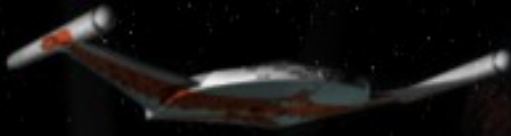


STAR TREK: ENDEAVOUR

# RAGNARÖK



BY  
RIGIL KENT

Disclaimer: Nothing's changed. Still not making any money, don't own anything and if there was any justice, I'd be married to MU T'Pol ...she can mindscrew me all she likes ...

Author's Note:

Major thanks to **TJinLOCA** for being an awesome beta, thanks to **pookha** for being my canon fiend, and a big shout-out to **Boushh**, **HTH2K4**, **Mitchell**, and **Jedikatie** for some amazing feedback that inspired me to get off my ass and back to work.

All of you rock!

And thanks to **Jedikatie** for giving me an idea about Archer & Mayweather. She'll recognize it when she sees it...

This is the second part of the sequel to *Elysium*. It won't make a lot of sense if you haven't read *Vigrid*. Like *Elysium* and *Vigrid*, 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): ***Drahn***, (Andorian male), 4IC - Lieutenant Commander (LCDR)

Senior Helmsman/Navigator (NAV): ***Daniel Hsiao***, Lieutenant (LT)

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

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

Damage Control Officer (DCO): ***Allison Li***, Lieutenant, Junior Grade (LT, JG)

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

**SECFORCE - "ROUGHNECKS"**

Roughneck 6 (OIC): ***Scott Reynolds*** – Lieutenant, Junior Grade (LT, JG)

Roughneck 6-Alpha: ***Nathaniel Hayes*** – Ensign (ENS)

Roughneck 7 (NCOIC): ***Anita Karanja*** – Senior Chief Petty Officer (SCPO), enlisted, still called "Gunny"

## **TEASER**

### **Vigrid Station. 1 October 2156.**

Allison Li was tired.

It was a bone-deep weariness, one brought on by nearly twenty-four consecutive hours of constant activity and hard work. Repairing Drahn's constant "shortcuts" was almost always exhausting, but adding a three-hour visit to Mac's quarters followed by nearly two hours of assessing damage on a rundown station only made things worse. And now, with both the station and *Endeavour* on high alert due to a string of suicide bombings, bombings that had inflicted the same damage she'd just repaired, sleep didn't seem to be in her future any time soon.

And yet, despite the exhaustion that was riding her shoulders, despite the promise of another twenty-plus hour day, Ally found that she was surprisingly alert. She was actively looking forward to the long overdue conversation with Mac; if nothing else, they'd argue, and nothing turned him on - or her, for that matter - more than arguing. That thought made her smile.

Shifting in place, she glanced around the tram station with barely concealed interest. It said something about the sheer size of Vigrid Station that a train system was necessary to get from one sector to another. The tram cars themselves reminded her of enclosed skylifts, complete with clear windows that provided an amazing view of the station's internal workings during travel.

Across the tram station, a cluster of Starfleet uniforms drew her attention and Ally glanced at the newly arriving group. She recognized the commodore at once and took a moment to watch him; for a man his age, Jonathan Archer was in great shape, and she idly wondered if he was as energetic in bed. At once, she pushed that image out of her head: entertaining thoughts of sex with a flag officer, no matter how attractive she found him, was probably not the best way to repair her relationship with Mac.

The Vulcan ambassador was walking alongside the commodore and, once more, Ally's thoughts took a decidedly prurient turn before she could catch herself. Both men were surrounded by grim-looking Roughnecks. The members of the security force were in full combat regalia and wore expressions so dark that very few would think to approach them. From their front, Gunny Karanja surveyed the crowd of early-morning Boomers that filled the tram station with a look in her eye that was positively predatory.

Taking a step toward her arriving tram car, Ally bit back a curse as a man suddenly shoved by her without even an apology, jostling her arm and knocking her tool box to the deck. Shooting him a black look, she froze at the sight of wires poking out of his oversized jacket. For a long moment, she didn't know what to do and simply stood there, rooted in place, watching him with wide eyes as he weaved his way through the crowd, his eyes intent on the commodore.

"Bomb!" someone shouted - it might have been her - and the word spurred Ally into action. Darting forward, she tackled the man, suddenly grateful for all the times her older brother had insisted that she play rugby with him and his friends. She and the bomber hit the station floor hard and he twisted in her grip like a snake, smashing his elbow back into her face with brutal force. Momentarily stunned, her grip on him loosened and he staggered to his feet as she struggled to clear the dancing spots from her vision. Screams were echoing around her as Boomers scrambled to get clear of the bomber and, as she leapt to her feet, she realized that the panicking crowd had pinned the Roughnecks in place. The security force could not move, could not get the commodore or the ambassador to safety, could not get a clear shot at the bomber.

It was up to her.

Heart pounding, she sprinted forward. Once more, she tackled the bomber, this time approaching him from an oblique angle. The momentum of her sudden attack carried them both over the turnstile and into an open tram car. Rolling quickly to her feet, Ally kicked the rising man in the face. The power behind her blow knocked him once more to the ground, and he gave her a blank look that was absolutely terrifying. There was no emotion on his face, no trace of humanity, no hint of compassion or anger or even contempt. He seemed little more than a flesh robot, a walking instrument of chaos that would not stop until it had carried out its objective. Blindingly fast, he kicked out, sweeping her legs out from under her and dropping her to the floor of the car. Once more they scrambled to their feet, and Ally realized that she was running out of time.

Without removing her eyes from the bomber, she reached for the tram's control panel behind her, experiencing a sudden mad surge of triumph as she felt a button depress under her fingers. Recognizing her intent, her opponent lunged forward and she met him with another desperate grapple, this time employing a judo throw that flipped him onto his back. Her breath coming in ragged gasps, Ally punched him hard in the face.

With a hiss, the door slid shut.

The jolt of the tram suddenly jerking into motion knocked her momentarily off-balance and the bomber took advantage instantly, giving her a kick that sent her sprawling. Her head smacked hard against metal, and stars danced before her eyes as she struggled to focus. The man moved quickly toward the door, toward the control panel, and she found yet another burst of energy. Leaping onto his back, she wrapped her legs around his stomach as she locked him in a sleeper hold with her arms. Straining to cut off his breathing, she held on tightly when he smashed her into the car's walls in an attempt to dislodge her, despite the pain that lanced through her back. Through the windows, she could see the tram station begin to recede in the distance, could see Gunny Karanja lunging through the crowd of Boomers toward the car.

Too late, Ally realized that the bomber held something in his hand.

*Star Trek: Endeavour*

*"Ragnarök"*

The world exploded in fire.

## **ACT ONE**

Fire burned through her.

It was a liquid pain that seared through her stomach with each ragged breath she took, a pain that scorched away coherence and thought each time she shifted under the imprisoning weight. Gritting her teeth against the waves of agony that pulsed through her, she strained to move the column of fallen metal that pinned her in place; muscles honed by nearly two decades of military service struggled in vain against the unyielding steel. Numbness crept into her lower extremities and, though she was not a trained physician, she knew what that meant.

Anita Karanja was dying.

Around her, she could hear the cries and whimpers of the dying and wounded, could smell the distinctive stench of seared flesh and smoke and death, could feel the gentle spray of fire suppression systems upon her face as they fought the flames. It wasn't unfamiliar to her; as she recovered consciousness in the moments after the blast, her first thought was that she was back on Mars, following one of the more extreme 'Free Mars Now' demonstrations. The moment passed quickly, however, as memory flooded back and pain thudded through her.

Commodore Archer was safe, that much she knew. In the seconds after the explosion that consumed Lieutenant Li and the bomber, Karanja had seen the commodore knock a dark-skinned Boomer to safety with a well-timed body-check that carried them both out of the immediate danger area. Lieutenant Reynolds' voice had been the last thing she heard before darkness and pain consumed her; the lieutenant had sounded calm and collected despite the chaos, and she felt a flicker of amusement at the sudden image that flashed through her mind of him issuing orders wearing nothing but his boots. She'd been looking forward to teasing him about his earlier nudity, eagerly anticipating his flush of embarrassment, but now it didn't look as if she'd get the chance. She regretted that.

She regretted a lot of things, actually.

"Gunny?" The voice of PO1 Mitchell snapped her drifting thoughts back to her current situation and she grunted in response. Even doing that much sent a stab of pain through her body, and she winced; his warm hands touched her neck, seeking the pulse point. "Stay still, Gunny," Mitchell said, his voice calm. Despite herself, Anita felt a smile touch her lips at the thought of the petty officer calm: he was easily the most hotheaded member of First Squad. "Doc's on his way," Mitchell continued, "so you just hold on, okay?"

"Report," she rasped, her words nearly unintelligible. Once more, fire swept through her, pain so intense that she momentarily lost the train of Mitchell's words.

"...and you're trapped under a girder of some kind," he was saying and Karanja would have frowned if she could. "There's blood all over the place and..."

"The mission," she tried to snarl but it came out slurred and soft.

"The ell-tee took command of Second Squad," Mitchell said quickly in response, his hand now on her shoulder, his touch oddly comforting. "He left Chief Gray to coordinate with you and got the commodore clear." Mentally, Anita saluted Reynolds for that; his ability to stay focused on the mission, no matter what, was one of the lieutenant's strongest points. She hoped he got the ambassador out as well. Mitchell continued, his grip on her shoulder tightening. "First Squad is conducting rescue ops now." Despite the dire circumstances, she felt a surge of pride that her team was already helping people. It also now made sense why Reynolds had left behind the more experienced First Squad; one of his first orders of business when he assumed command was to make sure that every member of the Roughnecks was a trained medic. The lieutenant had even gone so far as to acquire an actual corpsman in the form of PO2 Simons; 'Doc' to the team, Simons was a qualified nurse and often found himself aiding Phlox in emergency surgeries. Second Squad, having just arrived on *Endeavour*, had only started their training with the Denobulan doctor and would be of negligible use in an actual real-world situation like this one. "Phlox is on his way, Gunny," Mitchell finished, his words clearly meant to be soothing.

Her mind drifted as he spoke and she fought against an overwhelming sense of fatigue that tried to overwhelm her. It helped that the pain had begun to lessen, slowly fading to a dull ache that merely amplified her lassitude; Karanja knew that she should be concerned, knew that she needed to fight the exhaustion, but simply couldn't find the strength or the motivation. Memory flitted through her awareness, recollections of past experiences both good and bad. She remembered the swelling pride within her breast at MACO Boot Camp graduation, felt once more the crushing despair when her fiancée Johnny died, and recalled with sharp amusement the sight of a naked Lieutenant Reynolds glaring at Commander Eisler.

Voices pierced the mental fog, distant and hollow, and she struggled to focus on them, fighting to push aside the regrets of the past and the memories of a man ten years dead.

"...clipped the femoral artery," a female voice was saying. Anita tried to place the voice, but couldn't. "There's nothing I can do, Mitch. Frankly, it's amazing she's still alive with the amount of blood she's already lost." Consciousness wavered once more as Karanja realized the unknown voice was talking about her. *Looks like I'll be seeing Johnny sooner than I expected*, Anita thought to herself sadly.

"Where the hell is Phlox?" Mitchell demanded, his words coming out loud and angry. If she'd had the energy, Karanja would have smiled then: *that* was the Petty Officer 1st Class Mitchell that she knew.

"He's trying to save a three-year old," the unidentified female replied, still perfectly calm. "I'm sorry, Petty Officer, but she's already gone."

"What can I do?" a subdued-sounding Mitchell asked and Anita tried to open her eyes, tried to

tell him that it was okay, but her strength was gone. The numbness spread into her torso and arms, and she felt sudden fear surge up within her.

"Make her comfortable," the female said from an impossibly vast distance. Karanja felt Mitchell's hand on her shoulder again and she tried to speak, trying to reassure him. His words floated to her ears.

"Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name." Once more, amusement trickled through her; she'd always suspected Mitchell was a religious guy and wondered why he had felt the need to hide it. She felt him take her hand.

And then she was gone.



She was gone.

As he observed the Roughneck medic stand up from the little girl's body with a grim expression, a flood of anger and guilt washed through Jonathan Archer. It was his fault that this girl had been killed by bomb debris, his fault that so many others had been injured or killed, his fault that T'Pol was in the sickbay on *Endeavour*...

His fault...

"This is my fault," Paul Mayweather muttered from where he stood, his eyes glued to the body of the little girl, anger and despair on his face.

Jon knew exactly how he felt.

"Your fault?" Archer asked, his expression and tone bleak as he stared at the corpse: she couldn't have been more than nine or ten. "That bomber was coming for me." And Tolaris ... if Jon had blown that sonuvabitch out of the airlock when he'd had the chance...

"I picked the Cradle for these negotiations," Mayweather pointed out. Soval interrupted abruptly, his voice flat.

"Blaming yourselves for the actions of one individual is neither logical nor productive," the Vulcan declared. Jon gave the ambassador a frown, knowing that he wouldn't or couldn't understand; out of the corner of his eye, Archer noticed Mayweather giving Soval an identical look. Jon's eyes met those of the Boomer for a moment, and silently they reached a mutual understanding. Archer would never forgive himself for this child's death and, judging from the Boomer's expression, neither would Paul Mayweather. *Guess we're not so different after all*, Jon thought to himself.



"Sir, we need to keep moving," Lieutenant Reynolds whispered into the moment of silence. Archer gave him a sharp nod of acknowledgement but said nothing else as the ex-MACO issued quiet orders to his men. Twenty minutes had passed since the tram bombing and Reynolds had kept them on the move ever since; when Archer suggested that they lend a hand with the rescue operations, the Roughneck lieutenant had directed a pointed look at both Ambassador Soval and Captain Mayweather, a clear reminder that there were other lives to be concerned about.

Jon had taken the not-so subtle hint and had fallen into step with them.

It was yet another stark reminder for Jon that, despite his rank, he was *not* in charge anymore. The ten-day trip from Starbase-1 to Vigrid Station had been bad enough, with the crew stepping lightly around him but always - *always* - looking to Trip or T'Pol for confirmation of any order Archer issued. Nothing had prepared him, however, for just how difficult it would be to hold his tongue during a crisis. From the moment he stepped on the bridge of *Endeavour* in response to the tactical alert to the moment that Administrator Maddox had hailed them for an emergency meeting some forty minutes later, Jon had been grinding his teeth and struggling to keep from offering his opinion. If Trip had noticed, he had been too busy to care.

The word given, the Roughnecks set out at a brisk pace, Archer in their center along with Soval and Mayweather. Around them, debris from the bomb damage cluttered the corridor, slowing their progress to a crawl; four suicide bombers had struck in the last three hours, the most recent at the central tram depot, and the resulting damage had virtually crippled Vigrid Station. The first of the bombers had struck mere minutes before Soval had melded with Tolaris; that suicide attack had completely knocked out the defense grid of the station, causing an immediate panic to set in among the station administrators. By the time they had contacted *Endeavour* for assistance, a second bomber had destroyed the station's long-range sensors.

Even to civilians, it was immediately clear that the stage was being set for an all-out attack.

"Copy that," Lieutenant Reynolds muttered into his throat mike, slowing his pace to come alongside Archer. "Sir," he said, "Captain Tucker wants me to advise you that a fifth bomber has just taken out the atmospheric processors." Archer glared at nothing in particular as Mayweather softly cursed; ever the picture of Vulcan poise, Soval gave no hint as to his thoughts. "Damage control teams are being dispatched now. He further recommends that we make haste back to *Endeavour*," Reynolds finished, his expression grimly amused. Jon had to smile. They had been trying to get back to *Endeavour* for the last twenty minutes.

Bomber number three had struck at an outlying computer facility manned by only three people; compared to the other attacks, it seemed an unlikely target as it resulted in only four deaths, but it quickly became apparent that the location had been chosen with deliberate care. Since the area served as the central hub for lift control, the destruction of the facility completely halted all turbolifts, whether they were between decks or not. On a station the size

of Vigrid, such damage effectively stopped travel. Getting to the docking ring without the use of turbolifts was proving to be nearly impossible; they had been forced to retrace their steps no fewer than three times in the last twenty minutes, each time returning to the outskirts of the tram depot to start anew.

"Tell him I'll take that under advisement," Jon ordered as he glanced to Soval. "Guess we should have had that emergency session on *Endeavour* after all," Archer commented, and the ambassador lifted an eyebrow.

Destruction of the defense grid had done more to convince the Earth Cargo Authority of Starfleet's position than any of Jon's arguments had; when Administrator Maddox had commed *Endeavour* to demand a resumption of the integration discussions, it had been at the behest of the ECA reps. Recognizing the concession for what it was, Archer had quickly suggested that they meet aboard Vigrid Station, hoping that his choice of locales would show a trust in the Boomer security.

Having the Roughnecks escort him to the meeting and back had been Trip's idea.

Paul Mayweather gave him a sour look and Jon mentally kicked himself for the unspoken intimation that Station Security wasn't up to the task, even if it was true. The Boomer had been mostly silent since signing the official agreement that placed the ECA under the aegis of Starfleet protection, and had barely said anything beyond a muttered "thank you" when Archer saved his life at the tram depot by knocking him clear of a falling durasteel girder. He now bore a haunted look that Jon recognized all too well. Despite their personal differences, Archer realized that he empathized with Mayweather; the fear that the Boomer must be feeling, that he was signing away his freedom and an entire way of life, had to be paralyzing. *Time to mend some fences*, Jon thought, grudgingly admitting to himself that he hadn't exactly been the easiest to negotiate with either.

