious scrutiny. Several times, T'Pol had nearly stumbled when the cat abruptly appeared underfoot, but, in the last day or so, the two appeared to have come to some sort of unspoken understanding. T'Pol would provide the feline with the attention that it desired, and Flodot would stop trying to trip the Vulcan.

Shaking his head in amusement, Trip quietly pulled on a robe and crept from the room, making sure to pull the door shut behind him. Moving as stealthily as possible, he made his way to the kitchen, where he checked the automated beverage dispenser. For a moment, he thought that he was reading the integrated chronometer wrong before finally shrugging and searching for a cup. Since he was up, he decided, he might as well stay up.

Within minutes, he found himself outside the house and in the back yard. Cradling the cup of tea in one hand, he wandered toward the man made lake behind the house and onto the small

pier that jutted out over the water. He breathed in deeply, smiling at the many memories of summers here as he looked at the other houses that surrounded the lake. Dawn was already beginning to peek over the horizon, and he inhaled peaceful contentment before taking a seat at the edge of the pier. He lowered his feet into the lake and spent a few minutes simply enjoying the feel of the cool water as it lapped against his legs.

Only one thing was missing...

He sensed her approach long before he actually heard it, but said nothing as she slowly made her way across the short pier. Though she concealed it, he could feel her discomfort through the bond. Despite his best efforts, T'Pol remained uncomfortable around any body of water larger than a bathtub, no matter how safe it was. As she sat down next him, her legs instantly folding into the familiar meditative pose, he finally gave her a look. It didn't surprise him to discover that she was completely dressed, wearing the civilian clothes that he'd actually become accustomed to seeing her in over the last couple of days.

“Mornin',” he said in greeting, basking at the flash of warmth that pulsed through the bond. As expected, she didn't reciprocate the nonsensical greeting. Instead, she gave the lake a discreet frown that caused Trip to grin.

“It's perfectly safe,” he pointed out, earning himself an annoyed glance. “We used to swim in it all the time.” He gestured toward the other houses. “The local kids still do.”

“It sounds unsanitary,” T'Pol commented, a wry tone in her voice. At his surprised look, she elaborated. “How many life forms excrete or decompose within a body of water this size?”

“None,” Trip replied with another smile. Pointing to cylindrical objects scattered at equidistant intervals around the lake, he explained. “See those? They're sterilizers designed to eliminate nasty microbes and the like. This is a man made lake, T'Pol. Nothing lives in it.” He grinned. “The sterilizers also keep the wanderin' pets from gettin' too close.”

“Fascinating,” T'Pol declared, her voice indicating that she didn't find it so. Her eyes seemed to scan the brightening horizon and Trip couldn't help but notice the tension that was once more in every line of her body. Tucker frowned at that and spent a moment deciding on the approach to take; in the end, he chose forthrightness.

“What's goin' on, T'Pol?” he finally asked, his own eyes now fixed on the rising sun. He caught her startled look and frowned. “You've been acting weird ever since you showed up at the hospital.”

“I have not,” she retorted, a hint of heat in her voice, and Trip gave her a disbelieving look.

“You held my hand,” Tucker reminded her, not unkindly. “In *public*.” The tips of her ears darkened slightly and she glanced away, eyes darting in a gesture that he recognized as discomfort. “I thought we agreed to be honest with one another.”

“I have not lied to you,” T'Pol argued, voice tight.

“But you haven't told me the truth, either.” Suddenly Trip was angry, and he glared at the placid lake, seriously considering throwing the cup. As if sensing his intent, T'Pol reached toward his hand and took the tea from him. She sipped the warm beverage and gave him that wide-eyed look of hers over the rim of the cup that always made him want to kiss her senseless.

Suddenly, he drew in a sharp breath of arousal as a memory of the previous night flooded into his mind's eye: The feel of her skin against him, the touch of her lips against his, the heat of her body as he was gloriously captured within her. Even now, many hours after the fact, he could still feel the phantom sensation of her fingers touching his face as their *katras* became one during their silent intimacy. Friction and movement hadn't been necessary as their minds – and their bodies – raced toward climax.

“Damn it,” he muttered crossly as he looked away and fought the urge to pounce on her once more. It was one of those oddities about his relationship with her that he still struggled to come to grips with; simply put, he *couldn't* stay mad at her. Every time that he was truly angry over something she said or did, memories of their more happy times together would overwhelm him, either moderating the annoyance or washing it away entirely. Even in the weeks and months after T'Pol's short-lived marriage to Koss or her almost callous treatment of him following her mother's death, Trip had tried to figure out why he forgave her so readily. It had later taken an amused Soval to explain that this was a benefit of the bond as it worked to restore equilibrium between the mated pair.

Fortunately, Trip knew that T'Pol experienced the same thing, so he didn't feel as if he were being controlled through some sort of Vulcan mojo. On several occasions, he'd seen her frustration at him mounting before she'd abruptly blinked in surprise, and continued on as if she weren't angry. With force of will, they could remain angry at one another; but Trip generally found it not worth the effort. T'Pol, on the other hand, excelled at holding a grudge.

“You're my *mate*,” Tucker muttered softly as he returned his eyes to the lake. “We're not supposed to keep things from one another, remember?” To his surprise, T'Pol looked away and did something he couldn't remember ever seeing her do.

She sighed.

“Your father's condition,” she began softly, “reminds me that you're going to die.” She glanced at him as he gave her a confused look. “I have no desire to live as a widow, Trip,” the Vulcan admitted, her voice thick with barely suppressed emotion. “Not for a single day.”

“Is that what this is about?” he asked in surprise. They had discussed this very matter at some length after Trip had returned from *Columbia*; despite the bond, they had forced themselves to weigh the pros and cons of continuing their relationship in a blunt conversation that Tucker

had no desire to recall. After all, even if Trip survived to his life expectancy, she would outlive him by forty or fifty years.

"In part." T'Pol frowned slightly as she put the empty cup down. "Your mother's description of Doctor Tucker's eating habits sounds suspiciously similar to yours," she accused, almost glaring at him. Despite his better instincts, Trip barked out a laugh.

"If it makes you feel better, darlin'," he joked, "I'll let you pick out my meals in the future." Too late, he realized that she would likely take him at his word.

And, indeed, she was giving him a measuring look. Trip sighed, knowing that he was going to regret saying that. They sat together in silence for a moment.

"So, what's the other thing?" Trip asked, hiding the smirk that threatened to cross his lips as she gave him another one of her deer in the headlight looks. "You haven't left my side, darlin', but you haven't exactly hidden the fact that something else is botherin' you." A thought occurred to him and he narrowed his eyes. "In fact, you've been actin' more like a bodyguard than anything else." Rather than answer, she glanced away again, and Trip felt anger stirring within him. "That's it, isn't it? You're tryin' to protect me again."

"Yes," came T'Pol's response as she returned to scanning the horizon. "I received a communique from Lieutenant Hayes' associates that indicated you were in danger." Her tone was wry as she continued. "Despite my ... displeasure at your recent order, I made the decision to protect you." She locked gazes with him. "You have an unfortunate tendency to be injured when away from the ship," the Vulcan deadpanned.

"Do you really want to compare records, darlin'?" Trip almost snapped, suddenly feeling sick of it all. She didn't have to explain who on Earth wanted him dead since that list was pretty short. *Why can't those goddamned zealots leave me alone?* Angrily, he looked away from her.

"Trip." T'Pol's voice was soft, but drew his eyes back to her face. He was putty in her hands whenever she used his nickname, especially when she used that tone of voice. "We will get through this. Together." She offered him the half-smile that always lightened his mood, and Trip sullenly wondered when she'd broken him so thoroughly. *Hell, Tucker*, he grouched to himself, *she's had you whipped since she refused to shake your hand.*

"Does that mean this place is crawling with Roughnecks?" he asked after a moment, wondering if he'd even see them. Probably not, he reflected, remembering the eerie ability to disappear that Eisler and his SEALs seemed to have mastered while planetside in the months of the Icarus Project.

"It's under control," she replied coolly. Once more, T'Pol was every centimeter the Ice Princess, and Trip gave her a knowing look; he'd long since figured out that this was her way of concealing concern or fear. With a sigh, he lifted his feet out of the lake and stood, pulling

her up as he did so. Seeing no reproach in her eyes, he leaned forward and gave her a lingering kiss.

“I still haven't forgiven you for cutting your hair, by the way,” Trip remarked as they began making their way back to the house, and he could feel her embarrassed amusement through the bond.

“I wasn't aware that I required your permission to do so,” T'Pol responded, allowing him to take her hand and hold it for the short walk.

“Well, you do.” He reached over with his other hand and tucked the hair behind her ear. “You cut it 'cause you were mad at me, didn't you?”

“I'm Vulcan,” she retorted quickly. “I do not get mad.” Abruptly, she gave him a sidelong look. “And it will remain this length until you rescind your absurd standing order keeping me aboard *Endeavour*.”

“Blackmail?” he grinned. “That's stoopin' pretty low, sweetheart.” T'Pol quirked an eyebrow in response, but did not reply.

Trip chuckled.



Anna Hess chuckled.

Leaning back from her desk, she studied her handiwork with giddy approval. It was perfect. A wrench monkey by preference and training, she had always struggled with the written word. Throughout her Starfleet career, her written reports had been characterized as either poor or incomprehensible. Even when she had served under Trip, she had relied heavily on Mike Rostov to translate her rudimentary outlines into something legible.

But this ... this was her masterpiece.

“Riggs!” she bellowed as she stood up, putting memories of Mike out of her mind. He had been her best friend until his death, and even now, she found herself unable to think of him without getting depressed. “I'm heading to the bridge,” Anna continued as the lieutenant looked up from his station. He gave her a quick nod and returned to what he was already doing.

At the main door leading to the rest of the ship, Hess paused and gave Engineering another look, sighing at how foreign the entire setup looked to someone who had cut her teeth on Henry Archer's design. Even though she had participated in designing the new layout, and had been in command of the teams installing it, every time she entered, Anna expected it to

look like the Engineering department on *Enterprise* or *Columbia*. Hell, she actually had a *real* office!

Shaking her head, she exited the engineering deck and headed toward the nearest turbolift. As she waited for the lift to arrive, she spent a moment thinking about the duty logs; there were three engineers that she trusted to keep their mouths shut about this project, but she wasn't sure if she could juggle the repair schedule without them. With a hiss, the lift door opened and she stepped in.

"B Deck," Anna ordered, bracing for the abrupt acceleration of the lift. That was another one of the kinks that she had yet to work out of the newer systems. According to all of the tests they'd conducted, the lift should work normally instead of with these jackrabbit starts and jarring stops. Since the lifts actually worked, though, determining why they didn't work perfectly was low on the list of priorities.

Halfway to the bridge, the lift screeched to a sudden halt that sent Hess to her knees. Cursing under her breath, she climbed to her feet and reached for the comm button to inform damage control to relay this latest problem. Before she could hit the transmit button, however, the lift lurched into motion once more, causing her to stumble again. She pressed the button anyway.

"Hess to Damage Control," she snapped. "I'm in the bridge turbolift and it just froze up for a couple of seconds. I want it fixed."

"Copy, Commander," Ensign Rostova's voice replied almost instantly. "What deck, ma'am?"

"Between C and D Deck," Hess replied as the lift stopped. She held out a hand to keep the doors open. "Make this a priority," the lieutenant commander continued. "We can't have the lift stalling in combat. Hess out."

Giving the bridge a quick glance around, she frowned at the skeleton crew present. Lieutenant Devereux was the only other officer on the command deck, and she was busy at her station. Anna nearly smiled at how harried the lieutenant looked; although communications was the division least affected by this latest refit, Devereux had still been run ragged coordinating most of the repair teams with the drydock crews.

"Is Commander Eisler in the ready room?" Hess asked one of the two enlisted personnel present on the bridge. As the girl nodded in reply, Anna found herself wondering at what point Starfleet had started recruiting from grade school. The crewman wore the blue of science but looked sixteen, tops. *Damn*, Hess grouched, *I'm getting old*.

Anna didn't bother hitting the announce button, instead opting to barge in on Rick. It was a calculated decision that she knew would irk the hell out of him, even though he wouldn't complain too much. As expected, Eisler looked up from the desk and glowered at her unannounced entrance, looking as though he had swallowed a foul-tasting stone. But then, he always looked like that.

“What do you want?” he demanded as he returned his attention to the computer screen in front of him. Without asking for permission, she dropped into one of the empty chairs – a nice, comfortable one – and sighed heavily.

“I’m getting old, Rick,” Anna announced, grinning at his sidelong look. “*We’re* getting old.”

“Speak for yourself,” Eisler retorted in that low growl of his that was so damned sexy. Despite herself, Anna found herself once more wondering what he’d be like in the sack. She’d seen him mostly naked several weeks back when they had been forced to go through Decon together, and had found herself unable to tear her eyes from the scars that decorated his body. She sometimes thought he had been born in the wrong era, and should have been fighting alongside the Spartans at Thermopylae, marching with Alexander at Gaugamela, or crossing the Rubicon with Caesar.