"Change of plans, Lieutenant," Archer said suddenly, and Reynolds turned to face him, eyes narrowing. Jon nodded toward the Boomer. "We're going to escort Captain Mayweather to his ship." Reynolds frowned, opening his mouth to argue, but Archer continued over him in his sternest voice of authority. "That is an order, Lieutenant." Once more, the ex-MACO frowned before triggering his throat mike.

"*Endeavour*, this is Roughneck Six," he said, his eyes never wavering from Archer. The commodore almost smiled at the hint of frustration in the younger man's voice. "I need to speak to *Endeavour* Actual," Reynolds informed whomever he spoke to, clearly hoping that Tucker would give him orders to countermand Archer's.

Jon did smile then.

"This isn't necessary," Mayweather declared, and Archer turned his attention to the Boomer rep, aware of Soval's silent observation of their discussion. "I can make it back to *Horizon* without your help," Mayweather continued.

"On the contrary," Jon argued, "it's the entire point of the Vigrid Accords. You need protection." He gestured to the security troops - the Roughnecks - spread out in the corridor around them, knowing that the civilian wouldn't see the inexperience in the younger troops. "And that's what we're here for. It's our job: exploration *and* defense." A long moment passed as Mayweather let Jon's words sink in.

"I'm not going to forgive you for Travis' death," Mayweather said softly and Archer recognized how difficult it was for the Boomer to say even that.

"I'm not going to forgive myself," Jon replied, his tone grim, "but it's up to us to make things better for those that follow us." Archer drew a breath, hiding the twinge of pain that shot through his chest. "I can understand your anger," he said, "and I probably deserve it, but we have an opportunity - you and I, right here, right now - to make sure that what happened to Travis doesn't happen to others." Mayweather pursed his lips in thought. "Together," Jon said, offering his hand, "we can build something greater than ourselves, something that will make all of the pain we've suffered, all of the losses, all of the setbacks actually worth it."

For a long time, Paul Mayweather said nothing as he stared at Archer's outstretched arm. Jon held his breath as the Boomer slowly reached forward and took the offered hand. An entire decade of grief seemed to be lifted from Archer's shoulders.

"Now let's get you to your ship," he said with a slight smile.



He was no longer smiling.

In the thirty-minute walk from Captain Mayweather's ship to *Endeavour*, Soval had quietly observed Commodore Archer's good cheer gradually fade, to be replaced by a grim expression that the ambassador remembered all too well from the days after the Expanse mission ended. Twice in the last half hour, the presence of the *Endeavour* security force was all that had prevented looters from assaulting them. Administrator Maddox had announced an imminent Romulan attack minutes before they arrived at Mayweather's ship, and the resulting panic continued to rage throughout the station. Frightened humans rioted and looted, causing unnecessary destruction as they scrambled to find a way off of the station.

It was a sad display of humanity's darker side.

Unsurprisingly, Captain Tucker was waiting for them as they entered *Endeavour's* docking hatch, his own dark expression mirroring that of the commodore's.

"The *Ti'Mur* wants you to contact them at once, Ambassador," the captain said by way of greeting, gesturing toward a wall unit as he continued. "You can use the comm panel to

respond." Soval gave him a slight nod before striding toward the unit. Behind him, the captain began to quietly debrief Commodore Archer. Had he desired to, Soval could have easily eavesdropped on their conversation, but he instead focused his attention elsewhere.

The comm panel was easy to operate and, within seconds, the ambassador had a direct communication link with the *Ti'Mur*.. His assistant, a promising young diplomat named Skon, quickly answered.

"The *Ti'Mur* is standing by for departure, Ambassador," the young man said simply, his words unhurried and calm. "Captain Vanik has informed me that seven warp signatures have been detected on an approach vector. All have been tentatively identified as Romulan, and they will be in-system within six point five two standard hours." Skon paused briefly before continuing. "What are your instructions?" Soval nearly frowned.

As a senior ambassador and close associate of Minister T'Pau, he had been given absolute command of this diplomatic mission. It fell within his authority to have the *Ti'Mur* remain in-system and provide additional support to the outnumbered and outgunned humans. Logic dictated an immediate withdrawal in the face of a numerically superior force, but the ambassador seriously doubted that either Archer or Tucker would follow such a course. *Endeavour* would remain and face the Romulans, would offer what meager defense it could, and would be destroyed if necessary so that some of these 'Boomers' could survive. It would be a tragic and completely unnecessary loss.

And yet, Soval could not help but think of Surak's own words: *the needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few*. By remaining to defend the fleeing humans, the crew of the *Endeavour* would be holding true to that maxim, whether they knew of it or not. They would do so without thought or complaint, and would offer up their own lives without hesitation, if it meant that another human would survive.

It was one of the things Soval admired about humanity.

Ordering the *Ti'Mur* to participate in the battle had its own risks. Thus far, Vulcan had provided only strategic advice in the ongoing Earth-Romulan war and had resisted being drawn into the escalating conflict. Many within Starfleet had accused Minister T'Pau of cowardice, or decried the lack of military assistance as further proof that the Vulcans desired to stand in humanity's way. Few desired to look at the difficulties Minister T'Pau continued to experience as she struggled to keep her fledgling government intact. Discovery of the *Kir'shara* had fundamentally altered the way Vulcans saw themselves. Seemingly overnight, their military force had dwindled to less than a quarter of its original might as most of their experienced officers resigned to re-evaluate their lives. As it stood, Vulcan could ill afford to be drawn into the war, no matter how badly they may wish to aid their allies.

"Inform Captain Vanik that I will rejoin you within the hour," Soval ordered. He needed more time to determine the appropriate course of action. "I will issue instructions then." Skon gave him the slightest of nods as he deactivated the link. Turning his attention back to

Commodore Archer and Captain Tucker, Soval let himself focus on their conversation.

"...here in six and a half hours," Tucker was saying, his face grim. "I've got T'Pol coordinatin' the evacuation plan with station authorities."

"T'Pol's on the bridge?" Archer asked, his face reflecting his surprise. "But her injuries--"

"I need her there, sir," Tucker interrupted. "She's under strict orders not to get out of the command chair." He rolled his tongue around inside his cheek as he observed Soval's silent approach. A flicker of something flashed through his eyes as the commodore spoke.

"You've talked to Maddox?" Archer queried, and Tucker nodded.

"Yes sir," the captain replied. He frowned angrily. "Eisler warned that moron about the suicide bombers and the idiot didn't even sound an alert." Archer's expression darkened and he opened his mouth to speak when Captain Tucker suddenly turned his attention toward Soval. "Ambassador," he said, and Soval could not help but notice the flicker of surprised annoyance that appeared briefly on the commodore's face. The Vulcan inclined his head slightly in response. "Is your ship ready to go?" Captain Tucker asked, his face giving nothing away.

"It is," Soval replied calmly. "The captain merely awaits my arrival." Tucker nodded, gave Archer a sidelong glance before pressing on.

"Then I'd like to officially request you get Commodore Archer clear of the battle zone, sir." Had he been Human, Soval would have smiled his approval at Tucker's logic even as he realized that the appropriate course of action was now before him.

"Not a chance, Trip," Archer declared, his voice tense and his face flushed with some emotion that Soval could not identify. "I'll coordinate the evacuation from *Endeavour* or from one of the Boomer ships." Tucker frowned as he and Archer squared off, but that was the only indication of his emotional state. As Soval calmly took a step back from the two, it occurred to him that Commander T'Pol had clearly been a good influence on Captain Tucker.

"Sir," Tucker began but Archer cut him off with a sharp hand gesture.

"That's enough, *Captain*." The emphasis on Tucker's rank was clear. "I'm not jumping on the fastest ship out of here and that's final!"

"Where's *Columbia* at right now, sir?" Tucker's question seemed to come out of nowhere, but Soval mentally saluted him for his choice of tactics. T'Pol had been a *very* good influence.

"What?" Commodore Archer asked, showing momentary confusion. It faded quickly as understanding appeared in his eyes.

"How about *Discovery* or *Atlantis*?" Tucker took a step forward, invading the commodore's personal space. "What about *Challenger*? When will she launch again?" With each question, the older human visibly flinched and his features became more grim. "How's the *Intrepid*-class refit comin' along? Or maybe-

"I know where you're going with this, Trip," Archer interrupted, "but Romulans don't take prisoners."

"That we know of, sir." Captain Tucker clasped his hands behind his back in a stance that Soval recognized from T'Pol. Once more, amusement swelled within the ambassador. "Can you take that chance?" the captain asked softly.

"All right," Commodore Archer said quietly, his confrontational air gone. "You've made your point." He shot the younger man a look that Soval could only call disgruntled. "T'Pol's been a bad influence on you," he muttered.

"She'd argue that point," Tucker said with a grin. "You'll have to walk," he continued. "Both shuttlepods are deployed and we're usin' the transporter for rescue operations." His mirth faded quickly as he turned away. "Professor," he said as he turned his attention to Lieutenant Reynolds. Even if T'Pol had not explained why her mate called the lieutenant by that appellation, Soval would have recognized it as a 'nickname' by the annoyance that briefly appeared in the younger human's eyes. Knowing it to be a friendly alternative to the man's name, however, did not give Soval additional insight as to why it was even necessary.

He wondered if T'Pol could explain it.

"I want you and Second Squad to escort the ambassador and Commodore Archer to the *Ti'Mur*," Tucker ordered. Reynolds gave a sharp nod and the captain continued. "Stay with him until you reach Starbase One." Both Archer and Reynolds tensed at that; the commodore shot Tucker a hard glare as the captain shifted to his oddly accented Vulcan. "Keep him from trying to do anything ... heroic." The lieutenant blinked in surprise, then nodded again. "I'll owe you a case of beer," the captain finished.

"Make it Andorian ale, sir," Reynolds responded in unaccented Vulcan and the two men shared a smile. Tucker turned his attention back to Archer, clearly ignoring the frown on the commodore's face.

"Mind telling me what that was all about?" Archer asked; Tucker opened his mouth to respond, then glanced away, an expression of surprise on his face. Commander T'Pol's voice on the intraship comm sounded mere seconds later.

"Captain Tucker to the bridge," she declared.

"Sorry, Commodore," the captain smirked. "Duty calls." He offered his hand and Archer took it without hesitation. "Be seein' you, sir."

"Good luck," the commodore replied. "Look after T'Pol and Phlox for me." Abruptly, Archer drew the captain into an embrace and they exchanged hearty back slaps. "Don't get yourself killed, Trip," the commodore said as he released his old friend.

"I'll do my best, sir," Tucker smiled. His expression shifted to one of startled annoyance as he glanced once more in the direction of the bridge. "I'm comin', woman. Jeez," he muttered under his breath and Soval found himself fighting to maintain his composure. Tucker frowned at Soval's poorly concealed amusement as he lifted his hand in the traditional *ta'al* salute. "Live long and prosper, Ambassador," the captain said in his mangled Vulcan and the ambassador returned the gesture, not even trying to hide the smile in his eyes.

"Peace and long life to you *and* your mate," Soval replied and Tucker grinned.

"I'll pass that on," he replied. His eyes darted briefly to Archer and he continued in Soval's native tongue. "Look after him for me?" he asked and Soval nodded.

"Let's get moving," Commodore Archer suggested as Tucker disappeared into the turbolift. He took a step toward the docking hatch. "Mister Reynolds..."

"On it, sir," the lieutenant stated, gesturing quickly to his security troops. Two of them preceded the commodore, weapons held at the ready, and another two flanked Archer. Soval glanced at Reynolds, inclining an eyebrow. "Shall we, Ambassador?" the lieutenant asked in Vulcan.

With the slightest of nods, Soval stepped through the docking hatch and into the corridor.



The corridor was empty.

His face mostly concealed by the seemingly opaque faceplate of the tactical helmet he wore, Scott Reynolds felt his lip curl in contempt as he silently observed the after-effects of human panic. Debris littered the broad walkway that linked the two parts of the docking ring. Signs had been smashed, computer consoles had been ripped free, and three bodies could be seen, one of which appeared to have been bludgeoned to death. As a student of history, Scott immediately recognized a riot zone when he saw it, and it depressed the hell out of him that humans had yet to evolve past such insanity.

"Second Squad," he said into his comm, "move out."

For a team of rookies, the seven soldiers of the squad were surprisingly professional. With PO3 Konikowski directing them with rapid hand signals and soft verbal commands when necessary, they spread out through the mostly empty corridor, pausing only long enough to

verify that the dead were actually dead. At no time did they display a lack of caution or relax their guard; hyper-alert, each of them treated everything as a threat, regardless of how mundane it appeared.

Experience was a harsh teacher.

Even before Konikowski had given the all-clear signal, Commodore Archer was striding forward into the corridor and Reynolds found himself gritting his teeth in frustration. Ten minutes had passed since they'd departed *Endeavour*, ten minutes and two minor skirmishes with panicked looters, and still - *still* - Archer acted as if he were out on a stroll through a park. Scott wasn't sure if the man was totally fearless or completely insane.

"Ell-tee," Crewman Hensen said abruptly, pointing to an air vent near one of the bodies, "I've got two bio-signs." The computer and sensor operator - CSO, for short - adjusted the scan frequency on the dedicated sensor pack he wore. A comm-tech by training, it was to him that Scott would turn should a computer system need to be hacked or a security system bypassed. "Both appear to be Vulcan," Hensen identified, and Reynolds exchanged a look with Ambassador Soval.

"Konikowski, set up a defensive perimeter," Reynolds quickly ordered, not even bothering to see if the instruction was obeyed before turning his attention back to Hensen. "Weapons?" Scott asked.

"Negative, sir," the CSO replied. Out of the corner of his eye, Reynolds noticed Soval taking a step forward, eyes intent on the indicated spot.

"Ambassador!" Scott said sharply, drawing the immediate attention of the Vulcan. "Let me handle this, sir." For a moment, the lieutenant thought that, like Commodore Archer, Soval would argue but, after a moment of consideration, the ambassador nodded. With Archer quietly observing, Scott approached the vent.

"I'm Lieutenant Reynolds of Starfleet," he said softly in Vulcan. "We're not here to hurt you." He frowned as he realized the body sprawled out in front of the vent was that of a female Vulcan, although she had some slightly curious ridges upon her forehead the likes of which he had never seen before. Mentally, he shrugged; it wasn't as if he were an expert on their species.

"You're human," came the accusing reply and Reynolds nearly frowned again; the voice had been that of a young boy. Scott glanced at the body of the dead Vulcan again as a troubling thought came to him.

"Yes, I am," he said. "But I won't hurt you. We're escorting Ambassador Soval to the *Ti'Mur*."

"Are the bad men gone?" a second voice asked. She was young and so heartbreakingly innocent-sounding that Scott felt a wave of sadness wash over him. Once more, his eyes



flickered to the corpse and anger replaced the sadness.

"Yes ma'am," he replied, gesturing for Soval to join him. "And we'll make sure they stay gone."

It took a few more minutes - time they could ill afford to lose - but they coaxed the two from the vent. The boy - Skov - looked to be nine or perhaps ten and stayed protectively in front of his much younger sister, T'Prin. Both were filthy exhausted, and had the curious forehead ridges but held themselves with a dignity beyond their years. Ambassador Soval they accepted at once, and the older Vulcan slid into the role of father figure so easily that Scott knew he had to be a parent. Skov identified the slain Vulcan as their mother, killed in the chaotic panic that followed the announcement of an impending Romulan attack. Once more, Scott found himself wanting to do bodily violence to the administrator of this station.

Immediately prior to the operation in the Orion sector, Lieutenant Commander Eisler had informed Reynolds of the suicide bombers, information that the commander had already relayed to the station authorities. Eisler had even gone so far as to provide a number of suggestions for station security that could have limited the number of casualties inflicted by any of the bombers that weren't apprehended.

Administrator Maddox had done nothing.

It wasn't an uncommon course of action for weak leaders; human history was rife with incidents of governments or rulers electing to do nothing in the face of a growing crisis, only to regret it in the end. The Second and Third World Wars were perfect examples, with the civilized nations doing nothing as the aggressors - Nazi Germany or the Augments respectively - rose to power. Maddox's rambling and terrified stationwide announcement in the minutes after the fifth bombing only fed the fires of chaos; from the way he spoke, the Romulans were within minutes of arriving.

Naturally, the station had exploded into panic.

"Second Squad," Reynolds said into the silence. They had wasted too much time here and he had a mission to complete. "Let's get ready to move." Out of the corner of his eye, Scott noticed the ambassador studying the dead Vulcan with an eerie intensity and wondered if Soval had known her. "Chao, LaPolice, you're on point." The two named crewmen nodded and took up positions near the exit; according to the station schematics, that particular hallway would lead them directly to the docking berth that the *Ti'Mur* was connected to. "Diamond formation, Commodore Archer and Ambassador Soval in the center." Scott gave the two young Vulcans a brief glance. "Ambassador, I'll need you to carry Skov and T'Prin."

"I will not be capable of doing so," Soval replied as he hefted the body of the slain Vulcan over his shoulder. Reynolds opened his mouth, to suggest that the ambassador leave the dead Vulcan behind, but hesitated when he noticed something odd.

Soval appeared ... troubled.

"No one needs to carry me," Skov declared, holding himself so stiffly erect that Reynolds thought he could almost hear vertebrae cracking, "I can keep up with you." It was difficult to hide the amusement that the young Vulcan's words caused and several members of the squad looked away to hide their smiles, no doubt recalling their own adolescences; some things, it appeared, were universal. To Scott's surprise, Commodore Archer crouched before the Skov's younger sister and gave her a slight smile.

"Hello," he said in broken but understandable Vulcan. "My name is Jonathan. I will carry you ... if that is acceptable." She stared at him, eyes wide and appearing so much like an elf from ancient European mythology that Reynolds had to smile; it was a scene straight out of a dream, a perfect moment of innocent beauty juxtaposed against the chaos of war, and Scott knew he would take it to his grave. Finally, like a regal queen of ages past, she nodded before crinkling her nose.

"You smell funny," she told him bluntly and Archer laughed as he straightened.

"That's because I'm human," the commodore said lightly.

"I was unaware that you could speak Vulcan, Commodore," Ambassador Soval stated, an inclined eyebrow the only hint of his surprise.

"There are a lot of things about me that you don't know," Archer said in reply, smirking as he continued. "It's just a little something I picked up from when Surak was in my head." Soval gave him another indecipherable look before finally nodding. A tug on his pants leg drew Scott's attention to T'Prin.

"Are you going to hurt the bad men?" she asked in a solemn voice, and once more he felt something tear within him.

"If I have to," he replied in as neutral a voice as possible.

"Good," she murmured, drawing another frown and a long look from Soval.

"You'll need this, sir," Konikowski abruptly said, offering the ambassador his sidearm. The Vulcan raised an eyebrow as he responded.

"It is unnecessary." He pulled a fist-sized pistol of unfamiliar design from a concealed holster. "I am already armed." Commodore Archer shook his head.

"Didn't know you carried that," the commodore said, and Soval gave him a brief glance.

"There are ... a lot of things about me that you don't know," he replied in clear imitation of Archer's previous comments. The two men locked gazes and were about to speak when

Crewman Hensen broke in, his eyes still locked on his scanning equipment.

"Lieutenant, I've got multiple bio-signatures heading this way."

"Let's move, people," Scott ordered, his voice tense.

They were running out of time.

## ACT TWO

Time was running out.

Ensign Nathaniel Hayes forced back the lump that was in his throat and checked the power settings on his pulse rifle yet again. It was unnecessary - the settings hadn't changed in the forty seconds since he had last checked them - but it gave him something to do that didn't involve looking at the transporter. Less than a week on the *Endeavour* and he was already going on an away mission.

He had expected more time, had expected to be slid into the duty rotation gradually after he had gotten to know the capabilities of the men and women he was to lead. It wasn't that he was afraid; in the three years that had passed since he had been recruited into the Section, he had already participated in five covert operations, two of which had devolved into combat. Though he loathed playing the role of the "new guy," it wasn't hard to appear at least a little concerned; he was barely checked out on half of the equipment he carried, and hadn't qualified or even test-fired the rifle they'd issued him. In addition, there was the exhaustion that came from having not slept in the last twenty hours. And yet, despite it all, he was excited, eager to live up to the expectations of the Section, to *finally* prove his worth to Starfleet.

There were five other members of Third Squad present and, though he outranked them all, they still managed to make him feel like the new guy. At a glance, he could tell that all of them had seen combat; it was in their eyes and the casual way they stood waiting for orders. To them, the transporter was just another tool, just another technological marvel that allowed them to complete their mission even more quickly. None of them even spared the engineering crewman a glance, trusting her expertise with the equipment in a way that Hayes realized he couldn't. He swallowed again, and his eyes drifted toward the machine before he could stop himself. He had no desire to think about being disassembled, piece by piece, molecule by molecule, atom by atom. No desire whatsoever.

From where he stood, Nate had a clear view of Lieutenant Commander Eisler and took a moment to study the man. Despite his broken ribs and an ugly bruise that covered most of his face, the commander was at his station to coordinate the coming assault. He appeared to take his job as senior tactical officer absolutely seriously, and Hayes was convinced that the cold-eyed German hadn't cracked a smile since coming aboard *Endeavour*. In the wake of Eisler's escapades aboard the station, the ship's rumor mill was working overtime and fully half of the Roughnecks seemed convinced that the TAC was an ex-spy.

Nate knew better.

"Contact," the voice of CPO Luckabaugh whispered across the intrasquad frequency. He and PO2 Elliot were kilometers away, carefully concealed in an overwatch position above a docking berth. Contained within that docking facility was an Orion gunship.

Tentatively identified by documents seized during the assault on the bar in Green Sector, the gunship officially did not exist. According to station records, Docking Berth TK-4-21 was empty and undergoing renovations. Eisler had suggested holding off seizure of the gunship in the hopes of nabbing additional members of the Orion Syndicate, and Captain Tucker had signed off on the plan immediately.

"One-four hostiles approaching target zone," Luckabaugh continued his quiet report, and Nate frowned at the thought of facing fourteen aggressive Orion legbreakers. "All are armed with disruptor pistols. Two have rifles." The chief petty officer paused briefly. "No sign of armor."

"Acknowledged," Eisler said in reply before quickly triggering the intraship comm. "Bridge, Eisler. Third Squad ready for insertion. Recommend standard defensive dispersal." He turned toward the transporter and the squad took their places; Hayes found his breath coming fast as he climbed onto the platform. He *really* didn't want to do this.

A chime sounded and Hayes felt his stomach lurch. Though he was facing the rear of the transporter, he *knew* what that meant. The captain had given them the go-ahead. He was about to be torn apart at the subatomic level and reassembled in an entirely different location. For a long moment, he would be nothing more than a data stream. *Oh God, I don't want to do this!* he thought, and then Eisler's voice cut through his fear.

"Energize."

It was like diving into a pool of icy water while stark naked or cold-shirting through the hard vacuum of space in nothing but his underwear. Only seconds elapsed but he hated every single moment of it. Was it his imagination or could he actually *feel* his parts disappearing as he stood on the pad? He blinked - or tried to blink - and suddenly found himself facing the wall. Embarrassment flooded through him as he realized that the TAC had placed him in the safest spot available. *Stop acting like a damned rookie*, he snarled to himself as he glanced around.

Already, two members of Third Squad had moved to the connecting airlock to cover it as two others advanced to the entryway leading to the docking berth. At Nate's side, Crewman Wakulich shifted quietly as he loaded a grenade into the under-the-barrel launcher that was attached to his pulse rifle. Hayes gave the five Security personnel a quick once over, noting the complete lack of worry on their faces with approval.

"This is Three Alpha," he whispered into his comm. "Good to go."

"Bravo good," Luckabaugh's voice came at once.

"Charlie good," PO2 D'Agostino reported, indicating that he and Crewman Hawkins were ready in their sniper position. Having two sniper teams in position above the cavernous docking berth had been another of Eisler's suggestions, one that Nate was more than happy to

see implemented.

"Go to night vision," Eisler commanded from *Endeavour*, and Hayes pressed a button on the side of his helmet. At once, the transparent face shield seemed to darken as the light enhancement technology built into the helmet activated. Despite being based on centuries-old technology, helmets had only recently made a reappearance in the standard gear issued to a soldier. "Stand by," the TAC officer continued. A tense moment passed before the entire corridor was suddenly plunged into total darkness. "Execute," Eisler ordered.

The two Roughnecks that had moved to cover the airlock - Hernandez and Hoffman - wheeled around and rejoined the rest of the team as they rushed through the opening hatch that led to the docking berth. Like the corridor, it too was pitch black but that had been part of the plan; Hayes wasn't sure who was responsible, but someone on *Endeavour* had killed the power to the berth lighting system.

Three Orions were already down as the assault team entered, dropped by well-placed shots from the two sniper teams, and a fourth fell in the seconds afterwards. A fifth and sixth Orion surged toward the gunship despite the darkness and Wakulich triggered his launcher without hesitation; tumbling through the air, the grenade exploded between the two runners, erupting in a goopy mist that enveloped the two before hardening almost instantly. Encased in a rigid but air permeable shell, the two fell, no longer a threat.

Like vengeful ghosts, the six members of the assault team moved toward the gunboat, weapons spitting fire. Seven more Orions toppled to the ground as the six neared the open hatch of the gunboat, victims of the precise aim of the team. Without a word, Crewman Hoffman and PO1 Vera sent a pair of stun grenades sliding into the ship; both detonated with loud flashes and a resulting surprised cry warned them of at least one hostile. Up the small ramp Hoffman and Vera went, weapons at the ready, followed immediately by Hernandez and Simons; three steps behind them, Nate followed.

He heard the shots before he saw them.

Hoffman took a blast to his chest and the brutal kinetic energy of the shot sent him sprawling backwards. As he fell, his finger reflexively tightened on the trigger of his rifle. A stream of pulse rounds hammered into Vera, catching him completely by surprise and slamming him into the unyielding bulkhead with bonecrushing force. The petty officer dropped, a victim of so-called friendly fire, and "Doc" Simons moved instantly toward his fallen comrade, corpsman training kicking in and overriding his survival instincts. Caught by surprise, Hernandez lurched to the side and, momentarily overcome by panic, sprayed wildly with his rifle.

Straightening from his crouch, the waiting Orion shifted fire, abandoning his cover to get a steadier grip on his rifle. Taking careful aim at Hernandez and ignoring the wild shots that flashed by him, he squeezed off a single shot; shrieking in sudden agony, Crewman Hernandez fell to the deck of the gunship as the disruptor beam burned through his armored cuirass and

into his stomach. Acting as if he had all the time in the world, the Orion took aim at Simons.

By then, Hayes was on him.

It took every gram of restraint Nate had to not break the Orion's neck as he pounced on him. A small part of him - the part remaining distant and logical - knew that it would have been more efficient to simply shoot the Orion but the anger that washed over him came too quickly, and he found himself suddenly in front of the pirate with a need to lash out, to inflict physical pain. He batted the pirate's disruptor rifle away, using his own weapon as more of a melee weapon, then brought the rifle butt up in a blurring attack. It caught the pirate on the jaw and Nate felt the satisfying crunch of broken bone. Limp and completely senseless, the Orion collapsed in a heap.

Kicking the disruptor away from the unconscious pirate, Hayes turned back to his team, his face bleak with the effort to fight down the thundering rage that swept through him. It had been a long time since such a fit of fury had overtaken him, a long time since he had lost control so suddenly and completely, and he struggled to contain himself from lashing out again. He drew a breath, held it for exactly five heartbeats, and released it. His anger faded, exhaled with the breath; it did not completely go away - it never would - but it faded to controllable levels.

Gratified to see the others already assisting the fallen, he pulled the stun-cuffs from his belt and secured the bleeding Orion. If he were a better man, he would have attended to the pirate's broken jaw or given him a painkiller; but he had long since given up thinking he was a good man. PO2 Simons stood up from Vera and shook his head. The calmness that Nate had just found fractured slightly and he focused once more on his breathing. Hernandez was no longer screaming but was clearly in extreme pain, and an unmoving Hoffman drew ragged breaths as Wakulich began to apply first aid. Activating his comm, Hayes spoke.

"*Endeavour*, Hayes." His voice was flat but he couldn't completely contain the anger.

"*Endeavour* here." It was Devereux. He didn't want to talk to her. Not right now.

"Inform *Endeavour* Actual that the target is secure. Two casualties, one KIA, one-four prisoners. Require immediate medical attention for two casualties."

"Acknowledged." The line fuzzed out for a moment and the captain replaced Devereux as the lights flickered back on in the docking berth.

"This is Tucker. Can the casualties be moved?" Hayes glanced at the two; Hernandez gave him a thumbs-up despite the grimace of pain on his face but Simons, who was now checking on Hoffman, shook his head and spoke for Hayes.

"Negative, sir," the corpsman said. "One is critical. I need Phlox."

"All right. Stand by."

"Get the prisoners ready for transport," Nate instructed Wakulich. "Bravo, Charlie, area is secure." A distinctive hum sounded and three figures materialized around them. As the two med-techs began assembling a stretcher, Phlox glanced over the three fallen men. Vera he ignored; from the odd angle that his head hung, the petty officer was clearly dead. Hernandez received a momentary glance before Phlox moved on to Hoffman's inert form and began scanning him. The Denobulan raised an eyebrow and met Nate's eyes.

"This crewman requires immediate surgery," Phlox declared and Hayes nodded, triggering his comm once more.

"*Endeavour*, Hayes. CMO and patient to beam directly to sickbay. Standing by to begin transporting prisoners." He was barely aware of the acknowledgement as the unconscious pirate began to stir. The anger started to resurface; if he didn't get out now, he might do something he would regret later. "Wakulich," he called out as the doctor and Hoffman dematerialized. "Secure that prisoner," he ordered before turning away. If anything, the insane fury that was always there intensified, heating into a raging volcano.

Being an Augment, he reflected bitterly, really had its drawbacks.



The drawback to being a senior officer, Rick Eisler mused, was being forced to attend so many meetings.

As walking wounded, he and Commander T'Pol were the only members of the senior staff seated around the situation monitor. Master Chief Petty Officer Mackenzie stood quietly by the wall display, his face closed up and his stance rigid; Rick had already heard the rumors of a romance between the COB and Lieutenant Li and, from the way the Master Chief stood in the wake of her death, it appeared that the rumors were true. Lieutenant Commander Drahn lingered quietly near the exit, alternately exchanging unprofessional looks or smiles with Lieutenant Devereaux and shooting equally improper frowns at the Vulcan commander. The Andorian's position placed him at the maximum distance away from the XO, but Eisler wasn't particularly surprised; according to the reports he'd read before arriving, Captain Tucker had been forced to create the DCO position for Lieutenant Li so Drahn could remain in Engineering and, thus, away from Commander T'Pol. Old hates died hard, it appeared. Standing on the opposite side of the monitor from Devereaux, Lieutenant Hsiao kept his attention mostly on the master systems display but, in between poorly concealed yawns, gave the communications officer subtle glances that were not intended to be noticed.

Rick noticed.

He found himself struggling to contain his disapproval of the antics between the three. In the



past, he'd served in units almost completely comprised of men; the few women with whom he had served had known the unspoken rules about not getting involved with members of their teams, and it bothered him to see how lax Starfleet appeared to be in that regard. Even the captain and First Officer weren't immune; he tried to hide the frown that the idea of fraternizing with a junior officer caused him. Eleven days aboard *Endeavour* and he already missed being a MACO.

He did his best not to look at Commander T'Pol as they waited. The screams of the rapist in sickbay had awakened him and he'd seen the naked fear in her face as she clutched the captain's hand. Rumor had it that this particular Vulcan – Tolaris, he was called - had assaulted her some years earlier, and Rick found himself regretting that he hadn't had the opportunity to cut on the bastard a little longer. Whatever it was that Ambassador Soval did, however, it was brutal and painful and, as the ambassador had stepped back from the privacy curtain, Eisler had found himself momentarily intimidated by the grim expression on the Vulcan's face. Every one of the Roughnecks present had given the ambassador a wide berth afterwards, and more than a few studied him with new eyes.

A tactical 2D map of the Vigrid system was displayed on the wall monitor and Eisler tried to focus his attention on it, hoping to distract himself from the dull ache that was spreading through his chest and face. The painkiller that the doctor had given him was already beginning to wear off, and he wasn't looking forward to visiting the Denobulan again; Phlox had barely wanted to give him the dosage necessary in the first place and, given how quickly the first was wearing off, Rick doubted he would be more forthcoming the next time. It wasn't his fault that he had such a high tolerance for pain medication; Rick's system had gradually built up a resistance over the years, and each subsequent injury had required stronger dosages.

His onetime addiction to painkillers didn't help much either.

Tucker exited his ready room and joined them at the situation table, his face grim, and Eisler knew he had bad news. The captain had been in communications with Starfleet Command for the last twenty minutes.

"*Farragut*, *Republic*, and *Soyuz* have been dispatched to aid us," he said in opening, taking his place at the head of the table beside T'Pol. Hsiao frowned at that information and glanced back at the table display. "Unfortunately," Tucker continued, nodding to the NAV who had clearly recognized something unspoken, "all three are capable of only warp three so it'll take 'em at least two days to get here." He gave a brief look to T'Pol. "We've got five hours until seven birds of prey are in-system so we need to be prepared."

"What about the Vulcan ship?" Drahn asked, crossing his arms as his antennae wiggled.

"The *Ti'Mur* has broken mooring," Commander T'Pol replied smoothly, "and is transiting out of the system now." The Andorian frowned at her, his expression dark, and Rick knew what he was thinking, probably because he shared that very thought: *cowards*. Captain Tucker

must have interpreted the expression.

"I asked Ambassador Soval to get the commodore clear of the combat zone," the captain pointed out grimly, and mentally Eisler kicked himself. Of course Tucker would do that; they couldn't run the risk of having Archer captured by Romulans. "Commander Eisler," Tucker said, "what's the status of that gunboat?"

"Fully functional, sir," Rick replied. He passed a PADD to Tucker, wincing slightly at the twinge of pain that shot through his chest. "Ensign Hayes has it secured and I've instructed him to coordinate with Lieutenant Hsiao regarding its capabilities." A flicker of something flashed through the captain's eyes and he shot the First Officer a hooded look. T'Pol said nothing as she inclined an eyebrow.