His response was also an indication of how differently he treated her compared to the rest of the crew. Somehow, against all odds, he had become her best friend on this ship and, though he was unlikely to admit it, she knew he felt the same way. Of equal rank, they had such radically disparate ways of doing things that Trip inevitably teamed them up when he had a problem that he needed solved. Anna sighed again as she realized how similar her relationship with Eisler was to Tucker’s friendship with Commander Reed. In her more introspective moments, she wondered if it was a universal constant that the Chief Engineer and Senior Tactical Officer would become friends.

“Are you here just to bother me, or do you actually need something?” Rick asked as he leaned back from the computer, a dark expression on his face. From what she could see, it was schematics for a weapon system of some sort, and she swallowed the urge to tease him about boys and their toys. After all, he could easily throw that back in her face by invoking her unhealthy attachment to *Endeavour’s* warp core.

“I need you to sign off on a work order,” she replied instead as she tossed the PADD onto the desk. “It’s not exactly ... official, but I wanted to follow procedures.” He gave her another curious look at the comment before picking up the data device and flipping through it.

“A door installation?” Eisler frowned, and she smirked, knowing exactly why he was confused: the work order was intentionally vague about *where* the door was to be installed.

“I want to install a door between the captain’s cabin and the one on its starboard side.” At that, his frown deepened even further.

His hesitation was understandable. During the refit, personal quarters had been reassigned and, in one of her more brilliant schemes, Anna had arranged to put Commander T’Pol in the cabin immediately next to the captain’s. Although she had managed to come up with a completely plausible and believable explanation for the change, Hess had later revealed to Rick that she had done so in silent protest to the silly no-frat policy that Commodore Archer

had been forced to reiterate. That had been phase one.

This was phase two.

As one of the few people aboard *Endeavour* who had been there through most of the ups and downs that comprised the Tucker and T'Pol relationship, Anna considered herself to be something of an expert on the unlikely pair. Since she considered Trip to be an unofficial big brother, she had made the decision to do whatever was necessary to see that he was happy. If that required going against Starfleet Command, then so be it.

Even more amusing was that she knew that Rick privately agreed with her. When she came aboard *Endeavour* to replace Lieutenant Commander Drahn, Eisler had still been adamantly opposed to the relationship between Trip and Commander T'Pol. In time, though, he'd actually grown accustomed to it, particularly as the Vulcan continued to earn his respect. He couldn't officially support the relationship, of course, but in a rare moment of total honesty, he had admitted to Anna that the two senior-most officers were good for one another.

“Who are you going to get to do this installation?” he asked after a long moment of consideration, and she smiled at him. *Gotcha*, she smirked.

“Do you really want to know?” came her reply and he grimaced before shaking his head. “There are still a couple of his old crew from *Enterprise* aboard that can keep their mouths shut.”

Without further comment, he nodded and applied his thumbprint to the work order, officially approving it. He handed her the PADD and, in the moment that she reached for the data device, she notice the minute tremble in his hand.

At once, she felt her earlier joviality dissolve. He hadn't intended for her to learn of the Krupitzer's but, during a routine visit to Sickbay, she had overheard Doctor Phlox use the term while speaking with him. Rampant curiosity had led her to research the term. Rick had been livid when she'd cornered him about the disease and had demanded that she keep silent about it. To her knowledge, he hadn't yet informed the captain, but she had spoken extensively and off the record with Phlox about how she could help. The Denobulan had been grim in his assessment, but had urged her to provide as much moral support as she could in the coming months and years.

She sometimes wondered if the doctor was trying to play matchmaker once more.

Evidently seeing her expression change, he snatched his hand back, almost as if it had been burned. The scowl on his face was dark and terrible; had she not known him as well as she did, Anna might have even been mildly intimidated.

“Bad day?” she asked softly as she stood, and his expression lightened slightly. He nodded stiffly but made no further reply. Silently, she sighed at how difficult it was dealing with him;

if there was one thing that Rick Eisler loathed more than personal weakness, it was someone else seeing it. Knowing him, Anna suspected he would pull a double shift now just to remind himself that he wasn't an invalid.

“Since the captain and T'Pol are off the ship,” Hess said suddenly, recognizing an opportunity to force him to relax, “we should do dinner in the Executive Mess.” To her complete surprise, he flushed slightly and she blinked before hearing the innuendo in her comment. She grinned wickedly at the opportunity to tease him and rose to her feet. “Nineteen hundred hours, Rick. Don't be late or I'll make sure that everyone knows you stood me up.” Anna paused at the doorway, hand above the release button. “I want some German bratwurst tonight,” she purred before exiting the ready room.

Before the door could close, she heard him sigh.



She sighed heavily as her husband stood before the headstone.

It had been moving ceremony, with the priest quoting appropriate passages from one of the many human religious books, and a Starfleet honor guard had been present to pay honor to a fallen comrade. The only thing missing in Feezal's opinion was an overcast sky. It should have been raining, especially if there actually was an all-knowing supernatural entity like the one that the priest spoke of. Instead, Sol burned brightly in the clear blue sky, almost as if in defiance to the somber events taking place.

“How did he die?” she asked softly in their native language. Startled, Phlox gave her a sharp look before exhaling heavily. Like her, he was dressed in subdued hues that were the traditional Denobulan clothes of mourning. Even though she had never met the human recently laid to rest, Feezal had responded instantly when Phlox requested that she accompany him. His body language more subdued than she had ever seen it, her husband returned his attention to the headstone and studied the words carved there.

Jeremy Lucas. Beloved Husband and Father. *Primum non nocere.*

“I told you of his reassignment to Cold Station Twelve,” Phlox began, his expression downcast. It was an indication of how completely he had adopted Terran mannerisms that he responded in Standard English instead of Denobulan Prime. At her nod, he continued. “During the decontamination of the station, he was accidentally exposed to a number of the pathogens that the human Augments released during their escape.”

“That was three years ago,” Feezal commented.

“Yes.” Phlox began to turn away from the headstone. “The last two years have been especially difficult for his family.” She fell into step with him as they walked toward the cemetery exit.

To his visible surprise, she took his hand in a decidedly human gesture of affection before giving him a slight smile and squeezing tightly. It was distressing to her how badly he appeared to need her touch in that moment.

“Humans traditionally have a gathering following a funeral,” she declared. She clearly meant it to be a question, and Phlox nodded sadly.

“My presence would not be appreciated,” he lamented, and Feezal frowned in understanding. Although Doctor Lucas' immediate family had welcomed both of them with open arms and had even encouraged them to stay, Feezal had seen the poorly concealed distrust and outright fear in the eyes of several of the other attendees, an unfortunate side effect of the continuing xenophobia on Earth. When Phlox had referenced his duties with Starfleet as the reason he could not attend the gathering, Feezal had assumed that he was speaking the truth; his recent comments, however, caused her to suspect that he had used his workload aboard *Endeavour* as an excuse to avoid making a scene with his friend's family. Now that she thought about it, though, Feezal also realized that Doctor Lucas' wife had clearly recognized his underlying discomfort with her grieving relatives.

“Thank you for coming, Phlox,” she had whispered before embracing him tightly. “I know who Jeremy's *real* friends are.”

At the time, Feezal hadn't quite understood what the comment meant. In her defense, she still struggled with comprehending human comments and innuendo. Unlike Phlox, she hadn't spent enough time among the Terrans to quite recognize many of their vocal idiosyncrasies. Sometimes, she completely misunderstood what they were saying or doing; her brief visit to *Enterprise* many years earlier had been proof of that when she'd realized that Commander Tucker *hadn't* been interested in having sexual intercourse with her. Phlox had later revealed some of the positively archaic stigmas that humans placed on sexual relations, and Feezal reflected that Terrans were nearly as bad as Vulcans when it came to that subject.

It was a sobering realization that she had misread her husband as she had, though. Though she hadn't actually thought about it before now, Feezal realized that she had never really been able to read Phlox's moods as easily as she read those of her other husbands. Most of the time, Phlox was a jovial, fun-loving individual, but, as she had learned over the years, he didn't take loss very well, and Jeremy Lucas had been a very good friend. Instead of engaging her husband with conversation and potentially angering him, though, she simply walked with him, her hand gripping his, hoping that it would be enough as he struggled to cope with his grief.

As they climbed into the waiting ground transport, Feezal studied Phlox for a long moment. He had lost weight since she had last seen him, and a cloak of grim resolve seemed to hang about him. It appeared completely out of place on a Denobulan of Phlox's temperament, and Feezal hated it. The stern expression on his face was also foreign to her, and she found herself missing his smile. Once, he had been happy and eager to spread his good cheer.

She missed those days.

"I received an employment offer from Alaan Kisen," she declared as the autocab pulled out of the cemetery. Phlox gave her a wide-eyed look, clearly surprised at the non sequitur.

"Indeed?" he asked, the barest hint of a smile on his face. "That is a prestigious assignment." Feezal nodded: employment at the Alaan Kisen medical facility would place her among the foremost medical minds that Denobula could put forward. Her continuing research into the slowly declining birth rate of her species was the reason for the offer, and she had to admit that having access to a larger number of Denobulans for her research was something she desperately needed for further advances.

"It would require a move to Denobula Triax," she said. Her original request to transfer to Terra had been solely to be closer to her favorite husband and, given the darkness that seemed to be slowly overwhelming him, she was loath to give that up. Whether he wanted to admit it or not, she knew that he needed her.

"That may be for the best," Phlox said, attention drifting to the passing landscape. "Our homeworld isn't a target for the Romulans."

"Currently," Feezal pointed out, and her husband nodded slightly. Once more, he sighed.

"Are you going to accept?" he asked as the ground transport began to accelerate.

"I am considering it," she replied as she continued to study him. "It will give me an opportunity to expand my fertility research." At her words, Phlox gave her a look that she couldn't begin to comprehend. He was silent for a long moment before reaching into the overnight bag that was at his feet. Extracting a human-style PADD, he pressed it into her hands.

"Read this, please" he instructed, an unusual emotion thickening his voice. With a confused frown, Feezal turned her attention to the data device.

Within seconds, she was absorbed in the research contained within it. In previous conversations, Phlox had intimated that Captain Tucker and Commander T'Pol were romantically involved, so she wasn't surprised to discover that they had turned to him when the subject of cross-species breeding came up. To her surprise, however, a number of genetic inconsistencies in Tucker's genome complicated the process. Based on her initial assessment of his progress, Phlox was being too conservative in his approach; at least three alternate approaches that he hadn't considered immediately came to mind.

"Can I keep this?" she asked as the autocab turned into the starport. "For study?"

"I had hoped that you might be interested," Phlox replied, an actual smile on his face. She returned the smile, suddenly noticing that he was studying another PADD. Blinking in

surprise, she realized that she hadn't even seen him extracting the second device. Noting her look, he gestured with the PADD. "One of *Endeavour's* officers is suffering from a terminal neurological disorder," he revealed, the smile fading from his face, "and I'm trying to find a way to slow the disease."

"If you wish," Feezal offered, "I can assist." She wasn't sure how much help she would be since human neurology was definitely *not* her area of expertise. To her surprise, though, Phlox's expression had transformed into one she had only seen a few times before: he was hiding something. She studied him for a moment and he glanced away, clearly trying to avoid meeting her eyes. "Phlox," she began.

"I've arranged to speak with Doctor Soong," he interrupted softly. Her eyes widened in mild shock; Phlox had made his opinion of the imprisoned geneticist clearly known the last time Feezal had spoken with him. "He understands human genetics far better than I ever will," Phlox continued. "If I can enlist his aid, I may be able to reverse this disorder before it's too late ..." He trailed off and drew in a deep breath as the autocab slowed to a halt. The doors popped open and Phlox began to climb out.

"Give me a copy of your data," Feezal said abruptly as she exited the ground transport. "I will have avenues of research at Alaan Kisen that you will not."

The whine of an arriving shuttlepod drowned out his response, but she could see the grief that had cloaked him lift slightly. Tension drained out of her shoulders as he grinned broadly at her.

She had missed his smile.



His smile faded as the import of the admiral's comment sank in.

"This isn't a demotion, Jon," Admiral Gardner was saying, and Jon found himself clutching the edge of the table with a white-knuckled grip. Anger thudded through his veins and the muscles in his face quivered under the force of his clenched teeth.

"Really." Archer's voice sounded flat even to himself, but he was beyond caring in that moment. "It sure seems like it, sir." The vid-image of Gardner frowned as he replied.

"Command trusts you, Jon, but we don't want to overwhelm you with work." The admiral's expression was bleak. "I need you at Starbase One right now. Admiral Zu will assume the duties of Sixth Fleet commander until further notice." Gardner studied Archer for a moment, almost as if he was about to make another comment.

"Will that be all, Admiral?" Jon asked tightly. He had to end this transmission before he said

or did something stupid.

"For now," Gardner replied before leaning back in his seat. "I'll forward you official orders within the hour."

"Thank you, sir." The admiral gave him another searching look before reaching forward and ending the transmission. In the moment after the screen went dark, Archer was venting his anger by smashing his fist into the wall.

"Sonuvabitch!" he raged, before jumping to his feet. His fists at his side, he glared at the small hotel room, wishing for something to hit. Anything.

"Jon?" Erika's voice drifted from the bathroom, and he gave her a heated look. At any other time, he would have admired how she looked while wearing nothing more than a damp towel, but the anger that was flooding through him at that moment was not easily assuaged.