"Dan, who do we have that can fly it?" Tucker asked, and Hsiao hesitated.

"Well, I can, sir." The NAV officer recognized the impossibility of that and considered for a moment before glancing at Eisler. "Ensign Hayes is the only other person I'd recommend, Captain." Rick felt surprise at that. "He's got a better grasp of flight mechanics than any of the other pilots we have aboard."

"And he reads Orion," T'Pol stated. That caused a minor stir of surprise. Devereux and Hsiao exchanged surprised looks and Drahn frowned - though at what exactly, Rick didn't know.

"Eisler?" Captain Tucker asked and Rick quickly gathered his thoughts.

"It's doable, sir." He paused for a moment before pressing on. "It'll leave the Roughnecks without an OIC." The captain smiled slightly at that.

"Put Gray or Luckabaugh in command." His smile turned into a smirk as he shot a brief glance at the COB. "Besides, as the Master Chief keeps tellin' me, they don't need an officer-in-charge anyway." Both lieutenants chuckled at that and even Drahn smiled, but Mackenzie barely reacted. "Damage control?" Tucker asked as he shifted his attention to the chief engineer.

"It's ... coming, sir," Drahn winced at how bleak his prognosis sounded. "The bombers really did a letter on the station."

"A number," Lieutenant Devereux corrected softly. "Did a number."

"I have damage control teams working on bringing lift control back online," Drahn elaborated after giving the COM officer a sheepish grin. "They should be repaired within the hour." His grin faded quickly into a frown and Rick found himself amazed at just how expressive the Andorian could be. "The defense grid is ... shot," he said, giving another glance to Devereux who nodded. "It needs to be replaced, not repaired."

"Sensors?" Tucker asked, visibly amused despite their situation.

"Also shot." Drahn offered the captain a PADD as he continued. "Atmo-processors are partially repaired but I've diverted the teams to lift control." Tucker nodded his approval and the engineer continued. "To be honest, sir, this station is a ... lost cause." Once more, he glanced to Devereux for confirmation that his usage of human slang was accurate.

"Agreed," the captain stated. He frowned. "Orders from Starfleet are simple: we're to hold the line until the Boomers get clear." No one spoke; no one needed to. "And then we retreat."

"What about the station?" Eisler asked, hiding the latest wince with ease. "If this a retreat, we can't let the Romulans take it." He paused before pushing on. "We should rig the station to blow, sir," Rick suggested. The captain almost smiled as he glanced briefly at Commander T'Pol.

"What is it with tactical officers and blowin' stuff up?" he asked her, amusement tingeing his voice. Before Rick could defend himself, Tucker continued, this time directing his words to the Andorian engineer. "What d'ya think?" Drahn didn't hesitate.

"It's ... doable, sir," the Andorian said in clear imitation of Eisler's earlier comment. "I'd need two hours, maybe three, and a zero-gee qualified explosives expert."

"Commander Eisler fits that profile," T'Pol announced and Rick nodded in agreement, suppressing his momentary discomfort. He really hated zero-gee ops.

"All right then," Tucker declared. "Make it happen. Marie, I need you to continue coordinatin' our efforts with the station." Devereux nodded and the captain shifted his attention to T'Pol. "I want you to make scannin' the nebula a priority," he instructed and she raised an eyebrow in response. "If there's a tactical advantage, we need to know." Without a word, she nodded. "Any questions?" he asked, his eyes studying his senior staff.

"Sir?" Hsiao asked tentatively and the captain gave him a nod. "Where's Lieutenant Li?"

In the sudden silence, one could hear a pin drop. To his credit, Hsiao seemed to realize the answer nearly at once as Mackenzie visibly jolted and Devereux closed her eyes to stem tears. The captain's expression was a odd mixture of anger and sadness as he responded to the NAV's question.

"I'm sorry, Dan," Tucker said, "I forgot you just came on duty." He frowned as he continued. "Nearly two hours ago, Lieutenant Li was killed in action on Vigrid Station." Hsiao appeared momentarily shocked as the captain finished his explanation. "She saved the lives of Commodore Archer and Ambassador Soval, but ... she died in the process."

"Senior Chief Petty Officer Karanja was also killed," Mackenzie interjected, his tone flat and emotionless. "We've also lost Petty Officers Creed and Vera in Roughneck operations."

"Make no mistake," Captain Tucker said softly, his voice demanding their attention, "there *will* be more casualties. Our jobs as officers-" He gave the COB a sidelong glance, automatically including the senior enlisted man, "-and noncomms is to keep our people focused on the mission *no matter what*." Devereux was losing her fight against tears and Hsiao looked shellshocked; Rick nearly frowned as he realized just how young both of them actually were. "We were lucky at Pacifica," the captain continued, "but we can't trust luck forever." He paused, giving them all appraising looks. "I'm relyin' on each of you to do your job in the most professional way you can."

The situation room was silent as the members of the senior staff absorbed Tucker's words in their own way. Eisler studied each of them carefully, noting how the two lieutenants straightened slightly, and how Drahn smiled as if he'd heard similar comments before. Mackenzie remained a silent statue, his face betraying little more than T'Pol's. After a moment, Tucker spoke again.

"You've got your assignments," he said, "so let's get to work."



Working in zero-gee was not his favorite pastime.

Despite being one of the most qualified engineers in Starfleet, not to mention one of only four or five actively serving Andorians, Lieutenant Commander Drahn loathed spacewalks. Starfleet EV suits were not designed for his Andorian physique and, as a result, his head *always* hurt as the helmet bore down on his antennae; but that wasn't why he hated it. It wasn't the upending vertigo he always experienced when facing the endless starfield, either; nor was it the sense of how small, how truly inconsequential and insignificant he actually was that he felt when staring into the glittering expanse of space. His engineering knowledge was particularly troublesome during these excursions; knowing *exactly* how little pressure was actually required to tear the EV suit only served to make him even more cautious, more hesitant, and considerably more jumpy. No, it was none of these things that made him hate zero-gee operations.

It was all of them.

As he stared at the exposed core of Vigrid Station, he fervently wished he could have tasked this duty out to his 2IC; Lieutenant Hamilton Riggs derived an unnatural pleasure from spacewalks and had all but begged to take this one. At any other time, Drahn would have gladly, eagerly pushed it off onto Riggs, but the lieutenant hadn't yet acquired the necessary touch for this kind of work.

Neither, for that matter, had Drahn.

He'd spent the last three and a half hours watching with interest as Lieutenant Commander Eisler worked, using two hundred kilograms of detonex (acquired from where, Drahn couldn't say) to fashion a ring of explosives that would cause the station core to go critical. It was fascinating to observe: the various charges were tied in together and were intended to detonate in a sequential order, creating a cascading effect that would rupture the core and force it to go critical. Had he not seen Eisler rigging the explosives himself, Drahn would have thought that nothing short of a photonic torpedo could create such an effect. It did irk him somewhat that, so far, all he had been needed for was to disable the security measures around the station core and carry the detonex. He hated feeling useless.

"I didn't know we carried detonex on *Endeavour*," he said in a possibly vain attempt to start a conversation. Compared to Eisler, Commander T'Pol was positively vociferous.

"We don't," the tactical officer replied sharply and Drahn gave him a dark frown. He suffered the silence for a long time - at least a minute - before venturing another opinion.

"You know a lot about explosives," he said hopefully and indeed, the human was a veritable genius in that department. Eisler glanced in his direction, his expression annoyed, before returning his attention to the charge before him. Long minutes passed in absolute silence as the human worked. Just as Drahn was about to say something, his scanner beeped. Giving it a quick once-over, he spoke.

"Radiation levels are rising." It was to be expected; with the containment field offline, the core was beginning to become dangerously unstable.

"How long?" Eisler asked as he set another charge. By Drahn's count, that made one hundred and eleven.

"Six minutes to lethal exposure," he replied, and Eisler grunted. "Is there anything I can do?" Drahn asked.

"Being quiet would help," the tactical officer snapped. He pulled the last charge from the carrying case and briefly consulted a PADD anchored to his EV suit by a mag-line. Moving as quickly as the suit allowed him, he traversed several meters, his eyes glued to the PADD as he walked. Stopping abruptly, he resecured the data device before kneeling. "Time?" he inquired once more and Drahn could hear the frustration in his voice.

"Four minutes, forty seconds." Without a word, Eisler planted the charge and consulted the PADD once more. He tapped several buttons, finally nodding as he rose.

"Re-initialize the containment field," he ordered. Frowning at him, Drahn tapped several keys on his wrist-comp. Immediately, a faintly visible force screen snapped into place. "Lieutenant Commander Eisler to Vigrid Station," the human said into his helmet comm as Drahn cycled through the various start-up programs. No error messages could be found, and he let his breath out softly.

"Administrator Maddox," the station reply echoed through their helmets.

"Charges are set," Eisler announced, "and you have the ball." Drahn filed that particular bit of slang away for future use; he hoped he understood what it meant. "Don't let us down ... this time. Eisler out."

"This time?" Drahn asked as he began gathering their gear. It mostly consisted of carrying cases with magseals on their bottoms, but there were a couple of specialized tools that Eisler had brought along with him.

"I warned that ... I warned the Administrator about the bombers before the Green Sector op." The human's tone was dark, angry, and Drahn realized what Maddox must have done in response: nothing. Eisler activated his comm unit. "TAC-Six to *Endeavour*." The reply was nearly instantaneous.

"*Endeavour*," came Marie's voice, and Drahn smiled. He rather liked hearing her voice so close to his ear.

"ENG-Six and I are done, and are RTB." It took the Andorian a moment to translate the acronym to 'returning to base' and he wondered why the man didn't just say so. "ETA twenty minutes," Eisler finished and Drahn realized the tactical officer was staring coldly at him.

"Acknowledged," Lieutenant Devereux said.

"TAC-Six out." Eisler hefted his three cases and began the long walk toward the airlock.

"Is it the skin color?" Drahn asked abruptly, tired of the human's reaction to him. "Or the antennae?"

"What?"

"You obviously have a problem with me, Eisler, and I want to know what it is." He was pushing, but couldn't find it in himself to care. The tactical officer gave him a brief look.

"Don't take it personally, Commander," Eisler said, not even slowing his stride. "I don't like anyone."

"That sounds ... lonely." Drahn couldn't imagine living like that and, incredibly, found himself feeling pity for the cold-eyed human. He hoped that it didn't leak into his voice; no male, regardless of species, wanted to be pitied. Eisler said nothing as they continued the walk toward the airlock, didn't even acknowledge the comment, and Drahn struggled to find something else to say.

Ever since defecting to Starfleet, the Andorian had tried to integrate himself into the human

organization as quickly as possible. Initially, he'd faced some serious prejudice within the ranks and had quickly tired of being treated as 'The Andorian.' Despite his experience as the assistant chief engineer on an Andorian cruiser, he had first been assigned to Spacedock and given light administrative duties. It took several weeks for him to realize that the humans didn't entirely trust him, and depression had just begun to set in when he ran into Tucker again.

They had met once before aboard *Enterprise*, when Commander Shran had made a gamble to seize the prototype Xindi superweapon. Drahn had been surprised that Tucker recognized him, but found himself enjoying the human's company so much that, before he knew it, he was confessing the sorry state of his career. Three days later, Starfleet Command cut new orders for him: Chief Engineer of *Endeavour*, under Captain Tucker. Happier than he'd been in years, Drahn had gleefully reported to his new commanding officer.

He had very nearly resigned when he learned that he would be serving under a Vulcan.

In her defense, Commander T'Pol had gone out of her way to avoid antagonizing him and had, on several occasions, backed a few of his proposals to the captain, but it didn't make things much easier. He had lost his temper with her more than once over inconsequential disagreements and, when the captain had reprimanded him, even Drahn agreed that he had been wrong. The captain's decision to create a specialized bridge engineering position just to keep Drahn in Engineering suited the Andorian fine; he preferred tinkering with *his* engines to visiting the bridge anyway.

Drahn *still* didn't know what to make of the odd relationship between T'Pol and the captain; the idea of romance with a Vulcan was just ... wrong.

"*Endeavour* to TAC-Six!" It was Devereux again, and she sounded stressed. Eisler keyed his comm.

"TAC-Six," he replied.

"Stand by to be beamed aboard."

"Negative!" Eisler shouted into the comm. It was the closest Drahn had seen him to losing his temper. "Do *not* use-"

The rest was lost as reality fuzzed around them. Clenching his eyes shut, Drahn waited for it to be over. He really hated that device.

"*Scheisse!*" the tactical officer snarled as they materialized on the transporter platform. "Who the fuck ordered that?!" Eisler yanked off his helmet to glare at the lieutenant manning the controls. "That could have set off the detonators!" Recoiling from his fury, Lieutenant Ricker opened her mouth to respond when Marie's voice echoed around them.

"Tactical alert! All hands to battle stations! This is *not* a drill!"

Seconds later, an alarm began sounding through the ship corridors.



"Kill that alarm," Charles Tucker ordered as he stepped down onto the bridge. "Get me a situation report from all departments, Marie," he instructed Lieutenant Devereux as he took his seat in the command chair. Flicking his eyes to his mate, he spoke again. "What do you have, T'Pol?"

"Seven Romulan birds of prey have dropped out of warp at the outer edge of the system," she replied, and Tucker nodded. Had this been any other system, the attackers could have gotten much closer to the station before slowing. The mass shadow and sensor distortions cast by the nebula, however, made intra-system warp in the Vigrid System a risky proposition at best. "They are arrayed in a standard battle formation."

"No surprises so far," Trip mused. "Keep an eye on the subspace relays," he instructed, and she gave him a withering look that nearly made him smile; T'Pol hated it when he tried to tell her how to do her job.

"All personnel accounted for, sir," Devereux announced as the lift door slid open. Still clad in his EV suit, Lieutenant Commander Eisler entered the bridge and made a beeline for his station. He was, Trip noticed, carrying a uniform in one hand.

"Signal *Bad Omen*," Tucker ordered. The curious name for the gunboat had been Hayes' idea and, for some odd reason, the name had appealed to Trip. Even now, with Hayes at its helm and Chief Petty Officer Gray at its weapons console, the gunboat lurked mere meters under *Endeavour*, so close to the larger ship that its sensor signature would appear as nothing more than a minor sensor shadow. That had been T'Pol's idea and, recalling how successfully it had worked with Lorian's *Enterprise* in the Expanse, Trip had agreed at once. The element of surprise would only work once, but it might tip the balance just enough...

"Ensign Hayes signals ready, sir," the COM officer stated.

"The Romulans are maneuvering to attack the subspace relay," T'Pol abruptly announced, and Trip suppressed a smile. One of Eisler's first recommendations after he'd awakened had been to seed the immediate area around the relays with proximity mines.

"Onscreen," Trip ordered, and the main viewscreen snapped to life, displaying an image of the relay.

A sudden flash of light filled the screen as one of the Romulan ships swooped into view, triggering a mine during its attack run. Using an old Mark III torpedo as a template, the mine



was programmed to detonate when a ship not broadcasting the appropriate IFF transponder code came within 500 kilometers of it; such a distance was negligible in the vastness of space, but distortions emitted by the sensor relays required an attacking vessel to close to within that distance to acquire a targeting lock.

A more 'dirty' weapon than Trip preferred, the mine was a fragmentation grenade written on a huge scale. Hundreds of half-meter long durasteel rods surrounded the outer shell that encased the explosive itself. Upon detonation, these rods would be hurled from the shell at incredible velocities; to any craft within its killing radius, the durasteel shrapnel was devastating if not lethal. Many in Starfleet - Trip included - continued to grumble about using the mines despite orders from Command; the durasteel rods that didn't impact against the target were still out there.

"Surprise," Lieutenant Hsiao muttered from the NAV console.

"Detonation," T'Pol said unnecessarily as she leaned toward her scanning display. Trip gave her backside a quick look, despite the situation and the unflattering Starfleet uniforms. Through the bond, he felt her exasperated amusement at him a fraction of a second before she gave him the mental equivalent of a mild slap. He got the hint: *Not now*. "Heavy damage to one Romulan craft," she said aloud.

"That'll give 'em something to think about," Trip commented. "Mister Hsiao, cut us loose from the station." Glancing at the empty DCO station, Tucker frowned and mentally reviewed the engineering roster for a replacement. "COB to the bridge," he ordered. He knew that Mackenzie wouldn't want to man the station - Lieutenant Li's station - but right now, Trip needed a damage control officer more than a chief of the boat.

Seeing how Mackenzie responded to Li's death had finally clued Trip in to how close the two had been. He wasn't *entirely* surprised that they'd had feelings for each other, but it did come as something of a shock to discover that they were still a couple. Amusement flickered over the sadness as he wondered if Jon had felt the same way when he found out about Tucker's relationship with T'Pol.

"How long until they reach firing range?" Trip asked.

"At their present speed," T'Pol replied calmly, "twenty-one point seven five minutes." Trip nodded before glancing at Eisler.

"Commander, you might want to get rid of that EV suit," he suggested. "You can store it in my ready room." The tactical officer gave him a quick nod and darted - or at least the closest equivalent while in a pressure suit - toward the door; he was back within minutes, still buttoning up his uniform jacket.

The lift door slid open and Master Chief Petty Officer Mackenzie entered. Trip gave him a glance, noting the rigid way the Brit held himself. He appeared, for all intents and purposes,

to be entirely professional and completely in control.

"Master Chief," Tucker said in greeting as he gestured toward the Engineering board, "I need you to man the DCO board." Mackenzie flinched almost imperceptibly before giving a sharp nod and striding toward the indicated console.

"Several ECA ships are making a run for the nebula," Lieutenant Hsiao suddenly announced, and Trip frowned. According to the scans that T'Pol had conducted of the nebula, that was a quick suicide; entering the nebula, which was filled with debris and ionic storms, was the stellar equivalent of taking a rowboat into a category 5 hurricane. He mentally weighed their options and felt T'Pol's agreement with his decision.

In situations like this, their bond was invaluable. Words weren't necessary; in the span of a single heartbeat, Trip could tap into T'Pol's experience, exchange ideas and options with her, and develop a working plan at the speed of thought. People had commented on their curious verbal shorthand; he'd tried to explain it to Malcolm several months before Elysium but Reed, having never experienced the sort of telepathic communion Trip had with T'Pol, couldn't wrap his brain around many of the concepts. In the end, Malcolm had been too ... human to understand.

Trip still lost sleep over that thought.

"Lieutenant Devereux, wide broadcast, all Boomer ships," he instructed as he eased back in the command chair, immensely grateful for the sense of calm that T'Pol radiated through the bond; it was important that he look and sound entirely in control. The COM gave him a nod, indicating the channel was open. "This is Captain Tucker of the *Endeavour*," he announced, his voice perfectly calm and professional-sounding. "Form up on us. We'll punch a hole through the Romulan formation and cover your retreat." He paused for a mere heartbeat; it was a suicide run, and anyone with half a brain could see that. There was simply no way *Endeavour* could take on that many birds of prey and survive, even with the gunboat's aid. "Godspeed and good luck," he concluded before giving Devereux a nonverbal command to kill the transmission. He turned his eyes to Eisler and found the ex-MACO studying his board with the same intensity he remembered Malcolm having. "Weapons hot," Trip ordered and Eisler reacted without looking up, his hands dancing across his tactical board. The sudden change in *Endeavour's* ambient noise could not be mistaken for anything other than what it was.

"All Boomers report standing by, sir," Lieutenant Devereux declared from her COM station, and Tucker nodded in acknowledgement.

"Lieutenant Hsiao." Trip kept his voice cool and his features composed as he spoke. *Control*. "Put us between the Romulans and our fleet." He felt T'Pol's momentary confusion at his identification of the Boomers as 'our fleet' but it was almost immediately washed away by understanding and approval at his use of psychology. *Here we go*, Trip frowned to himself.

*Star Trek: Endeavour*

*"Ragnarök"*

At his command, *Endeavour's* engines roared to life and the ship surged forward.

## ACT THREE

The rumble of the engines concealed T'Pol's sudden flash of distress.

For a moment, it felt as if an icy hand had gripped her heart, paralyzing her in place. Her breath came in ragged gasps and the suppressed pain from her injuries returned with such force that, had she not already been seated, her legs would have buckled. Grasping the edge of the SCI board with a crushing grip, she struggled against the emotion that flooded through her, recognizing it at once.

Fear.

Logically, she knew that her distress originated from the effects of the previous day; but acknowledging that did not make any her less angry at her slip. The second encounter with Tolaris had badly shaken her resolve and, though he was now dead (and unmourned), she remained unnerved by the incident. There had been no time to meditate, no opportunity to lock the undesired emotions away and, given her damaged neural pathways, it was entirely possible that such an attempt would fail. Phlox had already urged her to seek trauma counseling; as this was the *fourth* time that someone had violated her mind, the doctor was understandably concerned about her psychological well-being. Soval had backed her refusal to schedule such an appointment, however, despite the doctor's disapproval; her old mentor knew that she didn't need counseling.

She needed her mate.

Time alone with Trip would ease the pain and allow her to heal. She ached to wrap herself around him, to draw his *katra* around hers like a warm blanket, to let him soothe the hurt away and restore her to normalcy with his mere presence. It was, she realized in retrospect, how she had recovered so quickly from Rajiin's assault; even then, long before she had consciously acknowledged her growing affection for him, she had derived comfort from Trip's presence. Phlox could not understand that *only* her mate could help.

It was the Vulcan way.

Sensing her distress but not knowing the reason for it, Trip gave her a soft smile. Immediately a wave of calm flowed over her, washing away the fear and giving her the opportunity to regain her equilibrium. Though she sensed no recrimination from him for the flash of anxiety, T'Pol chastised herself for the momentary loss of control. Right now, with the fate of *Endeavour's* crew at stake, Trip needed no unnecessary distractions. Once more in command of her faculties, she returned her attention to her duties.

"Time on target?" Trip asked, his voice calm and professional. Visibly, he presented no clues as to how he felt, gave no hint of the emotions that bubbled within him, and she felt a surge of amused pride at his control. This cool and composed officer was a far cry from the explosively emotional man who had first offered her his hand, and had been known to shout at her on the

bridge of *Enterprise* so long ago.

"Two minutes," Lieutenant Commander Eisler replied, his own voice tinged with a hint of eagerness.

"Inform Hayes," her mate ordered, giving her another fleeting glance, primarily to assure himself that she was 'back to normal,' she assumed. In the back of her mind, she could feel his concern.

He was always there - a warm knot of affection and desire and protectiveness - and T'Pol had long since become accustomed to the force of his emotions; occasionally, she was a little surprised at how quickly she had adapted to his chaotic presence in her mind. In the worst of times, Trip could be a difficult man to live with, with his undisciplined emotions buffeting her like gale force winds, but the undercurrent of his strong feelings for her was always there. Even now, as he presented the appearance of total calm in the face of the coming battle, she could sense his muted fear that she would be injured or worse. *You're all I think about*, Sim had told her many years ago, and Trip had later revealed that the mimetic symbiot had indeed been speaking his own thoughts.

It was difficult for her, as a Vulcan, to admit that she now reciprocated those very thoughts.

"*Bad Omen* signals ready," Lieutenant Devereux announced.

Her eyes glued to her sensor feed, T'Pol felt a flicker of satisfaction that her suggestion regarding the gunboat appeared to be effective. Even to her own scans, the small Orion craft appeared as little more than a sensor error, a reflection of *Endeavour's* own mass shadow caused by the enormous gravimetric distortions from the distant nebula. Ensign Hayes' touch at the helm of the gunboat was unprecedented for a Security officer, however; even at full impulse, he was able to maintain his dangerous proximity to the Starfleet vessel without apparent difficulty. Mentally, she flagged the discrepancy for further review at a later date.

"On my mark," Trip said softly, his voice steady, "break and attack." To everyone save her, he was a picture of composure, a rock standing firm before a torrential storm. Affection and amusement arose within her as she easily saw through his facade; fear and anxiety warred within him but he kept it contained, concealed from his crew. It was something that Trip had admitted to her in the privacy of their quarters many times: he hated commanding a warship and missed being *just* an engineer.

For that matter, *she* missed him being just an engineer.

"Weapons range in ... twenty seconds," Commander Eisler announced from the TAC board and T'Pol refocused her full attention on her station's sensor feed, pushing all extraneous thoughts away. The Romulans had broken off into two distinct groups of three with the seventh ship lurking several thousand kilometers distant; at first, she assumed that the seventh bird of prey was the one damaged by the proximity mine, but a second sweep revealed

that was not so. She frowned.

"Mark!" Trip ordered and *Endeavour* lunged hard to starboard. At the TAC board, Eisler was reacting, triggering a volley of torpedoes and phase cannon fire that lashed out with deadly accuracy. Even as the tactical officer was firing weapons, T'Pol's fingers danced across her SCI board, washing incoming torpedoes with microwave bursts, neutrino pulses or wideband x-ray lasers to disrupt their internal targeting sensors. The Romulan retaliatory burst of disruptor fire slammed into the energy shielding that surrounded *Endeavour*, rocking the larger ship.

As the Romulans were adjusting their own courses to match that of *Endeavour*, the Orion gunboat darted out from beneath the Starfleet vessel, sliding into a flanking position behind one of the unsuspecting Romulan ships. Disruptor fire lanced out from the much smaller craft, and, at its scorching touch, already damaged hull plating was vaporized. Hayes, she realized with approval, had targeted the bird of prey previously damaged by the mine. As two low-yield torpedoes flashed out and exploded violently against the Romulan's hull, another disruptor beam from the gunboat briefly caressed the enemy nacelle, burning through the protective casing; a stream of warp plasma began trailing from the struggling ship.

"Energize," Trip told Lieutenant Devereux, and the COM officer quickly relayed the order to the officer operating the transporter platform. This was one of Commander Eisler's more creative tactical suggestions: Using the transporting device as a delivery system for armed ordnance, a proximity mine would be beamed aboard the targeted bird of prey.

The result was catastrophic.

Materializing where the Romulan bridge was hypothesized to be, the mine detonated immediately. Durasteel rods exploded outward, punching through bulkheads and control consoles and flesh with equal ease. Like a blister, the outer hull swelled and ruptured under the assault, causing the bird of prey to begin a slow, uncontrolled tumble toward the far distant nebula. Flame blossomed from its hull as the rods smashed through the internal superstructure, and even as the ship began to break apart it exploded in a violent burst of fire and debris. The unexpected explosion of one of their number had an immediate effect on the other Romulan birds of prey, and they twisted into dives or climbs that carried them away from the larger, heavier ship.

"Come to one-eight-seven mark five-three," the captain ordered, his eyes locked on the sensor feed that had been installed in front of the command chair. Through the bond, T'Pol could feel his grim satisfaction at the destruction of the first Romulan ship; she also sensed that contentment warring with his self-loathing that he *was* satisfied.

Such thoughts were neither logical nor productive. But they *were* human.

At the captain's direction, *Endeavour* banked again, dipping into a pursuit position behind the larger group of three birds of prey. Phase cannon fire lanced out and the hollow *thrum* of

the torpedo launchers' activation echoed through the ship; an explosion of fire wreathed one of the Romulan ships, sketching out a partially invisible force screen that surrounded it.

"Their shields are holding," Lieutenant Commander Eisler stated in a low growl. Trip shot him a disgruntled look before glancing quickly in T'Pol's direction. He said nothing - he didn't *need* to say anything - but, with a nod, she acknowledged his unvoiced request to find a way to bring down their shields shy of brute force.

As *Endeavour* pursued the trio of Romulan craft, the other two ships dove toward the convoy of fleeing Boomers. Disruptor cannons barking fire, the two birds of prey fell upon the poorly armed transports like wild and hungry sehlats; one human ship broke apart almost immediately, its poorly maintained hull shattering under the sizzling stream of white-hot energy. A second and third followed in short order as the two birds of prey weaved their way through the convoy, weapons spitting burning death; panic set in among the human ships at once and the orderly flight began to dissolve into a mad dash to get clear of the nebula's mass shadow and away from the Romulans.

"*Bad Omen* requests permission to break from escort," Lieutenant Devereux stated from her board. As T'Pol split her attention between jamming incoming torpedoes and seeking the frequency of the Romulan shields, she could feel her mate's momentary hesitation. Allowing Ensign Hayes to take the gunboat after the two Romulans was tantamount to sending him and Chief Gray to their deaths; the ship was outgunned and outmatched. Against dedicated warships like the birds of prey, it stood no chance.

And yet, the gunboat's mere presence might save a few more Boomer lives...

"Permission granted," Trip declared after less than a second of consideration. His eyes never wavered from the sensor display in front of him. "T'Pol?"

"There is no discernible shield frequency," she informed him calmly, wondering if the Romulans were using a rotating shield modulation; that would explain her difficulty in isolating the frequency. Frustration rolled off of her mate as *Endeavour* shook under a sudden assault. The trio of Romulans abruptly broke their formation, splitting off into three different directions.

"Three-three-six mark seven-two," Trip ordered. "Keep us oriented on Beta's tail."

"Targets Alpha and Gamma are accelerating toward the convoy," T'Pol announced. At once, she felt a pulse of anger through the bond as Trip immediately comprehended the Romulan strategy: maximum carnage by minimum engagement. Such a tactic fit their *modus operandi* in the war up to this point.

Upon her display, T'Pol could see the gunboat race toward one of the Romulans, weapons spewing fire that splattered against the bird of prey's protective force screen with little to no effect. Under Hayes' touch, the Orion ship danced around the slow-moving Boomer

transports, slewing around incoming retaliatory fire, and evading torpedoes with surprising grace.

There was no way he was *just* a Security officer.

"Break off," Trip ordered abruptly. He was glaring at the sensor display before him. "Take us back to the convoy." Anger surged through the bond as he recognized the Romulan attempt to draw *Endeavour* away from the convoy. "Inform Mayweather that he has a green light."

Underneath her, the deck seemed to tilt as *Endeavour* turned.



As the Starfleet vessel banked hard and accelerated back toward the convoy of human ships, its weapons now focused on alternate targets, Major Talok let himself relax. Alarms were still sounding throughout the *IRW Belak* and the stench of smoke was heavy in the air. Small electrical fires were burning from where overloaded panels had exploded and two crewmen were hard at work trying to extinguish them. Ten more seconds and the shields would have completely collapsed under the force of Starfleet firepower.

With a groan, Commander Xerius climbed back to his feet, all but collapsing into the command chair. Blood trickled down his face and he winced with pain as he touched the leaking scalp wound. Sensing Talok's eyes on him, the commander gave the major a dark look before barking a command.

"Damage report!" he bellowed, unnecessarily loud, and Talok struggled to keep his expression even. He loathed Xerius, and hated serving aboard this ship, but he had no choice.

Valdore had seen to that.

"Shields at eight percent," Talok responded calmly, his attention seemingly focused on the damage control console before him. "Minor structural damage along the aft quarter." He gave Xerius a cold look. "Maneuvering thrusters are out." For a long moment, the commander glared at Talok, seething fury and hatred in his eyes.

To Talok, such expressions from his crewmates had become almost routine and expected. His position as a disgraced Infiltrator in the *Tal Shiar* was common knowledge among the crew of the *Belak*, and his appointment as executive officer at the direct command of Admiral Valdore had displaced a popular officer. Commander Xerius had never concealed his disdain for Talok, and the ex-Infiltrator suspected it was he who had revealed the major's links to the *Tal Shiar*; how Xerius had found out was another matter entirely. In the month since his appointment to the *Belak*, Talok had survived three separate assassination attempts and, although he had no proof, he knew all three had been orchestrated by the commander.



"Get them back online!" Xerius snarled, swinging his attention to his communications officer. "I want a status report at once!" he demanded, wiping the blood from his face as he spoke. His eyes on the sensor feed, Talok pushed back his disgust at the man's overreaction.

Already, the Starfleet vessel was hot in pursuit of the *Koderex* and the *Dividices*, and Talok had to salute the humans for their ingenuity thus far. The mine that damaged the *IRW Makar* had been surprise enough, but the sudden attack by what appeared to be an Orion Syndicate gunboat had been completely unexpected. Even now, the gunboat dueled with the *Genorex* and the *Haakona*; the damage it was inflicting was negligible, but it was proving to be enough of a harassment that Talok fully expected one of those ships to focus on eliminating it.

Destruction of the *Makar* had confirmed one thing, however; the human transporting device, which *Tal Shiar* scientists were even now attempting to reverse-engineer, gave them an incredible tactical advantage, one which they had been able to exploit nearly at once. From his board, Talok had detected the transmission stream from the Starfleet vessel mere seconds before the explosion and had been stunned at how dangerous such a weapon could be. Shields seemed to defeat the matter transporter, but the major kept a cautious eye on the sensors just in case.

The Starfleet vessel - *Endeavour* by its markings - dove toward the convoy, weapons flashing. *Dividices* absorbed the brunt of the assault and Talok winced with remembered sympathy. Photonic torpedoes exploded against the *Dividices'* protective force screen, and the power of those detonations rocked the smaller craft. Wheeling into a spinning climb, *Dividices* darted into the panicked convoy of human ships, no doubt hoping to gain some sort of cover from the relentless assault, even as the *Koderex* and the *Haakona* retaliated against the Starfleet ship. Disruptor beams lanced out, splashing across the nearly invisible defensive shield, and a pair of torpedoes flashed forward.

Incredibly, *Endeavour's* shields held under their attack.

A dozen of the human ships, all clearly modified, suddenly pounced on the *Haakona* as she attacked the maneuvering Starfleet vessel. Disruptor beams, plasma bolts and pulsed lasers flashed through the void, outlining a brilliant image of the *Haakona's* shields; the Orion gunboat twisted into view, spitting a pair of low-powered torpedoes at the larger ship. Its shields suddenly stressed under the unexpected assault from multiple quarters, *Haakona* responded with a brutal barrage of firepower that hammered into the human ships, destroying four and crippling a fifth in a matter of seconds.

Too late, the *Haakona's* captain remembered *Endeavour*.