"That was Gardner," he nearly snarled as he began to pace the cramped room. "They're removing me from command of the Sixth Fleet."

"Why?" she asked, eyes wide in surprise.

"It's Black," Jon declared. "It has to be." Frustration boiled up again, and he slammed his fist into the unyielding wall. For a heartbeat, the pain almost made him forget how angry he was. As he cradled his hand, Erika took several steps closer, her eyes studying him.

"Do you want me to call Captain Tucker?" she asked. "We can have dinner another night."

"His name is Trip," Archer sighed as he sat down on the double bed and glanced around the room. He had rented the room before Erika arrived, knowing that she would be uncomfortable sleeping under the Tuckers' roof. For that matter, *he* would have felt pretty awkward sharing a bed with her in the Tucker house. "And we won't have many opportunities like this," he continued. "I'll be fine." Pushing the anger down as much as he could manage, he stood up and glanced around the room. "Have you seen my jacket?" he asked as Erika ducked back into the bathroom.

Thirty minutes later, they were climbing out of the autocab in front of the restaurant that Trip had picked out. Unsurprisingly, Tucker and T'Pol were already present and waiting outside; for a moment, Jon goggled at the sight of the Vulcan in human evening wear. She looked fantastic. With the shape of her ears concealed by her hair, she appeared to be nothing more than a stunning young woman out on the town.

"Wow," Erika muttered as she took in T'Pol's appearance with poorly concealed envy. Jon almost rolled his eyes at the comment before he caught himself; he was sure that she wouldn't appreciate his finding humor in the moment and he didn't fancy trying to convince her that, in his eyes, she outshone the Vulcan. Sometimes, women were strange.

"Hey, Cap'n," Trip said with a mocking grin as he offered his hand for Archer to take. Although Jon found himself slightly cheered at the utterance of his old rank turned nickname, his anger at Starfleet Command was still simmering within him and his return smile felt forced. As he shook Tucker's hand, he noticed Trip's expression change slightly. Jon sighed: his old friend would likely be grilling him later.

"*Polly* was starting to wonder if you were ever going to arrive," Tucker continued, emphasizing the name that T'Pol was to be called during the evening. Out of the corner of his eye, Jon caught a flicker of annoyance crossing the Vulcan's normally stoic face, and found himself wishing he could have been present when the two had discussed the name.

"Our reservations were for nineteen hundred hours local," T'Pol pointed out smoothly. She gave Archer the flat look he recognized as Vulcan disapproval. "It is now nineteen fifteen hours."

"Blame Starfleet Command," Jon grouched as Erika took his hand. To their credit, neither Trip nor T'Pol reacted beyond sharing a quick glance. "Admiral Gardner wanted to talk to me."

"It is now nineteen sixteen and we are still not seated," the Vulcan replied and Trip chuckled. Shooting Archer a wicked grin, the engineer reached out to T'Pol and took her hand. Had he not known her as long as he had, Jon would have missed the minute flinch that she gave. Knowing how uncomfortable the Vulcan was with such blatant physical contact, Jon was surprised that she did not immediately pull her hand free as they approached the entrance to the restaurant. He could almost swear that he saw Tucker wince at least once, though.

Dinner turned out to be spectacular. Trip and T'Pol were in rare form as they bickered good-naturedly, and Erika looked on in baffled amusement as the two argued over subjects ranging from the texture of their respective meals to the quality of the live band – Trip thought they were great, but T'Pol found their skill only slightly above average. The war seemed to be a subject that was off-limits, and Jon quickly realized that they were making a conscious effort to avoid being Captain Tucker and Commander T'Pol for one night.

"You should have seen them aboard *Enterprise*," he joked to Erika as the small party finished their meals. To his mild surprise, both of his friends had ordered vegetarian dishes, but Jon had noticed Trip cast a longing glance at his porterhouse when it arrived. The commodore briefly wondered what that was about, but decided against asking. "There were times that I swear they forgot I was even in the room."

"I saw the same thing when he was on my ship, and it was just the two of us," she responded smoothly, causing Trip to cough slightly as he choked on some wine. Erika leveled a mock glare at the other captain. "Did you know that the engineering team threw a party when you left *Columbia*?" she asked.

"Really?" Trip looked almost upset at that. "I guess I didn't make the best of impressions,

huh?" He gave Hernandez a sheepish smile. "Sorry about that, ma'am."

"You *can* call me by my first name, Mister Tucker," Erika replied. "We are the same rank, after all."

"I think I can do that." Tucker grinned. "As long as you call me Trip. I look around for my dad whenever someone calls me Mister Tucker." T'Pol gave him an odd look at that comment, and Archer found himself wondering what she was thinking. In that moment, however, a familiar tune floated from the band, and Jon gave Erika a look. She nodded instantly, a smile on her face, and the two rose.

"If you'll excuse us," she said to their dinner companions, but neither appeared to notice.

"No," T'Pol was replying to Trip's hopeful expression. "I do not dance."

"But it's good exercise!" the captain was arguing as he continued to give the Vulcan his best hangdog expression. Rolling his eyes, Jon led Erika to the dance floor and promptly forgot about his two best friends.

As he held Erika to him, Archer wished that the moment could last forever. In those all too brief minutes, he wasn't a commodore in Starfleet, she wasn't a captain, and Earth wasn't at war for its very survival. They were just Jon and Erika.

Once the song ended, Erika excused herself to visit the 'powder room' – whatever that was – and Archer weaved his way through the couples on the dance floor. He blinked in slight surprise to discover T'Pol sitting alone at the table, and glanced around for Trip.

"Professor Tucker called him," the Vulcan answered his unspoken question as Jon retook his seat. "I believe it is in regards to the arrangements for Doctor Tucker's release from the hospital tomorrow."

"Ah," Archer replied as he sipped his wine. He made a mental note to acquire a bottle of this vintage for later.

"Trip is concerned," T'Pol began without preamble, "about your mood." Jon gave her a surprised look and she quirked an eyebrow. "He suspects that your duty assignment has been changed, and that you are displeased over this change."

"How the hell did he figure that out?" Archer asked, eyes wide. He blinked in shock at the barest hint of a smile that briefly graced T'Pol's lips.

"When he actually applies himself, Trip is capable of logical thought." Her expression was once more a stoic one. "From your reply, I would assume he is also correct," T'Pol continued. Archer nodded.

"I'm no longer the commander of Sixth Fleet," he admitted softly, noting that both of her eyebrows shot up. "Admiral Zu will be assuming command." The Vulcan crinkled her nose in what almost looked like disgust.

"That is illogical," she stated. "The admiral does not have the appropriate level of training to command a fleet."

"But he does have the rank," Jon replied angrily. "It's the dark side of humanity, T'Pol," he continued softly. "Politics at work."

"It is an inefficient way to wage a war, Commodore." He almost smiled at her wry remark.

"Four hundred years ago," Archer reminded her, "human officers *bought* their rank instead of actually earning it." He shrugged. "There's not a lot I can do about it." Abruptly, he smiled. "Do you remember when you told me and Trip about your grandmother, T'Mir?"

"She was my second foremother," T'Pol corrected as she raised an eyebrow. Over her shoulder, Jon could see Trip approaching. "Not my ... grandmother."

"Right." Archer gave her another smile as Trip retook his seat. "You didn't tell us how much you look like her."

"My mother indicated that I share some similarities in appearance to T'Mir," the Vulcan said cautiously.

"You could be her twin!" Jon declared, almost grinning at the confused look that the two shared. He glanced away, hoping to catch sight of Erika.

"Care to elaborate on that, Cap'n?" Trip asked and Archer smiled broadly.

"I dunno, Trip," he smirked. "Most of the details are classified, but suffice to say I had a visitor a couple of days ago..." He trailed off as he finally caught sight of Erika. His eyes followed her return.

"Daniels." T'Pol's tone was flat, almost annoyed, and Archer smiled again as he nodded.

"I thought that crap was over," Tucker muttered. His disgust with Daniels' manipulations nearly rivaled Jon's.

"For the most part, it is. He just needed me to help him recruit a wayward Vulcan wandering around Pennsylvania in the nineteen fifties."

"Mestral?" T'Pol sounded as shaken as she had ever sounded. "You recruited Mestral?"

"Actually, Lieutenant Reynolds did most of the talking," Jon said with a smile as he signaled

Star Trek: Endeavour

“Pandora”

the waiter.

They were going to need more wine.

ACT FOUR

The stench of wine caused him to flinch, and Hannibal Black felt his temper spike.

Pausing at the sealed door, he gave the two Security troopers standing guard a look that conveyed his disgust with them. His orders had been absolutely clear in regards to what amenities the prisoner was allowed, and yet he could smell proof to the contrary. Harrad-Sar was too important to be given access to intoxicants.

“Commodore Casey is waiting inside, sir,” the taller of the two guards said as his companion pressed the door release button. Fighting to keep his fury from his face, Hannibal strode through the entranceway and into the cell.

It was a comparatively luxurious prison cell, with a comfortable-looking bunk, a sonic shower, and smart walls that could be programmed to simulate the appearance of any environment desired. The temperature in the room was slightly below human norm, but Black barely noticed as his eyes fell upon the two figures that sat together at the desk in the center of the room. Although the hulking Orion was still wearing the mag-cuffs and was dressed in prison gray, there was no other indication that he was a prisoner as he chuckled at something Casey had just said.

“What the hell are you doing here?” Black hissed through clenched teeth, his eyes riveted on the commodore's face.

“Having a conversation with our guest,” Casey replied smoothly as he gestured toward the Orion. “I was interested in finding out how Harrad-Sar was doing today.”

For a heartbeat, Hannibal found it impossible to see straight. In that moment, he wanted nothing more than to grab the wine bottle on the small desk and smash it over Casey's head.

“Commodore,” he said tightly, “outside. Now.” He turned away and stormed through the doorway. The two guards gave him a glance, but said nothing. A moment later, Casey joined him.

“You know the fucking rules!” Hannibal snapped the moment that they were out of hearing range, and the commodore's eyes widened slightly at the venom in Black's tone. “You do *not* get to speak to the prisoner without my explicit permission!” He took a step closer, invading the ex-MACOs personal space. “Am I clear, *Commodore*?”

“Crystal,” Casey responded coldly. His eyes were chips of frozen ice as he returned Hannibal's glare with one of his own. “But, with all due respect,” the commodore continued, his tone making it clear that respect was the farthest thing from his mind, “you brought me into this to break him.” Casey crossed his arms and glowered. “I can't do that with you breathing down my neck.”

Black hesitated, suddenly wondering if he had overreacted. It had been against his better judgment to bring Casey into the ongoing interrogation of Harrad-Sar but, as time passed and the Orion continued to prove uncooperative, Hannibal had grown desperate. Casey's history in the MACOs included a stint in black ops, so Black had discreetly recruited the man into the select group of Starfleet personnel who were aware of the Orion's presence on Earth. So far, it had worked, with the commodore managing to gain Harrad-Sar's trust in a bizarre bit of misdirection that Hannibal wouldn't have ever considered. Three Security troopers – ex-MACOs all – had been instructed to utilize a brutal regimen of physical coercion on the Orion for a period of five weeks straight; at the beginning of the sixth week, Commodore Casey had entered the cell and played the part of a man aghast at what he was seeing. As far as Harrad-Sar knew, the two men and one woman who had beaten him repeatedly for days had been arrested and imprisoned for their “unlawful” actions.

As the Orion slowly recovered, Casey made it a point to visit him on a daily basis, generally bringing food and other luxuries. At no time during this convalescence period did he ask questions about the Romulans and, gradually, Harrad-Sar began to loosen up around the commodore. When Casey finally did ask about the disposition of Orion and Romulan forces, Harrad-Sar seemed almost eager to tell him what he knew, and that intelligence had led directly to the discovery of the Romulan installation at Zeta Reticuli.

“Have you learned anything new?” Hannibal asked, changing the subject slightly to avoid apologizing. He still wasn't sure if Casey actually deserved an apology or not. The commodore shifted slightly as he replied.

“Nothing we didn't already know,” came his response. Casey uncrossed his arms as he glanced in the direction of the cell. “He's on the verge of breaking,” the commodore began confidently, smirking coldly. “I've seen it in his eyes. Another couple of weeks and I'll have him almost housebroken.” At that, Black frowned. He hoped that he was able to hide his discomfort from the ex-MACO; the very notion of referencing another sentient being in the same way one spoke about training an animal made his skin crawl. It was just another one of the reasons he hated interacting with Casey.

“Keep me apprised,” he ordered before turning away. Disgust twisted his stomach and he swallowed his protesting morals. This wasn't the time to hesitate about the course that they had already embarked upon. It wasn't the time to second-guess himself. *What I do*, he argued silently, *I do for the sake of Earth. I am not a bad person for what I'm doing.*

He just wished that he could believe that.

The turbolift ride from the secure underground facility took nearly five minutes, during which time Hannibal studied an encrypted PADD containing the latest status reports. He sighed in frustration at the revised casualty list coming in from the *Atlantis* strike group. It seemed as if they were losing people more quickly than they could replace them...

Moving on to a fleet readiness report, he found his mood brightening at the latest news from

Jupiter Station. The chief engineer in charge of the station reported success at integrating over ninety percent of the *Endeavour* upgrades with the *Daedalus* hull frame. According to those reports, he was incorporating a number of the design revisions to the ships currently under construction. The next run of these ships would be faster and tougher than even the ones already in service.