A salvo of high-yield photonic torpedoes raced from the Starfleet vessel, exploding against the *Haakona's* shields with devastating force that overloaded the field generators almost at once. Streams of phase cannon fire punched through the collapsing shields, stitching angry gashes across the smaller craft's hull. Hull plating melted under the attack and an explosion of

molten metal rained out from the ship; a second salvo of torpedoes pounded into the *Haakona*, detonating against the hull with horrific results. Leaking atmosphere and bodies, the *Haakona* went into a steep dive, twisting and spinning in a vain effort to evade *Endeavour's* assaults. More phase fire lanced out, slicing into the port nacelle with the casual ease of a laser through bread. An explosion of plasma and warp coolant erupted forth.

Talok's console beeped and he swept his eyes over the incoming data. Glancing back at Xerius, he found the commander pressing a stained cloth to his scalp wound and frowning at the data display of the battle.

"Maneuvering thrusters are online," Talok announced, his lack of honorific a calculated insult that Xerius noted at once.

"Get us back into the fight," the commander ordered his helmsman. On the main sensor display, *Endeavour* was relentless, pounding *Haakona* with attack after attack; under the withering assault the smaller craft began to disintegrate, breaking apart into great chunks of burning debris.

"Incoming transmission from the *D'ridthau*," the communications officer abruptly announced, and Talok frowned. The *D'ridthau* was Admiral Vrax's command ship and had been lurking at the edge of the battle, ostensibly to better direct the assault; but Talok knew better.

Vrax was afraid.

Ejected from the Senate for his role in the droneship fiasco, Vrax had entered the military in an attempt to redeem himself. Despite the disgrace, he was given the rank of Admiral and offered command of a strike group. Made up of older ships originally slated for decommission, this squadron was clearly meant to be Vrax's death, but his own influence and wealth had allowed him to arrange for considerable upgrades. Without these upgrades, they would hardly stand a chance against a ship like *Endeavour*.

For six months, Vrax's strike group had been terrorizing human shipping lanes throughout this entire sector, destroying dozens of ships in the process and nearly single-handedly bringing interstellar commerce to a standstill; it was patently obvious that Vrax was trying to reclaim the respect he had lost by burying his previous failure in glory. Having somehow escaped blame for his role in the droneship failure, Admiral Valdore had noted Vrax's efforts with some concern.

That was where Talok came in.

As an Infiltrator, the major had the skills necessary to penetrate Vrax's command structure to monitor the admiral and, if necessary, eliminate him. At the time Valdore contacted him, Talok's failure with the Vulcan V'Las was hardly common knowledge, but somehow the admiral had known and had offered him an opportunity for redemption. The plan that Talok

devised had been a simple one: establish himself as an efficient military adviser in order to get close to the admiral. His assignment as the executive officer for the *Belak* had complicated matters slightly, but he had been confident that it was a minor setback at best; the moment he stepped aboard the warship, however, Talok knew that his position had been compromised. Only fear of the *Tal Shiar* kept most of the crew from assaulting him.

"*D'ridthau* orders *Belak* to move against the station," the communications officer said after deciphering the encrypted transmission. Neutrino tightbeams were still the preferred means of communication, but in situations such as these it was necessary to encrypt the actual message.

"Send: acknowledge and comply," Xerius commanded. He suddenly smiled, a cold and terrible expression that held no remorse or pity. "*Major* Talok," he said, the emphasis on Talok's *Tal Shiar* rank loud, "prepare an assault team." Icy tendrils of fear crept up the major's spine as Xerius continued. "I will grant *you* the glory of taking the station." Giving his superior officer a tight nod, Talok turned back to his duties, recognizing that assassination attempt number four was beginning.

He had hoped to avoid this sort of situation.



Despite the situation, Dan Hsiao found that he was enjoying himself.

He hated himself a little for that, hated that Boomers were being killed while he felt like a giddy twelve-year old joyriding in his parents' car, but he couldn't help it. Sending *Endeavour* into a twisting spin through the chaotic Boomer convoy, he kept his eyes on the NAV sensor feed, ignoring the explosions that clouded it -- explosions that, if he let himself think about it, were innocent men and women and children being consumed by fire and vacuum. Twice, he nearly clipped Boomer transports as they unexpectedly altered their headings, and once he very nearly rammed into a slow-moving fuel transport, but *Endeavour* emerged on the other side of the convoy unscathed and Dan was forced to admit something to himself that he would *never* tell anyone.

This was fun.

"Six-two mark one-eight-nine," Captain Tucker ordered and Dan reacted without thought, his touch steady but light. One of the Romulan ships abruptly loomed into view and, from his TAC board, Commander Eisler unleashed a withering salvo of fire at it. Explosions bracketed the bird of prey and it darted back into the relative safety of the panicked convoy. "Stay on his tail, Dan," Tucker instructed, and Hsiao fought a completely improper grin.

"Target Beta appears to be breaking for the station," Commander T'Pol announced calmly as Dan banked *Endeavour* around another lumbering transport. Almost immediately, he was

forced to send the ship into a stomach-lurching dive as two rickety-looking cargo ships loomed into view. *Endeavour's* engines howled with protest and the inertial dampeners struggled to compensate as he demanded more maneuverability. Three more insane maneuvers later, they were once more on the Romulan's tail and Hsiao was desperately trying to keep from giggling.

Even as Commander Eisler was triggering a burst of fire at the bird of prey, the Romulan ship was loosing a salvo of torpedoes at the convoy. Fire exploded from one of the larger Boomer ships as the warheads slammed into it and, in the seconds before it flew apart, Dan recognized it as the fuel transport that he had narrowly missed earlier. Huge chunks of burning durasteel were sent spinning into other ships, smashing against the hulls with crushing force. Two Boomer craft were vaporized instantly, and a third was sent tumbling into a cluster of other ships, causing an immediate domino effect. Ships never designed to conduct evasive maneuvers dove and climbed and twisted away from the flying debris. Some made it. Most did not.

Great gouts of flame exploded from many of the crippled vessels as the onboard oxygen ignited and fragile warp nacelles were sent spinning into the void. For a fraction of second, Hsiao thought that he could see bodies tumbling from the ships as they collided with one another. Many - far, far too many - were children.

Suddenly it wasn't fun anymore.

"Shift fire," Tucker said as a second Romulan shift darted out of cover, its disruptor cannons slicing into unprotected transports. Phase cannon fire lashed out from *Endeavour*, briefly illuminating the Romulan's shields. A trio of photonic torpedoes leapt from the Starfleet vessel and raced through the darkness; two exploded across the Romulan's shield and sent the bird of prey tumbling. The third...

The third torpedo smacked into a Boomer ship.

"*Scheisse*," Commander Eisler muttered as the transport vanished in a burst of atomic fire, and one did not need to know German to recognize his meaning.

"How long until they reach the threshold?" the captain asked, his tone bleak but measured. Until the Boomer ships reached the outer edge of the nebula's distortions, going to warp remained almost certainly fatal. Six ships had already tried to do so and their exploding nacelles had destroyed them instantly.

"Seventeen point three six minutes," came T'Pol's measured response, and Dan frowned. He'd lost track of how many Boomers had been destroyed so far.

Initially, Captain Tucker had wanted to concentrate fire on a single ship until it was destroyed, but the Romulan hit-and-fade tactic proved to be difficult to combat. The moment that *Endeavour* appeared to focus on a single bird of prey, that ship would pull away and go

evasive, attempting to draw the Starfleet vessel away from the relatively slow-moving convoy; in that moment, the other two ships would conduct brutal strafing runs on the rest of the Boomers. Even the presence of several armed Boomer transports and the Orion gunboat were proving to be of negligible aid; of the twenty-six combat-capable ships that Captain Mayweather had put at *Endeavour's* disposal, fewer than ten were still functional.

"That's too damned long," Tucker muttered as Hsiao sent *Endeavour* into another steep nose dive. "Recalculate the safety zone," he instructed and Dan could almost imagine the Vulcan raising her eyebrow in response.

The murmur coming from the COM station had become background noise and Hsiao risked a single glance in that direction. Her headset on, Devereux's face was tight with frustration as she pleaded with the Boomers.

"Negative," she was saying, her voice soothing despite the expression on her face, "do *not* break formation. Maintain your present heading and course."

The third bird of prey - target Epsilon - lunged briefly into view, hotly pursued by Captain Mayweather's ship and the *Bad Omen*. Hayes had adopted the role of shepherd for the *Horizon* once Captain Tucker gave Mayweather's "combat-capable" ships the green light to engage; they made an unlikely team, the sleek gunboat that was all curves and smooth lines and the J-Class transport that was all sharp corners and right angles.

"Captain," T'Pol suddenly spoke, her voice as full of excitement as any Vulcan's could be, "the seventh bird of prey has sent an encrypted message to target Beta."

"A command ship," Tucker breathed. Hsiao could almost feel the sudden shift in atmosphere on the bridge and he was already adjusting their trajectory. "Can you verify?"

"No." The Vulcan's pause was fractional but telling. "Scans do indicate that it is more heavily shielded and I have no other explanation for its refusal to engage."

"Agreed, sir," Lieutenant Commander Eisler added without being asked.

"Right," the captain muttered. "Tactical, get a weapons lock on that ship," Tucker abruptly ordered. "Helm, come to one-eight-two mark four-nine, best speed." He paused. "Let's go kill a command ship."

*Endeavour's* engines growled as Dan altered their course.



The change in direction was so abrupt that, for a moment, Paul Mayweather was convinced that he was reading the sensor display wrong. He blinked in confusion, his fingers poised over

the flight console, and stared in absolute shock for an incredibly long heartbeat, unable to believe what he was seeing.

*Endeavour* was abandoning the fleet.

An explosion of sparks rained down upon him, causing him to jump in startlement and snapping his focus back to the situation at hand. Anger washed over him then, burning away the surprise and filling him with a rage that caused him to tremble. The fury that he had reserved for Archer suddenly found a new focus as *Endeavour* accelerated *away* from the convoy. Tucker had sworn that *Endeavour* would be the last human ship to leave Thor's Cradle, had assured Paul that the Starfleet vessel would be destroyed before it fled, but now...

Now, they were running.

Almost at once, the three Romulan ships took advantage of the Starfleet ship's abrupt retreat. As *Endeavour* moved away from the Boomer convoy, the three birds of prey swarmed toward the Boomer ships, unleashing a withering barrage of disruptor fire and torpedoes that had an immediate effect. Four ships were destroyed within seconds, a fifth and sixth mere heartbeats later.

"*Endeavour* is retreating!" Mick Berry shouted from the weapons console, his tone incredulous, and Paul shot him a dark look.

"Stay on target!" Mayweather snapped as he adjusted their course, triggering another burst of the maneuvering jets that sent the *Horizon* sliding into a flanking position behind the nearest bird of prey. It was a futile attempt and he knew it; the Romulan ships were faster and much more maneuverable than the old J-Class. Even with the modified pulsed plasma cannons that had been installed on *Horizon*, they would do little more than scratch the paint on the bird of prey's hull in the unlikely event they could puncture the warship's shields.

A bleak yet sadly familiar tone sounded throughout the command deck and Paul reacted without thought. Under his guidance, the *Horizon* suddenly slewed hard to starboard, the port jets firing in concert; it was such a sudden change in velocity and momentum that the artificial gravity flickered in compensation. A torpedo raced through the area that they had just occupied, missing the port nacelle by mere meters, and a bird of prey flashed by them seconds later, cannons spewing fire. *Horizon* rocked as disruptor fire stabbed into it, burning through its already weakened hull plating; sparks exploded around them and Paul winced, fervently praying that the old ship would hold together.

She did.

"Hull plating down to twelve percent!" Tony Weiss shouted from the engineering console as Berry sent another stab of weapons fire at the Romulan. The plasma bolts splattered across the energy shielding that surrounded the warship, briefly illuminating the protective field but inflicting no real damage. In an almost leisurely manner, the Romulan ship reoriented itself

on the *Horizon* and fired a single torpedo before diving away.

For an impossibly long moment, time seemed to slow to a crawl as Paul stared at the incoming torpedo. Instinctive reflex sent *Horizon* into a twisting, spiraling dive but Mayweather knew it was already too late, knew that only a miracle could save them.

Salvation wore a Starfleet uniform.

Engines screaming, the Orion gunboat abruptly shot into view, weapons blazing. It was an insane maneuver, one that put the small ship between the incoming warhead and *Horizon*. A steady stream of disruptor bolts flashed from the gunboat, most missing but a few slicing into the torpedo housing and destroying the warhead in a fiery explosion mere seconds before impact. Wreathed in flame from the dying warhead, the gunboat rocked, and Paul released a breath that he had been holding, silently promising to buy the pilot and gunner of the captured ship as much beer as they wanted. The realization that the gunboat manned by Starfleet personnel was still in the fight gave him pause, and Mayweather quickly glanced at the sensor feed.

*Endeavour* was attacking.

He blinked once more in surprise as the Starfleet ship engaged another Romulan bird of prey, one that Paul hadn't even been aware of. At almost the same moment that he realized this, the three birds of prey attacking the convoy broke off their assaults, banking hard and accelerating toward the distant Starfleet ship. Engines burning bright, the three warships weaved through the fractured convoy, not even conducting opportunity fire as they raced through the void. Warp coolant leaking from its single nacelle, the gunboat darted forward, sliding easily into a pursuit course behind the Romulans. Mayweather felt the eyes of his command crew on him as he stared at his data feed and, for a long moment, shared their confusion as their guns went silent. *Why would the Romulans pull back now?*

"This is *Endeavour* to all ships," a feminine voice crackled across the comm channels, "maintain course and heading. Stand by to receive revised warp threshold parameters."

Everything fell into place then, and Paul felt a hot rush of embarrassment race through him. Travis' letters had been remarkably thorough, painting such an accurate portrait of the command staff of *Enterprise* that Paul almost felt as though he knew them personally. He had used that inside information to good effect against Archer; in a moment of absolute clarity, he realized that, in his anger, he had focused *exclusively* on the commodore, pushing aside or simply repressing memories of his brother's impressions of the rest of the crew.

On more than one occasion, Travis had detailed the intrinsic heroism of his crewmates. Until this very moment, Paul had thought that his brother's sense of loyalty toward his superior officers had seemed more like hero worship than reality, and he suspected this idolization had colored his words when describing the rest of the crew as well. Now, judging from *Endeavour's* action and the perspective of his new insight, Mayweather would guess that the

Starfleet vessel had discovered something about the seventh ship that would draw away the other Romulans, clearing the path for the Boomer fleet to escape without any further casualties. If those letters had been any indication, Tucker wouldn't hesitate to sacrifice his ship to save Boomer lives.

And neither would Paul.

"I need more speed," he ordered tersely as he reoriented *Horizon* on the fleeing Romulans. He imagined that he could almost feel Travis' smile as he did so.

"The reactor is already running at a hundred and five percent!" Weiss reminded him, fear thick in his voice. "Any higher and we risk a core breach!"

"Go to a hundred and ten percent," Mayweather said. He triggered the comm. "This is the *Horizon* to all combat capable ships. Form on me." He almost smiled. "Looks like Starfleet needs our help," he said with forced levity.

The rumble of *Horizon's* engines became a high-pitched whine as Paul accelerated toward the ongoing light-fight, pushing the J-Class harder than it was ever meant be pushed. From his sensor feed, he could tell that the seventh bird of prey was slightly larger than the others and, despite taking a heavy pounding from *Endeavour's* guns, was still in the fight. Orienting themselves on the Starfleet vessel's aft, the three smaller Romulan ships began attack runs, no doubt hoping that the NX-class did not mount aft-facing weapons.

It did.

Twin pulses of phase-cannon fire flashed through the night, splashing across one of the Romulan's shields in a brilliant display of pyrotechnics. Hot on the bird of prey's tail, the Orion gunboat spat a single torpedo at the same craft seconds later and sent a steady stream of disruptor bolts into its shields.

"Concentrate fire on that target," Paul commanded, hearing the almost instantaneous chirp of multiple acknowledgments sound across the comm channel. Pulsed lasers, disruptor beams, and plasma bolts leapt out from the seven remaining combat-capable ships, slicing into the Romulan's shields with searing heat. Under fire, the warship banked hard, twisting into a spinning dive that carried it away from *Endeavour*; a stream of disruptor fire lanced out from its guns, carving a lethal line across the hull of one of the Boomer ships. A second burst of fire punched through the forward viewport and onto the command deck itself. Bodies, seared beyond any hope of recognition, spilled from the shattered craft as it began a slow tumble toward the distant nebula.

"Oh God," someone whispered across the comm channel as the bird of prey straightened from its roll, cannons still spewing fire. A second of the combat ships exploded, and a third, and a fourth. The gunboat clung tightly to the Romulan's aft, no longer firing torpedoes but maintaining a steady stream of disruptor fire that lit up the warship's shields; in the distance,



*Endeavour* continued to exchange fire with the three Romulan ships it had engaged, no longer attempting - or perhaps no longer capable of - evasive maneuvers.

Alarms began to shriek as the bird of prey locked on to *Horizon* with its targeting computers and, out of the corner of his eye, Mayweather saw Weiss silently cross himself. *Don't let my people down, Tucker*, Paul thought grimly as he sent the J-Class into a screaming dive, knowing that it was already too late.

The universe disintegrated around him.

## ACT FOUR

The ship disintegrated in a flash of flame.

Biting back a curse as he watched the last of the Boomer combat ships blow apart under Romulan fire, Nathaniel Hayes pulled back hard on the control stick while simultaneously working the thruster pad with his other hand, sending the gunboat into a spinning climb that carried it out of the path of the exploding Boomer ship. The loud clangs of debris smacking into the outer hull of the gunboat echoed loudly through the command deck. Nate winced with each impact even as the Romulan responsible continued through the expanding cloud of fire, unconcerned about collateral damage.

Not for the first time, Hayes was glad for his maternal grandfather's teachings. In his youth, David Sinclair had been a pilot, a "fighter jock" as they had once been called, and had spent countless hours with Nate, teaching him the ins and outs of flight. Unlike many of the more esoteric abilities that the Section had taught him, flying was an easily explainable skill; Nate's possession of an official pilot's license proved that he had enough recorded flight time to assuage the suspicions of all but the most paranoid investigators. He had, for a very long time, wanted to be a pilot just like his grandfather.

That desire had faded the moment that he discovered the truth about his birth.

A shrill tone suddenly sounded, warning of a weapons lock, and Hayes reacted without thought, sending the Orion ship into a tight barrel roll in an attempt to confuse the Romulan targeting computer. Equipped with omni-directional maneuvering thrusters, the gunboat had never been intended for atmospheric operations and was instead optimized for zero-gee conditions; Nate took full advantage of that very fact. Firing a short burst from the forward port jets, he slewed the gunboat around, seeming to pivot the ship on its horizontal axis although it continued along its current trajectory. A second burst from the forward starboard thrusters halted the spin almost at once, and Nate punched the throttle hard. A surge of power erupted from the engines and the gunboat darted forward, streaking by the pursuing Romulan ship. The abrupt change in facing and momentum broke the targeting lock, and Hayes could only imagine the frustration of the Romulan gunners.

That almost made him smile.

Another burst from appropriate jets and they were once more on the Romulan's aft. Seated at the weapons console, Chief Petty Officer Gray sent a pulse of disruptor fire at their target; stabbing through the depleted shields, the sizzling beam sliced into the bird of prey's outer armor. The damage was minimal at best, but it was enough to keep the Romulan ship's attention focused on the gunboat and away from *Endeavour*.

And that was all that mattered.

A soft but incessant beeping drew Nate's attention and he risked a quick glance at his display

board. Almost at once, he felt his stomach lurch as he noticed the rapidly declining fuel pressure.

"We've got a fuel leak," he declared with a frown. Despite having a modern warp drive and impulse engine, the Orion gunboat relied heavily on some form of liquid propellant to fuel the maneuvering jets, and those thrusters were the *only* thing currently keeping them alive. *Shrapnel from that Boomer ship must have punctured a fuel line*, Nate mused grimly. At the rate they were losing pressure, the gunboat would be a sitting duck in less than a minute.

As if sensing their straits, the Romulan ship that they were pursuing twisted away, accelerating into a wide loop that would, once more, bring its main guns to bear. Already, its smaller point-defense weapons were barking, lashing out with small pulses of fire that slammed into the gunboat's already weakened hull plating. Nate cursed as his controls suddenly turned sluggish and an explosion of sparks from an aft panel filled the deck with light.

"Weapons are down!" Gray reported and Hayes shook his head in annoyance, keying the intra-ship comm with a quick flick of his wrist. That damned Murphy was hard at work again...

"*Endeavour*, Hayes," he snapped as he sent the gunboat into another diving spin to evade the Romulan fire, fighting the uncooperative controls the entire time.

"*Endeavour*," Lieutenant Devereux responded almost instantly.

"I am bingo fuel," Nate declared, not even thinking about whether the COM officer would recognize the archaic reference, "and my weapon systems are down." A Romulan torpedo flashed toward the gunboat and Hayes banked hard to avoid it; the shrill warning tone warbled and went silent as the warhead streaked on into the endless void before finally detonating harmlessly kilometers away. "Connect me to Ricker," Nate ordered sharply. A half-second later, it occurred to him that he had just issued a directive to a bridge officer two grades his senior.

"Acknowledged," Devereux replied without hesitation, and the comm-line went fuzzy.

"Counter-measures are gone," Gray announced, and Nate frowned hard. Shooting a quick glance at the tactical display, he was unsurprised to find that the Romulan bird of prey was now on their six.

"This is -" came the voice of the officer manning the transporter.

"Lock onto Chief Gray and beam him out," Hayes interrupted, not even waiting for the lieutenant to finish identifying herself. Gray shifted at the tactical board but said nothing, clearly recognizing that he had no reason to remain aboard the ship now that the weapons were out. As Nate sent the gunboat into a wide split-S, he heard the distinctive hum of an

active transporter.

At almost the same instant, the pursuing Romulan broke off and dove toward *Endeavour*, weapons spitting fire; Nate could only assume that they had detected the matter transfer and were taking advantage of *Endeavour's* brief moment of vulnerability. Now surrounded by the three smaller birds of prey and the slightly larger command ship, the NX-06 rocked under their combined fire and Hayes grimly realized that it was only a matter of time before she was crippled. Like ironclad battleships from ancient times, the ships exchanged shots in brilliant salvos that lit up the perpetual night; wreathed in near-constant explosions, despite her situation, *Endeavour* continued to hammer the command ship unmercifully. As the Starfleet vessel unleashed a crippling barrage, great chunks of polarized hull plating were blasted free and sent tumbling through the void. A stab of phase cannon fire flashed out from the NX-06, burning through the engine housing of the command ship and exposing the delicate components to the hard vacuum of space; seconds later, twin torpedoes impacted and a blossom of fire erupted forth.

The sensor board suddenly beeped, announcing several new contacts, and Nate's eyes narrowed as he noted the launch of four pod-sized craft from the bird of prey closest to the station and farthest from the battle. He recognized them at once: breaching pods. Already, that bird of prey was altering course and accelerating toward *Endeavour*. It didn't take a tactical genius to realize that the Starfleet ship simply could *not* take on another Romulan attacker.

"Lock onto my bio-signature," Nate instructed Ricker as he banked toward the limping command ship. A quick glance at his systems board revealed he had just enough fuel remaining for this. *So much for accomplishing my primary mission*, he reflected, darkly amused at the frustration his failed mission would cause the Section.

"Locked on," the lieutenant replied. Hayes drew a deep breath, holding it for exactly five heartbeats before exhaling it. With it, he exhaled his anger, his fear, his common sense...

"On my command," he said calmly, "get me out of here."

As Ricker signaled her acknowledgement, Nate kicked in the power. Engines howling in protest, the gunboat lunged forward, gathering momentum and speed with each passing second. The control stick started to vibrate in his hand as the flight control computer, already heavily damaged earlier, began to fail completely. The collision avoidance software was shrieking something at him in Orion, but he paid no attention to it. Looming before him, the damaged command ship suddenly seemed to recognize his intention and streaks of brilliant green reached out toward him as *Endeavour* intensified its barrage.

"Now!" he shouted into the comm, "Get me out now!"

The world exploded around him, dissolving in a loud hum that thundered through his skull and beat time with his heart. It wasn't cold this time; instead, a raging inferno seemed to well

up within and around him, so unbearably hot that it felt as though his eyes were melting. Acid churned in his stomach and through his veins and in his brain. He tried to take a breath but it felt as if he was inhaling fire. Back and forth his vision danced, swimming in and out of focus; overlaid over the gray walls of *Endeavour* was a brief image of armored humanoid shapes blanketed in fire. The figures seemed to flicker in and out of existence, and Nate realized that he was seeing *inside* the Romulan command ship, as impossible as that seemed.

A thousand years seemed to pass before he felt cool air on his face again and he inhaled sharply, tasting the familiar air. Nausea swelled within him and he dropped to his knees, quickly bracing himself with his hands before his head could hit the floor. Hands were suddenly gripping his shoulders, holding him steady, and he became aware of voices echoing from an impossibly vast distance.

"-we got him, Captain!" a feminine voice was stating in a shout to be heard over shrieking alarms.

"Hold on, Ensign," another voice - this one male - said calmly, very close to his ear.

"This is Ricker," the female voice declared, "I need a medical team at the transporter immediately!" Pain suddenly raced through his body and Hayes heard himself gasp; every square centimeter of his skin felt raw, as if it were on fire, and he bit the inside of his mouth to keep from screaming. The urge to curl up in a ball and whimper was nearly overpowering and he struggled against the blind fury that simmered within him.

"He's got second-degree burns over most of his body!" the second voice - Chief Gray, Nate realized - was reporting. The Chief's tone was dark and angry. "What the hell happened?"

"I lost pattern recognition when he rammed the Romulan," Ricker replied sharply. "He partially materialized back on the gunboat." The distant and logical portion of Hayes' brain - the part that wasn't writhing in agony - acknowledged the lieutenant's words and recognized how lucky he'd been; cool metal touched his neck and, with a hiss, ice seemed to suddenly race through his veins. The muscles in his limbs began to quiver uncontrollably.

"Will he be okay?" a third voice - also male - asked.

"I don't know, sir," Chief Gray quickly replied. Another wave of dizziness caused Nate to nearly pass out and he had an uncomfortable feeling in his stomach, a sensation he recalled all too well from his last experience with tequila.

"Call me Paul," the third man said. "I owe the two of you as much beer as you can handle."

Darkness loomed up to envelop him and, as he tumbled into unconsciousness, Nate hoped the gunboat's sacrifice had been worth it.



The impact of the Orion gunboat against the bird of prey was the opportunity Rick Eisler was looking for.

At his direction, phase cannon fire from *Endeavour's* guns flashed out, carving chunks of armor from the wounded command ship and slicing into the superstructure. Blue-green fire erupted from the port nacelle as warp plasma ignited under the scorching heat and, mere seconds later, the nacelle itself exploded. Already crippled, the bird of prey reeled under the assault as the last of *Endeavour's* Mark V torpedoes slammed into it, detonating with incandescent flashes that ripped into its hull and sent armor plating tumbling through the darkness. Secondary explosions ravaged the ship and, without hesitation, Eisler ordered a second salvo of torpedoes. Three Mark IVs struck the tumbling bird of prey amidships and it vanished in a brilliant fireball.

The trio of Romulan warships closest to *Endeavour* went evasive almost immediately, maneuvering to regroup outside of the range of the Starfleet vessel's heavier weapons. Staring at the sensor feed installed on his TAC board, Rick frowned at their sudden actions and noted the distant fourth bird of prey shifting its trajectory, clearly intending to join the trio.

"Damage report!" Tucker ordered, his voice perfectly pitched and composed; for all of the danger they were in, he sounded as calm as he ever had. Despite his disapproval of the inappropriate relationship between the captain and the XO, Rick mentally revised his opinion upward of Tucker's command abilities. The captain's ability to maintain an image of absolute control in the midst of a firefight had a powerfully calming effect on the junior officers; a frightened officer was a useless officer.

"Shields are still down," Master Chief Petty Officer Mackenzie responded almost instantly. He too was a picture of poise in the face of a storm; although in the COB's case, Eisler assumed it was more the result of shock. "Hull plating at seventy percent but there are breaches on decks C and D; damage control teams are working on them." Mackenzie paused briefly before continuing, his eyes never leaving his board. "Engineering is reporting a radiation leak; Commander Drahn is trying to lock it down." Out of the corner of his eye, Rick saw Captain Tucker frown.

The report was good news - no, it was amazing news that *Endeavour* remained so battle-ready despite the pounding they had taken. Ignoring the mostly negligible help from the Boomers and the gunboat, *Endeavour* had almost single-handedly taken on seven Romulan birds of prey, destroying three, including a command ship, and damaging the other four without suffering significant casualties herself. *Enterprise* had very nearly been destroyed facing four of these ships and, despite the technological upgrades that had been installed aboard *Endeavour*, it defied comprehension that the engagement had been so one-sided.

It was almost as if the Romulans *wanted* these ships to be destroyed.

"Weapons?" the captain inquired; Rick was already highlighting the closest of the four Romulans as the primary target. It was a common misconception that he controlled *all* of the weapon systems from his station; in reality, he was more of a manager with override capability. He would select a primary target and the weapon systems officer - currently Chief Petty Officer Luckabaugh - would focus on killing that target from his station in the Armory; it was a policy that had been instituted by Starfleet at the suggestion of Lieutenant Commander Reed several weeks before Elysium. Borne out of Reed's experiences in the Expanse, the new system allowed the senior tactical officer to focus on the larger picture.

"Port cannons one and three are out," Rick replied. The primary target - Target Delta - was still attempting to get out of *Endeavour's* range but was on the starboard side; three phase cannon bursts converged upon the ship, punching through the shields to burn a jagged scar across the smaller ship's hull. It twisted into a spiraling dive meant to confuse the targeting computers. "Aft cannons are damaged but Luckabaugh has a team on it," he continued his report as he input additional commands and suggested revised targeting solutions. "Mark Fives have been exhausted," Rick finished.

"T'Pol?" Tucker didn't elaborate, but the Vulcan seemed to already know what he was going to ask. She had been doing that a lot, actually.

"The first ships will be reaching the warp threshold in approximately four point seven six minutes." The Vulcan commander paused briefly during her report but it was enough of a hesitation to be noticed. "I am detecting four additional vessels on approach; estimated time of arrival is seven point two four minutes." She seemed to anticipate Captain Tucker's next question. "I am unable to identify their warp signatures."

"Keep your eye on 'em," the captain said; it sounded more like a request than an order, but she nodded anyway. "Maybe Commodore Archer got us some reinforcements after all." From the tone of his voice, Tucker didn't sound as if he thought that likely. Returning his eyes to the TAC board, Eisler frowned as the four Romulans reoriented themselves on *Endeavour*; they were on the very edge of optimal weapon range and seemed to know it. Letting the WSO pick the targets, he cycled through all of his tactical scans, growing more and more troubled as he studied them. None of this made sense.

Strategically, the Vigrid system was ideally situated for a force intending to move against Terran interests. The system itself was situated on a nexus of "warp highways," naturally occurring routes in which warp travel was substantially faster than normal, something that Rick had never even heard of until the captain's last debriefing. Apparently distinct from wormholes in a way that Eisler realized he couldn't possibly comprehend, the highways had reduced the normal month-long trip required to reach Thor's Cradle from Starbase-1 to just over a standard week. Reducing warp theory to layman's terms, Tucker had likened the warp highways to the slidewalks that littered spaceports: a person walking upon one moved far more quickly than if that person walked beside the moving walkway. Knowing this detail made the importance of the system clear.

For the Romulans, taking Thor's Cradle was not just a sound strategic move: it was an essential one.

And yet, despite that, the Romulan strategy made little sense. By openly attacking the system in this way, they were tipping their hand far too early. Any survivors of the battle - and the chances were high that there *would* be survivors - would be sure to pass on the revelation that it was indeed the Romulans who were responsible for the hit-and-fade attacks on supply convoys that had been plaguing the Boomers since the war had begun. It wasn't the Orion Syndicate, as many in the ECA insisted, nor was it the Nausicaans, or even - as a few had suggested - renegade humans. If anything, this attack would harden the opposition to the Romulan assaults.

On his tactical display, Rick could see the four birds of prey begin maneuvering in a distinct formation, one he recognized from long hours of studying the battle footage from previous engagements. At both Elysium and Pacifica, the Romulans had used a space variation of the "finger four" formation; four ships, split into two distinct fighting wings with a single primary leader in both wings, would fly cover for one another. The first wing would fly slightly ahead and to one side of the second group. Simple, yet effective: four birds of prey utilizing that tactic had nearly crippled *Challenger* at Pacifica and had all but destroyed *Enterprise* at Elysium.

There hadn't been even a hint of such coordination here until now.

Rick silently observed their maneuvers with growing concern. Something simply wasn't adding up. An effective commander would have focused all of their firepower on *Endeavour* instead of wasting time with destroying the Boomer fleet. Upon arrival in-system, the Romulans *had* to see that there was only one real warship in the system, and military doctrine was clear no matter the species: take out the hard target first, and then focus on the soft targets. With *Endeavour* gone, eliminating the Boomers would have been little more difficult than an average gunnery exercise.

"Bring us around, Dan," the captain ordered, "attack pattern delta." Tucker seemed carved from ice as he continued. "Take us right down their throats. Mister Eisler." He shot Rick a look. "Remoras are a go."

Combining elements of the ancient MIRV nuclear missiles and the even more archaic limpet mine, the Remora was a torpedo designed by Tucker himself. Untested and untried in actual combat conditions, it was comprised of multiple warheads, each individually less powerful than the obsolete Mark III but each capable of independent targeting. All ten warheads in a Remora were equipped with specially designed magnetic attractors attuned to Romulan hull composition; the limited range of these attractors, however, required the Remora torpedo to be used at *extremely* close range.

The pitch of *Endeavour's* engines spiked as Hsiao banked and sent the starship into a



spinning climb. Into the very heart of the Romulan formation the Starfleet ship raced, phase cannons spitting fire and carving searing scars across the hulls of two birds of prey. Three Remoras darted from *Endeavour's* torpedo tubes, breaking apart into multiple warheads almost at once, each seeking its own target. To the Romulans, it had to be confusing: a single torpedo abruptly became ten, and the space around the pitched lightfight was suddenly crisscrossed with thirty distinct targets instead of the three that had been launched. Point-defense weapons on the birds of prey stuttered out pulses of disruptor fire, destroying several of the Remoras, while the main batteries of the warships unleashed a devastating salvo upon *Endeavour* in a coordinated burst of fire that punched through the already weakened shields and into the hull plating. Alarms shrieked through the Starfleet ship as the sizzling energy burned through the hull and into the superstructure.