With a chirp, the lift slowed to a halt and Black stepped through the opening doorway, attention still focused on the PADD. A pair of security troopers assigned to guard the lift stood aside as he exited it, but he barely gave them a glance before continuing down the corridor. According to his schedule, he was supposed to meet with Admiral Gardner in a little over an hour to go over their daily presidential briefing. Grimacing, Black wondered what inane questions the commander-in-chief was going to ask today; all too often, she seemed less interested in how the war was going than she was in how it affected her approval ratings. *Politicians*, Hannibal grumbled with disgust.

Once inside his office, he plugged the PADD into his desk computer to allow the two to synchronize data before heading for his coffee pot. It was one of Black's little quirks that he refused to drink resequenced coffee and, though it cost a small fortune, he had arranged for a shipment of naturally grown coffee beans to be shipped to his address on a weekly basis. Since the Xindi attack, the price of those beans had skyrocketed, of course, but, as Hannibal sipped from his cup, he decided that the cost was worth it.

A beep sounded from his desk, alerting him to the fact that the PADD had finished downloading data to his computer, and he returned to the desk. Glancing over the personnel reports, he frowned. *Why the hell is he replacing Archer?* Black asked himself before exhaling sharply.

“Zu?” he said aloud, barely able to contain his surprise and disgust. The man was even less competent than Archer! Stabbing the transmit button on the desk comm panel, he spoke. “Get me Admiral Gardner.”

“Aye, sir,” the yeoman manning the switchboard said in response. Within seconds, the admiral's voice emerged from the comm line.

“This is Gardner.” He sounded bored, and Hannibal frowned.

“Why are you putting Zu in command of Sixth Fleet?” Black asked without preamble. He didn't care if his superior officer was offended by the tone; the man already knew what Black thought about him. “The man has less fleet command experience than Archer does.”

“I'm not in the habit of explaining myself to you, Hannibal,” Gardner replied stiffly, using Black's first name as a less than subtle reminder of his superior position in the Fleet. It was a centuries-old tradition in military and paramilitary organizations. “Admiral Zu's qualifications are not in doubt, and I've approved his transfer on the basis of his continuing support of the war effort.”

“What?” Black didn't even try to hide his stunned disbelief. “We're on the eve of a major offensive and you're changing the command structure *now*?”

“I have every confidence in the admiral,” came the less than revealing response. “And this discussion is closed.” With a second chirp, the line went dead and Hannibal sagged back in his chair.

It didn't make sense. As much as he didn't like Archer, Black was well aware that the man had more experience in fleet operations than nearly every other flag officer currently in the Service. Removing him from commander of Sixth Fleet made absolutely no strategic or tactical sense ... unless something else was going on.

Frowning, Hannibal pulled up the commodore's personal record and spent a few minutes looking over it. Almost instantly, Archer's unexplained disappearances drew his attention, and Black narrowed his eyes in thought. In every single instance, Starfleet Command had classified exactly what happened during these instances, and had led the officer corps to theorize that Archer was actually on covert missions for Earth. Could this be one of those instances? After all, Archer and the commander of Starbase One's security detachment *had* vanished off Starbase One for three days two weeks earlier. Pulling up the lieutenant's personnel jacket, Hannibal's eyebrows rose when he realized that this Scott Reynolds spoke Andorian.

“You sly bastard,” he muttered under his breath. Clearly, Gardner was more effective than Hannibal had anticipated. The close personal ties that Archer had cultivated with Fleet Captain Shran gave the man an ideal insight into their culture and, as much as Black hated to admit it, the commodore was a surprisingly effective diplomat when he remembered to be. Up to now, United Earth diplomats had been unsuccessful in trying to convince the Andorians to provide concrete assistance. Archer may very well be the right man for this job.

Sighing, Hannibal closed the personal files and went back to work.



She wanted to go back to work.

As she sat quietly in her chair and watched Doctor Charles Tucker direct his two sons with the authority of a military officer, T'Pol fought the urge to squirm slightly. When the Tuckers began rearranging the furniture in the front room to make space for the medical equipment, she had naturally offered her assistance. It was only logical, after all, given that she was stronger than both Trip and William combined.

They had moved only the couch when Trip's father limped slowly into the room and froze. For a moment, T'Pol feared that the doctor was suffering a relapse of his previous condition. His

face darkened to an almost purple color, and he appeared to experience considerable trouble breathing. To her surprise, however, Doctor Tucker pointed to her.

“Sit,” he ordered, authority ringing in his voice. He then turned to his two sons and an expression that T'Pol recognized from Trip's periodic flashes of rage crossed the older man's face. “What the *hell* do you think you're doin'?” he almost snarled at the two men, anger written plainly across his face. “It can't be what ah thought it was, 'cause no son o' mine is gonna be makin' a lady work like that!” To T'Pol's surprise, Trip and William looked at their feet, as if embarrassed. In that moment, the two men acted more like pre-adolescents than grown adults, and T'Pol raised an eyebrow at their curious body language.

“She's stronger than—” Trip began to explain, but Doctor Tucker glowered darkly at his eldest son and interrupted.

“Ah don't care!” the older man snapped, his accent particularly thick. “Ah thought ah raised the two o' you right, goddammit!” T'Pol's other eyebrow climbed at the man's words and the thickness of his accent; like Trip, his drawl intensified when he was in the grip of powerful emotions. She shifted slightly, unintentionally drawing his attention. “Ah asked you to sit, Miss T'Pol, while these two reprobates act like *gentlemen*,” Charles Tucker Junior reminded her. It was said politely, devoid of the raw anger in his comments to his sons, but there was a steely resolve underlying the words.

So she sat.

An hour passed while she sat in the chair. Initially, she wasn't sure if Doctor Tucker was angry at her as well as his sons, but within the first ten minutes she had discerned that his fury was directed solely at the two younger men. To her, he remained as polite and friendly as ever, going so far as to offer to have the two younger men bring her refreshments while they worked to rearrange the heavy furniture. As time crept by, however, the smell of William Tucker's perspiration became steadily more powerful, and T'Pol began calculating possible escape routes. While it was true that she had become accustomed to the smell of humans during her time aboard *Enterprise* and *Endeavour*, even so far as to almost completely eliminate her daily need for nasal inhibitors, in the enclosed room without the atmospheric reclamators of a starship, the smell was nearly overwhelming.

“Doctor Tucker,” she said softly to the seated Charles Junior. He turned toward her and, for a moment, she felt her stomach lurch at the familiarity of his eyes. Trip was correct: Lorian had inherited his forefather's eyes. That thought left her unaccountably sad.

“Yes, Miss T'Pol?” Trip's father replied, and she once more wondered at his use of the honorific. Despite repeated reminders that he could refer to her as simply T'Pol, Charles Junior persisted in calling her Miss. Sometimes, she wondered if her own formality dictated his use of the term or whether it was simply a sense of decorum that rivaled her own.

“I must excuse myself for a moment,” T'Pol stated. She rose, unsurprised to see him push

himself to his feet as well, despite his recent near death experience. He had been ordered to ease back into activity while his heart continued to heal but had been encouraged to walk around during this convalescence; unsurprisingly, he did so at every opportunity. Based on her experience with Trip, she suspected that the elder Tucker's foul mood with his sons had more to do with his inability to return immediately to his previous level of activity than any actual anger.

The nasal inhibitor assuaged her immediate difficulty, and she inhaled deeply through her nose to test the efficacy of the medicine. When she detected none of the offensive smells that had been seriously testing her control, she relaxed slightly in relief before chastising herself for not effectively suppressing the gratitude she experienced in that moment. Instead of immediately returning to the front room, however, she extracted a PADD from the Starfleet duffel at the side of the bed and activated it. Instantly, an icon representing new messages appeared at the bottom of the display screen, and she spent a moment studying the data there. All but one were progress reports regarding *Endeavour's* refit, and she quirked an eyebrow when she realized that the final message had no sender annotated. According to the date-stamp, it had only been received within the last ten minutes. Her pulse quickened as she opened it and read the text message within.

Cell identified and infiltrated. Will inform of results. Continue mission until further notice. Maintain high readiness. Nothing follows.

Even as she digested the meaning behind the message, it abruptly disappeared from the display of the PADD and she raised an eyebrow in surprise. Inputting a quick command, T'Pol blinked in mild surprise as the data device was unable to recall any hint of the message. Another diagnostic, this one of her own design, revealed that the PADD was operating at peak efficiency and had not received any digital messages from unknown senders in the last hour.

T'Pol frowned.

Logically, the inability of the PADD diagnostics to detect or recall the message was indicative of either superior equipment on the side of the sender, or that the PADD itself had been compromised. She resolved to disassemble the data device at the earliest convenience and examine its circuitry for abnormalities or perhaps non-factory standard additions. In the house where Trip had grown up, finding tools would not be difficult.

“God,” Trip abruptly said as he entered the room. His face was sweaty, his hair disheveled and even with the nasal numbing agent working, she could almost taste the potency of his scent. It took every gram of her control to hide the arousal that spiked through her as he collapsed on the bed with an exaggerated groan. The tiniest of smirks crossed her lips as she gave him an appraising look, noting that his father had evidently worked him rather hard in her brief absence.

“I feel terrible,” he almost whined before shooting her a glare. “You could've pitched in, you know.”

“Your father thought otherwise,” T'Pol remarked.

“That's 'cause he's an old-fashioned dinosaur who hasn't heard of the women's movement!” Trip declared, louder than was necessary. It took T'Pol a half-second to realize that the comment had been intended more for the elder Charles Tucker than for her, and she raised an eyebrow. Sometimes, humans made less sense than Andorians.

“Everything okay?” Trip asked in a softer voice as he sat up on the bed. He nodded in direction of the nasal inhibitor before giving the open door a quick glance. “Any problems?”

The question that he left unspoken regarded the nature of Vulcan biology, and she appreciated the diplomacy of his query. Evolution had granted the females of her species an enhanced olfactory capability, but Trip was, as far as she knew, the only non-Vulcan to understand exactly why. A vestige of their uncivilized past, the heightened sense of smell allowed the female to detect the pheromones released by a male entering *pon farr*, which usually initiated her own reciprocal state of arousal. The pheromones of a bonded male were virtually undetectable by females other than his mate, but those of an unbonded male entering his amok time were indiscriminate and dangerous. To her absolute surprise, T'Pol had discovered that Trip had exactly such an effect on her; when he was aroused – which was far too often, in her opinion – she found it difficult to focus on anything but him.

“I'm fine,” she replied coolly, ignoring his leer. As much as she cherished his presence in her life, there were times when she found him difficult deal with. This was just such a time.

“You sure?” he grinned as he leaned toward her. “We can duck outta here for a while if you want. I know a place–”

“Trip!” Doctor Tucker's voice echoed from the front room, interrupting Trip's lecherous comment. “Get your ass out here!” Sighing melodramatically, her mate pushed himself off the bed and headed for the door. Giving the PADD another glance, T'Pol set it aside and rose. Disassembly could wait until tonight while everyone was asleep.

She followed Trip into the front room – inexplicably called a *living* room, although why T'Pol had yet to determine since the Tuckers lived in the entire house, not simply this room – to discover that Commodore Archer and Captain Hernandez had returned from their expedition to procure additional foodstuffs. The commodore was struggling to carry several large bags through the main door, while fending off the flagrant curiosity of the house feline at the same time. Captain Hernandez was carrying a pair of bags herself but had clearly not attempted to overburden herself with weight as the commodore had. As Trip stepped forward to lend assistance to Archer, T'Pol recognized that one of the packages that Captain Hernandez was carrying contained beer. She sighed in advance of the coming festivities and wondered if she had sufficient nasal numbing agent to eliminate her sense of smell entirely. There were few human beverages that she detested the smell of more than beer.

Naturally, Trip loved it.

“T'Pol,” Elaine Tucker's voice momentarily startled her, and she turned to give the human woman her undivided attention. The moment her eyes focused on Trip's mother, the matriarch of the human clan hesitated and glanced away. This was not unexpected, as T'Pol had long since deduced that her *tel-ko-mekh* was still not entirely comfortable with her.

“Yes, Professor?” T'Pol said in response even as she tracked Trip's movements out of the corner of her eye. She wanted to caution him against overconsuming alcoholic beverages tonight, particularly beer; if he smelled like a brewery, she would rather sleep outside before sharing a bed with him.

“A man approached me at the store,” Professor Tucker whispered, her voice pitched low enough that only T'Pol could hear it, “and instructed me to pass something on to you.” T'Pol narrowed her eyes as the human woman continued. “It's a phase pistol.”

“I see.” Not sure if she was entirely successful at concealing her surprise at this revelation, the Vulcan glanced away. “Where did you conceal it?” she asked.

“It's still in the car,” Elaine revealed, discomfort written on her face.

“Thank you.” T'Pol's mind was racing. If this person was related to Lieutenant Hayes' mysterious Section, they had to know that T'Pol already had a phase pistol with her. Why would they want her to have a second one unless it was a discreet way of indicating that their operation against the terrorist cell was guaranteed to succeed? She would have to scan it to determine that it did not contain a locator beacon or perhaps explosive material. “I will retrieve it at once.” She started to turn away, but Professor Tucker touched her on the arm to halt her.

“It's Terra Prime, isn't it?” the human woman asked. “They're trying to hurt Trip again, aren't they?”

For a fraction of a second, T'Pol hesitated. She had no desire to give her *tel-ko-mekh* something else to be concerned about, especially given Charles Junior's recent experience. Yet, if their roles had been reversed, the Vulcan knew that she would want to be as informed as possible, no matter how dire the situation. The decision was an easy one to make.

“Yes,” she said simply before heading toward the door.



The door opened with an angry squeal.

Balancing the computer equipment on his hip, Terrence Bailey quickly scooted into the

derelict warehouse before the heavy door could slide back shut. He paused just beyond the entryway, noting without surprise that the other cell members had reached for weapons at his arrival. The vicious-looking German Shepherd that was leashed near the door growled softly, but made no move toward Terrence.

"You're late," the gruff cell leader snarled, his already harsh features twisted into an angry scowl that robbed him of any charisma that he may have previously possessed. Once an officer in Starfleet, Franklin Bond had been court-martialed following the Xindi assault and had never quite forgiven that organization for ejecting him from their ranks. A joint Human-Vulcan investigation had linked the then-Lieutenant Commander Bond to a number of violent assaults on non-humans, and Bond constantly displayed an almost rabid hatred of the pointed eared aliens.

"The right equipment was hard to find," Bailey replied cautiously. Around Bond, he did everything cautiously. From the moment that he had arrived at Terrence's door, the ex-Starfleet officer had terrified him, and Bailey knew that any misstep on his part would lead to his body being pulled out of the Atlantic Ocean.

That is, if his body was found at all.

"Were you followed?" Bond demanded, his eyes narrowed, and Terrence fought the urge to roll his eyes at the stupidity of the question. Of course he hadn't been followed. He held his tongue, though; there was no way to tell what the other man would do if he thought Bailey was mocking him, and he had no desire to actually find out.

"Of course not," he said in response as he placed the bulky computer on the desk. Bond grunted once as he returned his complete attention to the explosive that he was still working on. As Terrence plugged the newer computer into the portable generator, he glanced around the warehouse with barely suppressed trepidation.

A police raid on Bailey's apartment the day before had forced them to relocate to the industrial outskirts of Jacksonville. None of the cell members had been captured in the raid, but the near miss was proof that their time was limited and at least some of their identities known. With Charles Tucker released from the hospital, the decision had been made to hit the house of the target with a vehicle-based explosive. Terra Prime had even acquired a half gram of tricobalt from offworld sources; amplified by this, the explosive yield would be more than sufficient to level the Tucker household and every other home within a kilometer of the epicenter. According to Bond, all who died within the blast radius were considered acceptable losses.

Terrence shivered slightly as he covertly studied the other members of the cell. Within hours of the conversation with his Terra Prime contact, he had realized that he was way over his head; but he had absolutely no way to get out. Bond was the first to show up on Terrence's doorstep, and was followed in rapid succession by four others the following day. Another pair appeared three days after that, and Bailey had briefly interacted with another man earlier this

day who had the same fanatical light in his eyes as Bond.

Swallowing his unease, Terrence wondered how he'd let himself get swept up into this. He'd only wanted revenge for the death of his family and, in his anger, Terra Prime's precepts had made perfect sense. Humanity *had* been held back by the Vulcans, and if the aliens hadn't prevented it, Earth could have defended themselves better against the Xindi attack. Terrence was doing this for those lost to alien aggression. Instinctively, his hand sought out the small photograph of his wife that he kept in his breast pocket. Captured just three days before death from the sky robbed the world of her potential for all time, the image was a tangible reminder of what he had lost, of what he was fighting to avenge. Sometimes, it was enough.

Sometimes, but not today.

The squeal of the door opening caused him to glance up, and he frowned at the arrival of the man he'd spoken to earlier. Framed in the doorway with the setting sun casting a long shadow over his form, the newcomer paused for a long moment as his eyes ranged across the warehouse in an obvious visual sweep. Every hair on Bailey's body seemed to stand on end as he took in the man's unmistakably aggressive stance. He suddenly drew in a sharp breath as he caught a glimpse of the man's eyes.

They were red.

The dog began barking loudly in the moment that Terrence realized this, and it leaped toward the newcomer. As if the canine were a mere fraction of its actual size, the man backhanded it out of the air and sent it tumbling across the floor. Even before the dog struck the ground, the newcomer was lifting a large weapon out of concealment from underneath the longcoat he was wearing. Time seemed to slow to a crawl as the cell members scrambled for their own weapons and Terrence found himself frozen in stunned horror.

Spewing out a stream of superheated plasma bolts, the newcomer's weapon stitched a gruesome line across the chests of the Terra Primers. With the weapon discharging bursts of fire at a cyclic rate so high that they almost appeared to be a single, coherent beam, the newcomer scythed the stream of plasma across the room. Two of the Terra Primers were ripped apart almost instantly, followed by a third before the remaining cell members managed even to return fire. To Bailey's horror, the man barely reacted under the onslaught. Jacket and shirt smoking, the scarlet-eyed figure took another step forward, his weapon chattering its lethal song.

With a shriek, Bond fell as the weapons fire found him, clutching his ravaged face with both hands as he collapsed. The stench of seared flesh was suddenly overwhelming, and Terrence's survival instincts finally kicked in. He wasn't a fighter; fear spurred him to flee. Terror gave his legs strength, and he sprinted toward the service exit as he heard one of the remaining two Terra Primers scream a death cry.

Fire suddenly seared through his body, and an agonized shriek was ripped from his throat.

He hit the ground hard as liquid pain stabbed him in the back and robbed him of control. His head smacked the duracrete floor with brutal force, and he spent an impossibly long moment trying to focus on anything beyond the molten lava that churned through his veins. Looking down, he gasped in horror at the mangled flesh that had once been his legs. Shock quickly began to set in, and he stared in numbed disbelief at his sizzling wounds.

The sound of sporadic pulse weapon fire finally roused him back to coherence, and he forced himself to look away from the smoking flesh of his lower limbs. There was no sign of the shooters involved in the exchange, until one of the Terra Primers abruptly lunged into view. Terror was stamped on the woman's face as she dragged herself forward. She was limping and carrying two weapons now as she sprayed fire back in the direction she had come from. With miniature explosions, the bolts of superheated plasma smashed into the various pieces of equipment that littered the warehouse, showering the ground with debris. Discarding one of the weapons, she all but dove toward the massive explosive that Bond had been working on and, without hesitation, she slapped her hand down on the palm reader.

In that moment, the newcomer appeared.

His longcoat hung off of his shoulders in smoldering tatters and he had evidently discarded the automatic weapon in favor of a smaller but no less lethal rifle. The shirt he wore was smoking, and underneath it, Terrence could see body armor of unknown manufacture. Moving without apparent haste, the man raised his rifle and fired once, dropping the woman with a precisely aimed shot to the head. As she slumped over the explosive, the man gave Bailey a quick glance before continuing toward the woman's body. With almost casual disregard, he tossed her body aside and grunted at whatever it was he saw. A flashing light bathed his face in an unnatural scarlet glow as he produced a Starfleet communicator and flipped it open.

"Achilles to Galahad. Lock onto this signal and beam up everything in a one meter radius. Code Nineteen."

"Confirm code nineteen," a British-sounding voice emerged from the communicator as the shooter – Achilles? - put the small device atop the explosive and stepped back. "No molecular reintegration."

A noise that Terrence had never heard before sounded and, before his eyes, the explosive seemed to disappear. Displaying no hint of pain or injury, the shooter approached Bailey and knelt alongside him. This close, Terrence could see that the man was young, perhaps in his early twenties, and was wearing a pair of unusual contact lenses. Mostly transparent, they had a red glint to them, and Terrence could see some sort of data crawling across them.

"Terrence Bailey," the man hissed as he placed the still warm barrel of the rifle against Bailey's chest. "You have exactly one chance to live." A smile devoid of human warmth appeared on the man's face. "Are you interested?"

"Yes," Bailey replied without pause. He didn't want to die. Not for a very long time.

"Good." The man rose to his feet, grabbing Terrence's shirt as he did. Bailey clenched his teeth against the agony that pulsed through his body with each beat of his heart, and refused to look at his legs. Tears trickled down his face as he was dragged across the floor, and he whimpered at the effort it took keep from shrieking.

"Access code." The demand brought Bailey back to the present, and he looked up in surprise. They were in front of the computer array that Terrence had only minutes earlier installed. Surprisingly, it hadn't been touched by the recently ended violence. His eyes narrowed, the man who had been called Achilles was glowering at Bailey. "Now," he demanded. The code tumbled from Terrence's lips before he was even aware of speaking.

A feral smile crossed the man's face as the main screen snapped into existence, and he pulled a thumb-sized device from his pocket. He plugged it into one of the computer outlets before pressing a small button. Instantly, the computer came alive with activity and, despite his pain, Bailey's eyes widened when he realized that the man was downloading *and* uploading.

"What are you doing?" he asked through clenched teeth. To his surprise, he was no longer afraid of this man. Death was assured, after all, and he'd be seeing Laurie soon.

"Destroying a good man's career," Achilles replied as the small device chirped. He pulled it free of the computer and replaced it in his pocket. Turning his attention to Terrence, he frowned. *Here it comes*, Bailey told himself. He closed his eyes against the death that was sure to follow.

"Achilles to Agamemnon." The words came as a surprise, and Terrence opened his eyes to find the man still studying him even as he spoke into another communicator. This one was more compact.

"This is Agamemnon," a voice answered. It too had a British accent, but was clearly a different man.

"Primary objective complete," Achilles declared, his unblinking gaze on Bailey. "Secondary objective complete. I'm looking at tertiary objective. Request instructions." Terrence swallowed as fear turned his stomach to water.

"Salvageable?"

"Probably." Achilles frowned. "Recommend exfiltration and stage two."

"Understood. Permission granted." As the line went dead, the man smiled that emotionless smile once more and leaned toward Terrence. Pressing a button on the communicator, Achilles then dropped it into the pocket that held Laurie's picture.

“Welcome to hell,” Achilles whispered. A moment later, the world began to disappear.

And Terrence began to scream.



He woke with a scream on his lips.

It was only his long experience with the nightmares that kept Trip from actually crying out as he bolted upright in the bed, but the strangled gasp that forced itself past his lips was nearly as bad. His heart was pounding like a jackhammer and, for an eternity that probably lasted only a minute or so, he couldn't hear anything but his pulse as it slammed through his skull.

Slowly, he became conscious of T'Pol's warm fingers on his skin and her beautiful voice whispering soothing words. Instinct took over, and he wrapped his arms around her and buried his face in her hair. He held her tightly as he struggled to reclaim his equilibrium, incredibly glad that she was Vulcan so he could hold her as tightly as possible. It always helped, having her near, and now was no exception.

“Are you all right?” she asked when he eased his hold on her some time later. The worry in her eyes warmed him, chasing away the last of the terror that had demanded its nightly tithe. Despite how well he had slept, he suddenly felt tired and worn out. That too was familiar.

“Yeah,” Trip muttered. He dropped back onto the bed, glad at her calming presence. She gave him something to focus on beyond the images now fading from his mind's eye and, as she rested her head upon his chest, he could almost taste her concern. “It's this house,” he whispered in explanation. “Being here reminds me so much of Elizabeth.” He sighed. “Too damned much, I suppose.”

“You called out for help,” T'Pol revealed softly, her hand now caressing his chest in a soothing gesture. “I didn't understand everything, but you called out Phlox's name.” She pushed herself up and looked him in the eyes. “You were dreaming of Sim, weren't you?”

Trip nodded in frustration. It was a recurring nightmare, one that only a few people knew he experienced on a fairly regular basis. In the weeks immediately after Sim's death and the surgery that had saved Tucker's life, dreams revolving around the last hours of the memetic symbiot had begun to appear in his mental landscape, sometimes supplanting the nightmares about Elizabeth that so frequently haunted his sleep. At first, the Sim dreams had been fragmentary and difficult to recollect, but as time passed and his guilt over the clone's fate continued to grow, those nightly visitations took a decidedly darker turn. Sometimes, he was being held down by both Malcolm and Jon as Phlox began to cut into his skull. Other times, Lorian was there, holding him down as T'Pol wielded the laser cutter. Worst of all was when Elizabeth was the one holding the laser.

Tonight, Taylor and Masaro had joined her.

“It was a bad one,” he said, closing his eyes tightly in an attempt to force the memories of the nightmare away. “A really bad one.” Usually, sleeping alongside T'Pol was enough to prevent the nightmares as her superior Vulcan mind allowed her to adjust the flavor of their shared dreams. In the past, Trip had joked that she was like a remote control while they slept. Tonight, however, even her presence hadn't been enough.

“You should speak to Phlox when we return to *Endeavour*,” his mate suggested, and Trip instinctively tensed. He knew that she was right – she usually was – but on the heels of a particularly bad nightmare like this one, Tucker didn't even want to think about the Denobulan doctor. Especially not when he could still see Phlox smiling that inhuman grin as Elizabeth began sawing into Trip's skull.

“I'm fine,” he nearly snapped as he started to climb out of the bed. Only T'Pol's greater strength held him in place.

“You promised me that you would take better care of yourself,” the Vulcan accused, her expression bordering on anger, and his own emotions flared up in response.

“Just like you promised to tell me the truth,” he snapped. Suddenly angry, he pushed himself up and slid his legs off of the bed. This time, she didn't try to stop him.

“Trip,” she started to say, but he spoke over her as he pulled his underwear on.

“Don't,” Tucker interrupted sharply. “I know what you were doing, T'Pol.” He stood. “And I know why.” He gave her an annoyed look. “But I needed to know what was going on and you didn't trust me enough to let me know.”

She said nothing as he left the room, instead watching him with her beautiful eyes as he pulled the door shut. The muscles in his jaw ached as he gritted his teeth together. A flood of embarrassment washed over the simmering anger, and he groaned in self-disgust. *I'm such a goddamned hypocrite*, he silently chastised himself as he collapsed in one of the kitchen chairs. T'Pol's decision to keep him in the dark about the latest twist in the Terra Prime plot was really no different from his refusal to explain why he had barred her from landing missions. Even with a telepathic bond, they somehow managed to continue their miscommunications.

“You're up early.” His mother's voice drifted over his shoulder, causing him to jump slightly in surprise. Wearing a robe, she glided into the kitchen and immediately began programming the coffee maker. Trip winced at the time: zero four forty.

“Yeah,” he replied sourly. She gave him an amused sidelong look, but said nothing. Despite his mood, Trip found himself smiling. It was altogether too much like high school; instead of pressuring him to admit what was bothering him, she would outwait him. “Had an argument

with T'Pol," he admitted, giving a glance in the direction of the guest room. The door had yet to open and he wondered if T'Pol was meditating.

"Again?" Elaine placed a steaming cup in front of him, and he inhaled the wonderful smell of coffee. "What was it about this time?" Frowning, he gave her a slightly irked look at the poorly concealed amusement in her voice.

"Terra Prime," he muttered, deciding against offering specifics. She didn't need to know about the second message that T'Pol had received last night informing her that the terrorist cell had been neutralized; or the fact that neither he nor T'Pol had any real idea who had sent that message in the first place. Unexpectedly, his mother tensed slightly for the briefest of seconds before taking a seat at the small table across from, and Trip narrowed his eyes at her curious behavior; for a woman who insisted on making eye contact with everyone, she was going out of her way to avoid doing so now. His eyes widened with realization.

"You knew about it," Trip said, the words tumbling out before he was even aware that he speaking. Anger resurfaced, hot and fast, and he tightened his grip on the coffee cup. "You knew and didn't say anything!" He rose to his feet quickly and turned to leave.

"Sit down," his mother ordered, her voice even and calm. At his dark look, she gave him a fierce stare of her own that he remembered from his youth. Somehow, it had broken him, even when he played cornerback and outweighed her by thirty kilograms or more. "Sit down *now*."

Trip sat.

"I found out about them yesterday," Elaine explained as she sipped her coffee. "Only a few hours before T'Pol told you." As Trip crossed his arms and glowered at the table, his mother gave him a tight smile. "Stop sulking. It makes you look silly."

"She should have told me," he complained again as he looked at the closed door of the guest room once more.

"Why?" At his surprised look, his mother continued. "You were worried about your father, Trip. She probably thought you had enough on your mind." She sipped from the coffee. "And she was right, wasn't she?"

"That's not the point!" Trip glared at the cup before him. Just like high school, he could feel himself losing the argument. Why couldn't he win an argument with this woman? It was almost as bad as arguing with T'Pol. "I was the target, dammit. She should have told me!"

"Is there something wrong with your coffee?" Elaine asked out of nowhere, and Trip frowned at the non sequitur. She nodded to the cup in front of him. "You haven't touched it."

"Oh. I promised T'Pol that I'd lay off the caffeine," he admitted with a rueful half-frown. His

mother smirked, making him wonder what was so funny.

"Go talk to her, Trip." Elaine stood, picking up the coffee cup and pouring it out into the sink with a practiced flick of her wrist. "The two of you have enough problems ahead of you to waste on nonsense like this."

Glumly, Trip grudgingly admitted that she was right. *Like usual*, he reflected as he gave her a sullen look. He would need to admit to T'Pol that he had overreacted again. Grimacing, he rubbed his temples as he stood. He wasn't looking forward to this.

As much as he usually enjoyed their arguments, he hated having to apologize to T'Pol. Even if she was mortally insulted by something, her Vulcan upbringing inevitably caused her to quote Surak and claim that she couldn't be insulted. Taking offense, after all, would be admitting to emotions that Vulcans weren't supposed to experience. Trip sighed heavily. Sometimes, Vulcans made less sense than Andorians.

"Is that thing set up for chamomile?" he asked, nodding toward her coffee maker. Bringing T'Pol her morning tea would be a clear sign to her that he wanted to apologize. He tried not to think about how much practice he had at making this gesture.

A few minutes later, he opened the door to the guest room, a steaming mug in one hand. Unsurprisingly, T'Pol was once again sitting against the wall, eyes closed in meditation as a candle burned in front of her. She had donned a robe before doing so, which, Trip reflected, was probably wise given the general lack of privacy in the Tucker household. Pushing the door shut, he smiled in recollection of how mortified T'Pol had been during their first joint visit here; one of Billy's boys had accidentally walked in on her while she was using the bathroom, and it had taken nearly all day before she would even go near the boy in question.

Placing the mug alongside the candle holder, Trip sat down across from her. Folding his legs into the awkward meditative pose, he focused on his breathing while staring at the flickering candlelight. Meditation wasn't something that came to him easily; at times, it seemed more difficult to him than trying to catch smoke with his hands. Having touched T'Pol's mind and seen firsthand how powerful Vulcan emotions were, though, he understood why her species needed to maintain their strict control. Knowing that, unfortunately, didn't make achieving the proper state of mind any easier.

"You are not breathing correctly," T'Pol declared, her eyes still closed. "Inhale through your nose, exhale through your mouth." Her nostrils flared and she opened her eyes. Glancing down at the mug, she quirked an eyebrow. "No apology is necessary, Trip," she said, causing him to smile. "I should have informed you earlier than I did."

"You were right though," he responded before he inhaled through his nose. "I was already so worked up over Dad that I didn't need something else to worry about." Once more, he breathed in the proper way, all the while wondering why meditation had to be so boring. "Can we agree that we both screwed up?"

"If it makes you feel better," came her seemingly indifferent reply. Trip grinned at the warmth that pulsed through the bond and breathed. In through the nose, out through the mouth. Repeat. Focus on the flame. *God, this is boring*, he complained silently.

"You aren't concentrating," T'Pol pointed out.

"Because I'm bored," Trip muttered, earning himself the Raised Eyebrow of Doom. She opened her mouth to respond when a pair of beeps began sounding from their respective overnight bags. Trip shot to his feet and extracted the PADD he kept within his bag. Behind him, T'Pol rose smoothly to her feet.

"Immediate recall," he read off of the PADD. "Briefing at Starfleet Command for command-level officers at ten hundred hours." His stomach twisted as he realized what that meant. He exchanged a long look with T'Pol.

They were going back to war.

ACT FIVE

They were going back to war.

Indications of this fact were everywhere as Jonathan Archer climbed the steps that led to the main entrance to Starfleet Command. Everywhere he looked, armed and armored security troopers were in place, weapons held at the ready and grim expressions on their faces. The area outside the building was swarming with officers and enlisted personnel hurrying to their destinations or engaged in mission critical conversations. Whatever was going on, it was big.

“ID, sir?” The security trooper standing outside the door studied Archer with narrowed eyes as he held out a hand; several steps behind the man were two more armed personnel, their weapons charged and pointed in Jon's general direction. His card already in hand, Archer offered it without hesitation and the lead trooper slid it into a handheld reader. Containing an encrypted microchip and an embedded holographic image of Archer, the card also provided door access inside the secured building. A second later, the reader beeped, and the trooper offered the card back.

“You're clear, sir,” he said as Jon accepted the card. “Keep your ID handy, Commodore. We're at Ready Level Alpha.”

“Understood, Chief.” Archer gave the chief petty officer a nod before striding past him and into the main lobby. Almost instantly, he caught sight of Lieutenant Reynolds in conversation with another security officer. The lieutenant gave him a nod as Jon approached.

“Commodore,” he said in greeting. “Good leave, sir?”

“Could have been longer,” Archer replied with a tight smile. “And yours?” The lieutenant returned the smile.

“Could have been longer, sir,” Reynolds repeated.

“Commodore Archer to Briefing Room Six,” a disembodied voice echoed through the lobby, and Jon turned away. Without being instructed to, Lieutenant Reynolds fell into step alongside him.

“Did you hear about Admiral Zu?” the lieutenant asked. Jon nodded slightly before shaking his head in surprise. Circumstantial evidence linking the admiral to Terra Prime had been discovered by Jacksonville law enforcement officers dispatched to investigate reports of a firefight on the outskirts of the city. Preliminary reports were sketchy as to what had happened, but the consensus was that the terrorist cell had been planning an attack when one of their members tipped off the police. Either the city's SWAT team had struck (although the mayor of Jacksonville vehemently maintained that it hadn't), or the cell itself self-destructed violently but, by the time the normal police force arrived, it was all over.

"I heard." Archer presented his identity card to another security trooper standing guard in front of the turbolift. He found himself struggling with the realization that someone like Andrew Zu had Terra Prime sympathies. According to the media, the admiral had tendered his resignation to Starfleet almost immediately, even as he claimed that he was innocent of the charges.

Reynolds said nothing further as they rode the lift to the third level of the Command building, perhaps sensing Jon's distraction. Left to his thoughts, Archer found himself re-evaluating his interactions with Andy Zu over the past couple of years. There had never been any indication that the man hated non-humans. To the contrary, in fact. No one had interacted with the Denobulans quite as well as Andy had.

The lift door slid open and, once more, Jon had to present his identification to a pair of security personnel before being given permission to continue. At the door leading into Briefing Room Six, Reynolds slowed his pace.

"I'll be here if you need anything, sir," he said as Archer passed his ID to the trooper outside the door for another scan. Jon gave the lieutenant a nod.

"Find Captain Tucker for me," he ordered. "I need to talk to him once this briefing is over."

"Aye, sir," Reynolds responded as Jon pocketed his ID and entered the briefing room.

Admiral Gardner looked up from where he sat at the holo-table, and gestured for Archer to approach. His face still set in a perpetual scowl, Admiral Black gave Jon a sour look before returning his attention to the data crawling across his screen. Seated around the table in their usual places were the other senior officers of Starfleet Command, with the notable exception of Commodore Casey and the still deployed Rear Admiral Khanolankar of Fifth Fleet.

"Come in, Jon," Gardner ordered as he rose to his feet. He offered his hand. "You've heard about Andy?" he asked, frowning.

"Yes, sir."

"You think you know someone and this sort of thing comes out," the admiral muttered darkly before shaking his head in disgust. "Consider your previous orders rescinded, Commodore," Gardner continued as he retook his seat. Jon sat as well. "The Sixth is yours until further notice."

"Thank you, sir." It was a bittersweet realization that, once more, men and women would be sent to their deaths on his order. Archer momentarily wondered about his sanity: what sort of man actually wanted that kind of responsibility?

"If you'll consult your data screens," Black began the moment Jon took his seat, "you'll find the updated battle plan for Operation Pandora." The master viewer activated, and Jon

studied the tactical display intently. "The attack force will consist of Second, Fifth and Sixth Fleets." To their credit, Admiral Washko of First Fleet, Commodore Sanchez of Third, and Admiral Wang of Fourth barely displayed their disappointment at being excluded. "The plan is to hit the system in two waves. Second and Fifth Fleets will approach from Galactic North and South respectively." The master display changed to a simulation of the assault.

Black directed his next comments to Archer. "Sixth Fleet's objective will be the Romulan drydock itself. You have the big guns, Commodore, so you get the high value target."

"Aye, sir," Jon acknowledged as he began examining his data stream. He frowned at the annotation on his screen regarding weapons payload. "Mark Sixes?" he asked with surprise. The new torpedoes had only recently been field tested and approved for combat operations, and were little more than high yield fission bombs. Smaller than the standard photonic torpedo and with a destructive yield somewhat less than the Mark Five Photonic Torpedo, they were easier to construct and took nearly half the time to build. Their physical size meant additional advantages: a ship could carry more of them, and they had an increased rate of fire.

"That's correct," Black replied.

"Now we're using bloody atomics?" Burnside Clapp demanded, the disgust in his voice reflecting Jon's own thought on the subject. "What's next? Bio-weapons? Mustard gas?" He glowered at the Fleet Admiral. "Better yet, how about we field some Augment troops?"

"We're aware of your concerns about the Sixes," Gardner interjected coldly, his words directed toward the group as a whole, "but this decision is final." His expression tightened. "We will use *whatever* means are at our disposal to defeat the Romulans." He looked at Black. "Continue."

"Second and Fifth Fleets will enter the system at nineteen hundred standard on twenty-nine September," the Vice Chief of Naval Operations said as he advanced the main display to reflect his briefing points. "Sixth Fleet will enter the system at nineteen thirty from Galactic East." He gave the senior officers level looks. "Fleet disposition is to be determined by fleet commanders, but we recommend standard combat wedge."

"To reach the target in twenty days," Jon announced after some rapid calculations, "the *Iceland*-class ships will have to remain behind. They're only capable of three point seven." To his surprise, Black and Gardner exchanged a look devoid of their usual antipathy.

"Which is why we're going to reassign a few ships," Gardner replied. "All fifteen operational *Neptune*-class cruisers will be participating in this operation."

"They're still going to be redlining the engines," Burnside Clapp pointed out. He had spent nearly his entire career aboard *Neptunes* and knew their capabilities better than most of the other flag officers in the room. "We might lose two or three of them before we even reach Zeta Reticuli."

“Then see that we don't,” Admiral Black almost snapped.

“With all due respect,” the Australian commodore replied tightly, “the *Neptunes* are fifteen years old.” He barely blinked as he openly glared at Black. “Some of their components aren't even fabricated anymore.”

“We need those ships, Mitch,” Gardner interjected softly. “In your *official* judgment, are they capable of making this trip at the speeds necessary?” For a moment, Burnside Clapp hesitated, a torn look on his face. He finally nodded.

“It'll be tough, sir,” he said. “But I think they will.” The admiral returned the nod.

“Study your spheres of influence, gentlemen,” Gardner ordered. “We can't afford any mistakes.” He stood, a clear indication that the briefing was over. Ingrained reflex caused the rest of the officers to stand as well. “Fleet commanders, coordinate with your officers and get me tactical assessments ASAP.”

“We break orbit at zero nine tomorrow,” Black stated grimly as he headed for the door. Jon looked at the data crawling across his screen and frowned.

He wasn't looking forward to this.



He was looking forward to getting back to his ship.

As he paced in front of the wide desk, Trip Tucker found it nearly impossible not to fidget as he impatiently waited for his commanding officer to show up. Upon arriving in San Francisco, Trip had been eager to get back to *Endeavour* and go over Hess' evaluation of the new engine designs. He even had a couple of new ideas about increasing the efficiency of the injectors that he wanted to bounce off her, including one that he suspected T'Pol would disapprove of on general principles. Unfortunately Commodore Archer had other ideas, and had sent Reynolds looking for him.

“When will he be here?” Trip asked the lieutenant as he toyed with the model of the *Phoenix* that Jon kept on the desk. Along with a model of *Enterprise*, and unlike the flat image of the president of United Earth currently dominating the east wall, it was the only decoration in the room that wasn't standard issue for all government offices. The spartan appearance of the workspace wasn't a surprise though: Archer used this office only when he was Earth-side.

“I don't know, sir.” After much needling from Tucker, Reynolds had finally unbent enough to sit down in one of the plush chairs in front of the desk. “The briefing with Admiral Gardner must have gone long.”

Trip grunted as he wandered to the window. Outside, the grounds of Starfleet Command were alive with activity, and Tucker frowned at what that had to mean. The only time he could remember seeing the facility this busy was during one of his brief visits planetside prior to the Expanse mission. Glancing back to the lieutenant, he noted the distracted expression on the younger man's face and smiled in recognition.

“You look like a man with woman trouble, Professor,” he commented, using the lieutenant's old nickname from *Enterprise*. Reynolds' head jerked up and the young man speared him with a surprised expression. “Am I wrong?” Trip asked mildly.

“Not really, sir.” The lieutenant sighed. “Amanda wants me to transfer back to Earth.”

“Amanda?” A terrible, sinking feeling caused Trip's stomach to drop. “You're datin' Amanda Cole?”

“Yes, sir,” Reynolds replied, narrowing his eyes at Tucker's surprised tone. “Is there a problem, Captain?”

“Not at all,” Trip quickly said in response. “I wouldn't plan on getting a transfer approved right now,” he continued. “Not with the war going on.”

“Who said anything about wanting a transfer?” the lieutenant grumbled, mostly under his breath. Trip grinned at the comment, recognizing the sentiment. Amanda wanted a commitment and Reynolds had cold feet. *Better change the subject*, he reflected as he gave the wall chronometer another look.

“So,” Trip began, “I understand you were with the commodore at Carbon Creek.” The lieutenant's eyes narrowed.

“I can neither confirm nor deny, Captain,” Reynolds said with a slight smirk. “You know that.”

“Know what?” Commodore Archer asked as he entered the office. The lieutenant shot up from his seat, almost assuming the position of attention as he did. His hands filled with PADDs, Archer wore an expression that was dark without being angry as he strode by the young man.

“You sure took your time,” Trip joked as his old friend dropped the PADDs onto the desk. There were seven of them, Tucker realized.

“The *usual* problem,” Archer replied before glancing at Reynolds. “Have your gear ready for deployment, Scott. We launch at zero nine tomorrow.”

“Yes, sir,” the lieutenant responded. “What ship, sir?”

"*Endeavour*." Frowning, the commodore continued. "I want the combat control team in my office at eleven thirty." He rooted through the PADDs before finding the one he was looking for, and handed it to the lieutenant. "Have a runner track down these officers. I want them all in briefing room twelve at sixteen hundred."

"Am I on that list?" Trip wondered aloud, and Archer nodded.

"You are," he replied. "Consider yourself duly informed." The commodore looked again at Reynolds. "And Scott? Make sure your will is up to date."

"Aye, sir." Reynolds barely reacted to the ominous instruction.

"Dismissed," Archer told him. As the lieutenant headed for the door, the commodore was turning his attention to Trip. "We need to talk," he said with a frown. "Starfleet Command wants to transfer T'Pol to the *Intrepid*."

"What?" Shock pulsed through Trip, and he found himself clenching his hands into tight fists. "Why? The *Intrepid* isn't even out of Spacedock yet!"

"Starfleet needs combat commanders," Archer said, his expression still dark. "Right now, T'Pol is one of the most experienced ship commanders we have in the Fleet. Certain senior officers feel that she is being wasted by serving as simply an executive officer."

"Yes, sir," Trip replied automatically. His mind was racing as he absorbed this latest twist. The *Intrepid* was a *Daedalus*-class, named in honor of one of the *Neptunes* that had been destroyed at the battle of Pacifica Prime. When it launched, *Intrepid* would be state-of-the-art, and *Endeavour's* equal in almost every regard. "When will the orders come down?" Tucker asked, wondering how much time he had left with T'Pol. He didn't look forward to telling her, and silently mused if she would suggest resigning again. With Earth seemingly on the losing side of the war right now, he didn't think that he could actually stomach abandoning Starfleet.

Although, if T'Pol asked him to, he would seriously consider it.

"If I have anything to do with it," Jon declared, "never." Trip gave him a hopeful look and the older man continued. "So far, I've convinced them to hold off on any transfers until after this operation." The commodore rubbed his temples in frustration. "Black isn't behind this one, Trip."

"Needs of the service," Tucker growled in understanding, and his friend nodded.

"The two of you are too good a team to break up," Archer said softly before snorting with amusement. "Did you know that some of the admirals are starting to use 'T & T' as shorthand for the two of you? I heard Washko use that today and actually had to have it explained to me."

"Wonderful." Trip's voice was dull, but he couldn't find it in himself to care.

"Is there something I need to know, Trip?" the commodore asked softly, and Tucker looked up. He considered his words carefully.

"Off the record, sir?" At Archer's nod, he exhaled. "T'Pol doesn't want a command of her own, Jon. We've talked about it many times..." He trailed off and glanced at the model of *Enterprise* as he tried to explain something he didn't entirely understand himself. Fortunately, his old friend caught on quickly.

"Azati Prime." It was stated like a curse, an epithet that carried volumes of guilt and despair. Trip looked up and caught the emotion on Archer's face.

"Yes, sir," he agreed. "It's more than that though, Cap'n." The old nickname rolled off his tongue before Trip realized it. "Together, T'Pol and I are a helluva team." There was no doubt about the accuracy of that statement: the sheer evidence of how efficient Tucker and T'Pol were when working together was overwhelming. "But apart?" Trip concentrated on the breathing exercises his mate had taught him. "Apart, we're a mess."

"Elaborate," Archer ordered. It wasn't the voice of Trip's friend, Jon, but rather of the fleet commander who had to know the weaknesses of the people under his command. Lives depended on that knowledge, and this was no different.

"You know about the Pa'nar," Tucker began, shooting a glance over his shoulder to verify that the door was indeed closed. At the commodore's nod, he continued. "The trellium she was exposed to in the Expanse screwed her up more than you know," he revealed carefully. It wasn't entirely a lie, but T'Pol had never revealed her substance abuse to Archer and it wasn't Trip's place to do so. Even if he vociferously disagreed with her.

"That bad?" the commodore asked, and Tucker nodded.

"Sometimes, her hands shake so hard that she can't control it." Trip shuddered at the memory of seeing her in the throes of a bad attack. "Phlox has her on a medical regimen that helps her cope, but sometimes, that's not enough."

"I saw her hands shake after Azati Prime," Archer said softly, his own expression conflicted as he spoke. Tucker blinked in surprise at that; he'd been unaware that her control had slipped in front of their old captain. "But I thought T'Pol cured the Pa'nar."

"She prevented further decay, but the damage was already done, sir." He frowned as he pushed down the fury reserved for the late and unlamented Tolaris. "Frankly, I'm not much better."

"What do you mean?" It was the voice of Jon the friend once more, and Trip could hear the

concern. Setting aside his embarrassment, he decided to trust the commodore.

“I dream about Sim every night,” he admitted softly. “And I'm not talking about happy dreams either.” Trip clutched the armrests of the chair as he forced himself to continue. “Phlox has examined me and suspects that the transplant material has never fully healed.”

“That was years ago!” Archer said, his tone aghast. Trip could see guilt in the older man's eyes and hated himself for bringing this back up. He knew that his old captain still lost sleep over Sim's fate.

“No one had ever used the memetic symbiot process on a human before, sir,” Tucker shrugged. “Phlox told me that he never expected Sim to be as *alive* as he was.”

“And T'Pol helps you with this?”

“She can ... change the channel when we're sleeping.” Trip smiled ruefully. “Don't ask me to explain it, Jon. I just know that when I start to have one of those nightmares, she can usually stop it before it gets too bad.”

“How long have you had to deal with this?” Archer asked, and the smile faded from Trip's face.

“Since a couple weeks after the surgery,” he said. The commodore visibly winced at that and Tucker knew that his old friend was blaming himself. “Ever since Thor's Cradle,” Trip continued, his voice softer, “they've gotten a lot worse.” Phlox called it survivor's guilt and combat stress; but Trip knew that it was remorse over the men and women who had died under his watch, hiding under the guise of someone else who had died because of him. Understanding what caused them didn't prevent the dreams from coming, though.

“We're a team,” Trip declared. “She keeps me sane when I'm about to lose it, and I do the same for her.” The idea of T'Pol serving on a different ship caused Tucker's stomach to knot up tightly.

For a long moment, Archer was silent as he digested this new information. To his surprise, Trip realized that he couldn't read the commodore as he used to be capable of doing, and he silently grieved over that loss. They had been inseparable before *Enterprise* launched, more like brothers than just friends, and Tucker regretted the loss of that relationship more than he could say.

“I was going to fight for you anyway, Trip,” Jon the friend said with a sad smile. “But now, I'll just have to pull out the big guns.” He stood and, reflexively, Tucker rose with him. “Can't bust up T & T, can I?” the commodore asked almost mockingly.

“Thank you, Jon,” Trip smiled. He offered his hand and his friend took it. “You're a good friend.”

“Just remember that when it comes to naming your firstborn,” Archer chuckled, causing Trip to roll his eyes. “Now get out of here. I'll see you at sixteen hundred.”

“Aye, sir,” Tucker said with a grin.

Suddenly, things didn't seem so bad.



It was worse than she expected.

As she scrolled through the duty logs, Commander T'Pol found herself frowning at the logistical difficulties that seemed to have been figuratively dropped into her lap at the last minute. *This is Trip's fault*, she reflected in annoyance, even though she knew that it wasn't.

Upon her return to *Endeavour* at zero eight thirty, she had spent four hours being briefed by the various department heads regarding the ship's current status. Another two hours had been spent touring the ship and dealing with minor personnel issues; it was ironic, she thought, that a significant number of the enlisted crew were evidently more comfortable interacting with her than with Lieutenant Commander Eisler. After a brief break for a late lunch (just under ten minutes by her calculations), she had spent another three hours with the department heads creating a functional duty schedule and examining the records of the newly arrived personnel. Several key enlisted crew members had been replaced due to routine duty transfers, and this had led to some difficulty filling sensitive positions.

Another two hours passed as she oversaw the transfer of new munitions to ship's stores; normally, doing so would be Lieutenant Commander Eisler's job, but the tactical officer appeared visibly weary. Knowing his work ethic as she did, T'Pol hypothesized that the lieutenant commander had been standing double or triple shifts while she and Trip were planetside, so she relieved him of duty out of a sense of gratitude. When he balked at the instruction, an unexpected sense of mischief that she blamed on Trip's influence caused her to speak.

“Lieutenant Commander Hess,” she instructed with no hint of the amusement coursing through her, “please escort Mister Eisler to the mess hall. See that he remains ... relaxed for the evening.”

It had taken a significant amount of control to avoid smirking at Eisler's outraged expression.

By the time the munitions were properly stored it was nearly twenty hundred hours, and Trip had still not returned from Starfleet Command. Although she was curious about his continued absence, she made no effort to track him down, knowing that he wouldn't appreciate it. He had explained once how doing so caused others to perceive that she kept him on a “short leash” (whatever that meant) and that it made him appear weak in front of

other males.

Humans, she decided, were completely illogical.

She then spent an hour alone in the executive mess, eating dinner and finishing the duty schedule. Satisfied that she had successfully arranged the schedule in the most efficient manner, she had finished her meal, intending to retire to her cabin to meditate. It had, after all, been a long and trying day and she was looking forward to a hot shower. She had even planned to use the shampoo that Trip's mother had procured for her, which T'Pol hoped was a gift intended to demonstrate Elaine Tucker's acceptance of the Vulcan into her family.

Naturally, the universe did not take her wishes into account.

Twenty minutes later, she was in the briefing room with the other department heads as Trip informed them of the coming operation. Although she considered it an effective assault plan at first glance, T'Pol was mildly skeptical that an engagement of this magnitude could be planned in such a short span of time. There were contingencies that needed to be addressed; yet, true to form, the humans rushed forward, heedless of any problems in their plan.

An influx of the additional personnel accompanying Commodore Archer complicated billeting assignments, and thus T'Pol found herself in the captain's ready room revising an already needlessly complex system. As she entered her second hour of working on the sleeping assignments, the thought that only a human (or, perhaps, an Andorian) could devise such an unnecessarily complicated system occurred to her. On a Vulcan ship, every cabin was the same and assignments were not based on rank or position, but rather were determined by logic. The chief engineer's quarters needed to be close to or, if possible, *on* the engineering deck. The commanding officer needed to be quartered near the bridge.

Unfortunately, that was not the case with humans, despite the clear logic in such a system.

Sighing softly, she clicked on the Submit button that would send her revisions to Trip for his approval; it was really just a formality, as she had no doubt that he would sign off on it once he saw that she was the one who had written it. As long as it didn't involve the engine in some capacity, he invariably trusted her judgment. Often, she wondered if he even read what she sent, or if he simply approved it upon receipt.

Rising from the desk, she frowned at the time and reached out slightly with her mind. To her relief, Trip was deeply asleep. With Archer aboard, she had almost expected to find the two still in the executive mess, either reminiscing about past times or calculating new ways to cause headaches for her.

Departing the ready room, she paused briefly at the sight of Lieutenant Commander Eisler at the tactical station. The officer of the watch was Ensign Rostova, and the young engineering officer was seated in the command chair as dictated by Starfleet regulations, so there was no reason for Eisler's presence on the bridge.

“Not good enough,” the tactical officer was telling someone over the communication line. Eyes riveted on his console, he seemed oblivious to T'Pol's presence. “I want database assimilation by oh seven hundred. No excuses.”

T'Pol turned away. The lieutenant commander knew his own capabilities far better than she did, so it was illogical for her to assume otherwise.

Minutes later, she stepped out of the turbolift on E Deck, her attention once more focused on a PADD. A pair of enlisted crew members stepped aside as she exited the lift, before entering it themselves and resuming their conversation. T'Pol raised an eyebrow as she realized that they were discussing one of Earth's numerous sporting events. The competitive nature of humans never ceased to amaze her.

The moment she entered her quarters, T'Pol realized there was something different. Frowning, she looked around for anything amiss, but could find nothing. Her overnight bag was on the bed, exactly where it should be. When she had arrived aboard *Endeavour*, she had immediately gone to work and had asked one of the enlisted crew to carry the bag to her quarters.

Examining the bag, she noted that it did not appear to have been opened. Despite this, she unzipped the bag and dumped the contents onto the bed. A box tumbled out, and she picked it up. Pressing her finger to the thumblock on one of the boxes, she glanced at its contents and released a slight sigh of relief. Both phase pistols were present, including the one that had been passed on to Professor Tucker by Lieutenant Hayes' associates. Once more, T'Pol hefted that weapon and studied it for a moment. Her scans of it had revealed something fascinating.

The pistol did not exist.

More accurately, the serial number that should have been stamped on the weapon's power cell did not exist, something that was categorically impossible. Every phase pistol constructed by Starfleet had a manufacturer's stamp embedded on the power cell at a molecular level. The process was completely automated and was designed so that the stamp could not be removed. Further scans had revealed that the focusing crystals in this weapon had been manipulated so that it would fire an almost invisible beam. It was a weapon designed for a single purpose.

Assassination.

Frowning, she replaced the weapon in the shielded box and sealed it. As she did, a very faint buzz finally drew her attention to the wall that she shared with Trip. It was such a barely perceptible sound that she doubted a human could have even heard it. A moment of study revealed a curious meter-long strip placed along the crease where the wall met the ceiling. As she reached up to pull it free, a sudden flicker of light caused her to step back in surprise.

It was a holotransmitter.

Placing her hand at the top of the emitter, she disrupted the beam long enough to realize that a door had been placed in the wall. Her eyebrow skyrocketed in surprise. The buzz of an incoming message caused her to jump.

“Computer,” she said into the empty room, “play message.”

“Second drawer,” Lieutenant Commander Hess' voice said before the transmission ended with a chirp. Once more, T'Pol quirked an eyebrow, but she turned to the drawer nonetheless. A folded sheet of paper was resting atop the precisely folded clothes within. Unfolding the note, T'Pol began reading.

The door can be vacuum sealed, and the transmitter is tied into the ship's power grid. Access code can be changed to whatever you want: it is currently 012345.

I did this because Trip is the big brother I never had, and I've seen what he's like when you're not together. Don't thank me because, officially, this door was never installed.

Shock robbed T'Pol of coherent thought for a long moment. Blinking her surprise away, she studied the placement of the door before pushing the long bench in front of it. For the moment, it would serve as an effective means of drawing attention away from the door until she had the opportunity to find alternative means of concealment. Putting her hand in the way of the holo-transmitter, she studied the door for a heartbeat before reaching for the access pad.

The door slid open soundlessly, revealing Trip's darkened cabin. Stepping over the cot and through the open hatchway, she realized with approval that the door could be locked in the open position. She looked up, noting that a second holo-transmitter was in place in Trip's room.

“T'Pol?” Her mate was propped up on his bed, staring at her with confusion on his face. “Did you just walk through the wall?”

“Yes,” she replied, her attention still focused on the transmitter. “Go back to sleep, Trip.”

“Not until you tell me how you—”

“Bridge to Captain Tucker.” The voice of Lieutenant Commander Eisler interrupted him, and Trip shot the comm panel at the top of his bed a hostile look before reaching back and pressing the Transmit button.

“This is Tucker,” he said. “What is it, Rick?”

“Starfleet Command wants you and the commodore on the line in five minutes, sir,” the

tactical officer replied. His voice was grim. “We're receiving a transmission from Zeta Reticuli.” Trip exchanged a look with T'Pol, and she could feel his shock pulse through the bond.

“Contact Commodore Archer,” he ordered. “I'm on my way.”



The data packet was on its way.

Her face tight, Commander Annike Lundmark studied the data stream that was crossing her console for a long moment. Fear twisted her stomach into knots, but she swallowed the urge to scream. Revealing how worried she was would affect the crew. After all, there was nothing more contagious than fear.

Glancing around the bridge, she noted with grudging approval that her command crew appeared to be completely alert and ready. This was no surprise, though; they had served together for nearly five years now and were among the finest that Annike had commanded in her ten years as the captain of the *Iceland*-class ship. Under her, they had evolved into a finely honed team that seemed capable of practically anything.

A smaller ship than the newer *Enterprise*-class or even the outdated *Neptune*-class, the UES *Stockholm* had a storied history, and had already been a legend when Lundmark received command of the venerable ship. A native of the city for which the ship was named, she had joined UESPA Starfleet at seventeen, intent on someday commanding the ship. Her entire career had been oriented toward that goal, and once she was named *Stockholm's* commanding officer, she had gone out of her way to avoid relinquishing the job. Accepting the rank of captain would take her off the bridge of her beloved ship, and Starfleet had finally given up trying to promote her.

Annike pushed down the guilt that threatened to swamp her; she had put the crew in this position when she volunteered for this mission. It had been, in her opinion, one more opportunity to prove that the *Iceland* was still a good design. Despite its inability to break the warp four barrier, the reliable ship was still sturdier than the newer *Neptunes*.

“Data stream sent, ma'am,” Lieutenant Aaron Hermanns stated from the communication station, and Annike gave him a sharp nod in response. Instead of a realtime site-to-site transmission, she had decided to inform Starfleet Command of their arrival in-system with an encrypted data burst. Their likelihood of detection with the data burst was much smaller.

“Confirm scan,” she ordered Lieutenant Margaret Jhabvala, her tone brisk. The science officer acknowledged the instruction with a curt nod and bent over her viewer. A tense moment passed.

They had spent the last two weeks creeping into the Zeta Reticuli system at impulse to confirm the reports that the Romulans were indeed in-system. It had been a difficult fourteen days during which the crew of the *Stockholm* had been required to maintain silent running almost twenty-four seven. Per Lundmark's order, the communication system had been taken offline to prevent any accidental transmission bursts, and re-initialization required her command codes. Active sensor sweeps were forbidden, and anything that could be even potentially detected by Romulan scans had to be cleared by Annike herself.

As they drew closer to their target, the stress level aboard the *Iceland*-class light cruiser had skyrocketed. Tempers were frayed as the forty members of the crew dealt with the agonizing realization that they were deep in enemy territory now and detection would lead to their destruction. Despite the pride that the crew had in their old ship, no one held any delusions that the thirty-year old ship could outrun a Romulan attack craft.

“Scan confirmed,” Jhabvala announced, almost whispering as she did. The lieutenant looked up from her board. “Multiple encroachments in geosynchronous orbit over Acheron colony.”

“On screen,” Annike demanded. Instantly, the main viewer snapped alive and displayed the partially constructed drydock. The image was of poor resolution, but Lundmark didn't want to risk detection by asking for an active scan.

“Six birds of prey,” her tactical officer commented. “And one warbird.”

“Where are the rest?” Annike asked softly. She exchanged a look with Lieutenant Walt Nkrumah, and her tactical officer frowned.

“Energy spike!” Lieutenant Jhabvala shouted before he could respond. “Multiple mass signatures on rapid approach!”

“Tactical alert!” Lundmark ordered sharply as she began inputting commands into the pilot's station; it was one of the complaints among some officers about the *Iceland* design that the commanding officer was also the ship's pilot, but Annike had always preferred having control. *Stockholm's* impulse engine whined as she began applying thrust; glancing at the sensor feed installed at the nav station, she cursed softly at the sudden appearance of the trio of ships. Judging by their mass signatures, they were drones. *Where the hell did they come from?*

The artificial gravity pushed her back into her seat as Annike sent *Stockholm* into a steep dive. Their only chance for survival was to reach the system's Oort Cloud and use one of the comets within as cover. Capable of barely warp three point seven, the old *Iceland*-class probably couldn't outrun any of the ships in the system.

“Weapons charged,” Nkrumah declared, “and hull plating polarized.”

“Three Romulan drones on combat assault!” Jhabvala's fear was growing by the second, but Lundmark couldn't spare the time to calm her down. Leveling out from the dive, she sent the

Stockholm into a tight spin even as the trio of drones opened fire. Flashes of disruptor fire lanced out from the pursuing ships, narrowly missing the *Iceland*-class.

"Hermanns!" Annike growled as she sent *Stockholm* into a twisting climb to escape from the lethal barrage. "Realtime transmission authorized!" The hollow *thrum* of torpedoes being fired from the ship's launchers vibrated through the deck of the old ship. "Warn Starfleet Command!"

A pair of photonic torpedoes spiraled toward the fast-moving drone ships. At the last moment, the targeted drone altered direction in a radical maneuver that would have been impossible if it had been manned. It was a common tactic that had earned the drones a deadly reputation as difficult foes to defeat.

"Incoming!" the tactical officer warned a half second before an explosion sent the *Stockholm* tumbling. Alarms shrieked as the hull was breached on C Deck. Debris erupted outward, ripping into the starboard nacelle and sending a stream of warp plasma into space. Annike cursed at the mass signature surging toward them out of the Oort Cloud.

It was a Romulan Warbird.

Fire erupted from the warbird's main guns, punching through the hull plating of *Stockholm* as if it weren't online. Disruptor beams seared through the starboard nacelle, igniting the leaking plasma with a horrific flash that ripped the nacelle free and sent it spinning into the void. A second photonic torpedo detonated as the *Iceland*-class ship tumbled out of control, punching through the hull and spilling frail human bodies into the hard vacuum.

Her ship's controls no longer responding, Lundmark looked up at the cracked vidscreen with horror in her eyes. Looming toward them, the warbird spat a pair of torpedoes at *Stockholm* before banking away, and Annike's breath caught: there was no way the battered ship could avoid them.

She closed her eyes.

The End of **STAR TREK: *Endeavour*: "Pandora"**
The story will be concluded in **STAR TREK: *Endeavour*: "Acheron"**