"Multiple hull breaches!" Mackenzie shouted from his DC console even as Eisler watched the warheads from the Remoras detonate. One of the Romulan ships was destroyed almost instantly; it disappeared in a violent burst of fire as the explosions of the small warheads ruptured its fuel cell. Two more of the birds of prey shuddered under the withering assault; secondary explosions ripped across their hulls, tearing apart armor with unexpected ferocity and sending both craft into uncontrolled tumbles. The fourth Romulan ship - the one that had deployed the breaching pods against the station - suffered the least damage as only two of the Remora warheads struck it.

"Status!" Tucker demanded from his command chair. It took Rick a moment, but he suddenly realized that the ambient hum of *Endeavour's* engines had ceased. Keying in a rapid sequence of commands, he ordered a second salvo of the Remoras - it would expend the last of the experimental torpedoes, but if the engine was offline they were running out of options. Already, damage reports were crawling across his screen and Eisler winced at the devastation; fully three-quarters of the phase cannons were inoperative and only two of the torpedo tubes still functioned.

"We've lost impulse!" the COB snapped, his features bleak. The distant hum of twin torpedoes being launched echoed through the bridge; recognizing its danger, the fourth Romulan ship dove for cover behind its wounded brethren.

"How long?" the captain asked as Rick stared at his sensor feed in surprise. All twenty of the Remora warheads homed in onto the hull of one of the damaged birds of prey and exploded with lethal consequences; consumed in fire, the ship began breaking apart almost instantly.

"Unknown," Mackenzie replied, once more in control of himself. Recognizing that the Starfleet ship was still dangerous, the fourth bird of prey pulled back, maneuvering to remain out of *Endeavour's* weapons range. Its half-crippled companion limped away as well, streams of warp plasma and debris trailing behind it.

"Minimal weapon systems, sir," Rick reported without being asked, "WSO is on it." With a nod, Tucker exchanged a look with T'Pol that seemed to convey some sort of meaning. She raised an eyebrow in a distinctly Vulcan manner before speaking as if he had asked a question.

"Both birds of prey are circling *Endeavour*," the commander stated calmly.

"What are they waiting for?" Lieutenant Devereux wondered aloud, unable to hide the fear in her voice.

"We are being scanned," T'Pol suddenly announced before anyone could offer a hypothesis to answer the lieutenant's question. Her fingers darting across the SCI board, the commander seemed poised to frown.

"Can you block it?" Tucker asked and she gave him a look that was almost contemptuous; despite the situation, Eisler nearly smiled.

"I am doing so now, Captain," came her cool response. A thought suddenly occurred to Rick, and he glanced down at his board to look over the damage once more.

"Sir," he said softly, his voice carrying despite the alarms, "it is possible that they mean to seize *Endeavour*." Eisler looked up, meeting Tucker's eyes. "We did just take on seven of them and survive. I'm sure they'd like to know how." The captain nodded, his expression darkening.

"*Endeavour* can *not* be taken, Commander," he declared and Rick nodded his understanding of what remained unspoken: the captain would scuttle *Endeavour* before allowing the ship to be captured. Tucker activated the intraship comm on his command chair with a sharp jab of his thumb. "All hands," he said calmly into it, "this is the captain. Stand by to repel boarders." He gave Rick another look. "Arm the bridge crew," he ordered, before glancing back toward T'Pol, "and keep an eye out for more breachin' pods."



The breaching pod was little more than a heavily modified lifeboat, equipped with maneuvering thrusters, magnetic seals, and automated fusion torches. Launched like a lifeboat, the pod would attach to a target's surface and the torches would burn through the hull, thus giving the soldiers within the pod entry into the target. Against stationary targets, they were ideal transport platforms.

Major Talok hated them.

Inside the pod, there was remarkably little free space available; two acceleration "couches" consumed most of the interior volume and the rudimentary flight controls took up much of the rest, leaving very little leg room for the soldiers being transported. The couches themselves were actually poorly cushioned impact seats, equipped with shock-gel and inertial dampeners. Military theory stated that the gel would prevent any internal hemorrhaging should the dampeners fail, but Talok had his doubts.

Four centurions were secured to their impact seats, dressed in the standard-issue battle uniform, complete with an enclosing helmet to conceal their faces. The armor itself was virtually useless against most energy weapons but protection was hardly the primary reason it was worn; though it was difficult, Talok tried to avoid thinking about the highly acidic compound that was even now coursing through the body glove he wore under the armor. As he maneuvered the pod toward the station, the silence that filled it was deafening. He frowned once before speaking.

"The *Tal Shiar*," Talok said softly, his tone dark and his expression darker, "has extensive files on every member of the Fleet." He paused to let that bit of information sink in; it was a lie, but an eminently believable one. Everyone in the Empire rightfully feared the *Tal Shiar* and the hushed horror stories about the sinister organization's reach and power were legion. "They know everything about your parents, your siblings, your mates, and your offspring." The four soldiers shifted uncomfortably under his unblinking gaze and he infused his next words with as much coldness as he could manage. "If I die," he growled, "so do they." He speared them with a dark look. "In terrible, agonizing pain." Talok half-turned away, confident that none of them would act against him now.

He was wrong.

In a blur of motion, one of the centurions drew his sidearm and leveled at Talok before the major could react. The sound of a disruptor pistol being discharged echoed loudly in the cramped breaching pod and Talok braced himself for pain.

It did not come.

Gasping in surprise, the centurion shuddered, his fingers going limp as he stared at the smoking hole in his chest. The disruptor pistol clattered loudly on the deck as it slipped from his hand and, had he not been secured on the acceleration couch, he would have toppled forward; instead, he sagged against the restraints, his breath coming in ragged gasps as the life faded from his eyes. In a dangerously smooth motion, Centurion Jarok holstered his weapon and gave Talok a steady look.

"He was the commander's creature, sir," Jarok said calmly, and Talok noted the other two soldiers nodding in agreement. Neither of them seemed overly concerned at the action.

"And whom do you serve?" Talok asked, masking his tension behind a practiced expression of indifference. His time among the Vulcans had helped him perfect the illusion of calm.

"I serve the Empire, Major," came the confident reply and, once more, the two other centurions nodded. A smile briefly touched Talok's face as the breaching pod abruptly shuddered; the hiss of metal being seared by lasers was a glorious sound.

"Then let us serve the Empire together," he declared as their restraints released, dropping the

corpse to the deck with a loud thump. Already, the dead centurion's warsuit had begun to hiss as the concentrated acids contained within it began to break down his body, a final solution to prevent the Humans from learning of their physical appearance. The ability to walk among the Vulcans without attracting notice was an intelligence asset that they could not afford to lose.

"Glory to the Empire," the three centurions said in unison as they lowered the concealing faceplates on their helmets. Talok did the same, blinking his eyes rapidly to adjust to the twin laser pulses that blinded him for a microsecond; opening his eyes, he noted the activation of the built-in heads-up display that appeared before him a moment later with a sense of wonder. The warsuit was a technological marvel that never ceased to amaze him no matter how many times he wore it. Once the faceplate was lowered and locked into place, a pair of extremely low-powered lasers would activate and beam the appropriate information directly onto the lens of the wearer's eye, giving the illusion of a near-holographic interface set approximately ten to twelve centimeters beyond his face. Information flickered quickly across his line of sight and he took a moment to study it; integrated into the warsuit were a number of features intended to optimize a soldier's combat capability, which ranged from a built-in motion sensor with a range of fifty meters to an internal compass to a bio-monitor that allowed the team leader - in this case, the major himself - to keep track of the health of his team.

Toggling a command on his wrist comp, Talok activated an internal schematic of the station as the hissing of the pod's breaching torches abruptly ceased; semi-transparent, the schematic appeared upon the HUD with probable hostiles beyond the hatchway already highlighted. At the major's gesture, Jarok depressed the button on the side of the hatchway; almost at once, a hollow boom echoed through the pod as the explosive charges on the mating tube detonated. Exploding outward from the pod, they hurled the newly sliced segment of the hull into the station corridor with crushing force. The three centurions sent a trio of grenades through the gaping hole at once. Almost instantly, the three explosives detonated with flashes of light and hollow thumps. Jarok led the way, his heavy disruptor rifle held at the ready, and the two other centurions followed, covering the left and right. Four steps behind them, Talok followed, his own weapon primed.

Smoke filled the corridor beyond, limiting their vision, and Talok was once more glad for the armor. Hard-sealed, it could double as an environment suit in emergency situations and bore a two-hour oxygen supply. In the unlikely event that the humans would resort to biological or chemical warfare, the suit was rated to protect him against those threats as well.

Talok didn't want to think about how the suits had been tested.

They came under fire the moment they entered. Ten humans, all crouched behind hastily erected barricades and armed with little more than obsolete pulse weapons, began to spray fire wildly as Centurion Jarok darted through the breach and into the smoke-filled corridor. With almost casual ease, Jarok knelt and began returning fire, not even seeking cover; unlike the humans, he took the extra half-second to actually aim at his target and the results were

instantly obvious. One of the Terrans fell, his face a smoking ruin, followed by a second and a third. Jarok was quickly joined by the two other centurions and together, the trio sent a lethal barrage at the defenders that sliced through the flimsy barricade and into the unprotected flesh beyond. Panic set in among the humans as their number rapidly dwindled, and their already questionable accuracy deteriorated even more quickly. Two of the defenders turned to flee and Talok, from his kneeling position just beyond the breach, dropped them both with well-placed shots. The last of the human defenders threw up his arms, shouting in his barbaric tongue that he was surrendering; incredibly, he discarded his weapon and began to stand, arms held high.

Jarok waited until the fool was on his feet before shooting him in the throat.

"The command deck is that way," Talok announced, gesturing in the direction that the two runners had taken. He was unconcerned about speaking aloud; air tight, the helmets were equipped with comms that would allow the teams to communicate without fear of being overheard.

"These were not soldiers," one of the centurions stated flatly as he nudged one of the dead humans with a boot.

"The soldiers," Jarok pointed out as he began advancing, "are on the Starfleet vessel."

"Then these Humans were ... *civilians*," the centurion said, raw contempt in his voice as he fell into step with Jarok. "They would leave civilians to defend this installation?" He sounded incredulous.

"The Humans are retreating from this system," Talok replied calmly, studying the tactical display on his HUD. The other three teams were reporting minimal resistance as they progressed toward their targets. "In the face of a superior enemy," the major continued, "retreat is the logical course of action."

Almost at once, he wished that he could take the words back as the three centurions gave him quick sidelong glances. From the moment that he had returned from Vulcan space following the failure with V'Las, Talok had been forced to deal with accusations of having spent far too much time amongst their distant cousins. In many circles within the Infiltrator Corps of the *Tal Shiar*, he was now mockingly referred to as "the Vulcan," and was often treated little better than a Reman shocktrooper. Espousing logic as he had in the past - even when the situation called for it - only seemed to exacerbate the problem. Frowning, he focused on the mission; redeeming his reputation was a problem to be dealt with at a later date.

They advanced through the corridors at a pace quicker than a walk but not quite a run. Seizure of the station required capture of three key locations: the command center, the central computer, and the power core. The major had decided that seizure of the command center, the highest priority target, would be his team's goal, and he had dispatched two teams to secure the core. Already, the other three teams were beginning to report sporadic

engagements over the comm; three soldiers had fallen to sniper fire or improvised explosives. Long minutes passed in near-silence.

On point, Jarok abruptly halted and dropped to a knee; without hesitation, Talok followed suit, swiveling to face behind them to protect their flank. Peeking around the corner of the corridor, the senior centurion grunted before speaking.

"Command center in sight," he reported coolly and quickly transferred the data he was seeing to Talok's HUD. It was momentarily jarring to suddenly be seeing what another sentient was seeing, but the major barely reacted as he studied the data stream. Over a dozen humans were busy hastily erecting a barricade outside the command center. Several of them were armed with large rifles and at least two were carrying handheld sensor packages. "Recommend grenades, followed by a forward assault," Jarok continued.

"Agreed," the major quickly replied, and Jarok's data stream dropped from his HUD. Pulling a grenade from the tactical array on his battle armor, he quickly primed it and turned back toward the command center. With precise aim, the four of them sent their grenades tumbling around the corner and into the barricade; the two men with sensor gear shouted suddenly as the fist-sized explosives struck their targets. A half-second later, the grenades detonated in rapid succession.

Jarok led the way in a brisk walk, his disruptor rifle barking a steady stream of fire. He was flanked on either side by the two junior centurions, both of whom easily kept pace and were no less lethal with their weapons. A half step behind them, Talok was more judicious with his aim, targeting any of the Terrans who seemed more inclined toward accuracy or patience. Pulses of laser fire flashed by them, some narrowly missing, but the rapid rush and the overwhelming rate of fire from Talok's team almost completely overwhelmed the humans and cut them down with casual brutality. As they reached the doorway to the command center, one of the centurions abruptly cried out in pain and toppled, his left arm half-blown apart by a pulse rifle wielded by a hidden human; as if they were of a single mind, three disruptors sought the Terran out and cut him apart.

Into the command center they went, Centurion Jarok still on point; he took a lethal shot to his throat from another concealed human as he stepped through the doorway. Talok speared the human with a rapid burst of fire that sliced into the man's chest and dropped him. All at once, the command center went silent. There were no more targets.

Taking a step forward, the major kicked the pulse rifle away from the human that he had just shot. With eyes concealed behind the battle helmet, he studied the dying Terran, recognizing him from intelligence reports as the station administrator. These humans were not particularly impressive, especially in this state, and Talok could not help but think that the scarlet color of their blood was unnatural.

"Com..." the human wheezed, his breath coming in ragged gasps as he struggled to suck oxygen into his seared lungs. It was almost admirable that a human this damaged could still

cling to life, but contempt outweighed any other emotion; there was nothing admirable about dying in a pool of one's own blood and whimpering. "Comma..."

Talok studied him for a moment later before turning away. The human would be dead very soon and he had work to do. The sole surviving centurion had already taken up a defensive position at the doorway, his rifle still primed for combat. The major had taken three steps away when the human's words rang out once more, words that he recognized at once.

*"Command..."*

Talok spun around, his disruptor coming to a ready position, but it was too late. The whimpering human had not been whimpering after all. Even as the major was leveling the weapon and taking aim, the human spat out a word that was totally foreign. A word that meant death.

*"...Ragnarok."*

Around them, the command center came to life with a flare of sudden light and a disembodied voice echoed off the walls.

"Command Ragnarok acknowledged. Five seconds. Four. Three. Two."

Talok closed his eyes.



Marie Devereux opened her eyes.

Almost at once, she began coughing as her oxygen-starved lungs struggled for air. For a moment, she wondered why she was lying on the deck of the bridge, why her head pounded and her fingers tingled, but a quick glance at the shattered COM board quickly reminded her. She could recall Captain Tucker's urgent shipwide order to brace for impact as the shockwave from the exploding Vigrid Station raced toward *Endeavour*. She remembered the terror that turned her stomach into a ball of ice as she waited for the inevitable impact, and the sensation of flying as *Endeavour* was sent tumbling by the raw concussive force of the shockwave. There had been explosions and cries of pain and the sounds of metal tearing.

And then ... nothing.

Pushing herself up from the deck, Marie glanced around, wincing at the damage she could see. Her COM board was a complete loss, shattered beyond repair; live connections still sparked and hissed intermittently. A thick layer of smoke covered the entire bridge, blanketing it in a thick gray haze that limited visibility. Small electrical fires - the source of the smoke - still raged, many unchecked, but the suppression system was already kicking in. A gentle spray of

white foam rained down from the ceiling, coating everything it touched and looking incongruously like snow. Alarms flickered erratically, bathing the bridge in a surreal scarlet light, as the klaxons continued to howl.

Shock finally receded and her wits slowly returned. Ignoring the stab of pain that climbed up her side, Marie staggered to the NAV station, fervently praying to whatever gods would listen that Dan would still be alive; until this very moment, she had not realized just how essential he was in her life, how much she looked forward to seeing him every day, or how deep her feelings for him ran. Sprawled out over his board, his face a mask of blood, Hsiao was still and silent; her heart lurched up into her throat but Marie forced herself to reach forward and check his pulse. At her touch, he stirred; the relief that swelled within her in that moment was staggering.

"Marie?" he asked in a slurred voice. He looked at her through unfocused eyes and she gave in to her impulse; wrapping her arms around him, she hugged him tightly.

"Don't die," she whispered as she held onto him. He muttered something incomprehensible in reply but the sound of cursing drew her attention to the captain's chair. A gasp escaped her before she could restrain it.

A durasteel support girder had fractured and collapsed inward; now pinning a semi-conscious Captain Tucker to his command chair, the three plus meter long metal beam shifted ominously with each indrawn breath the captain took. Precariously balanced, the beam appeared to be on the brink of toppling onto him and crushing him with its substantial weight. Tucker had so far been lucky: the command chair bore the brunt of the girder's mass but was even now groaning with the effort.

Lieutenant Commander Eisler, his scalp leaking blood from a jagged cut and his uniform seared with electrical burns, knelt before the chair, one hand steadying the girder as he looked for a way to move it off Tucker. At once, Devereux realized the lieutenant commander's concern: any miscalculation and the beam would collapse on the captain, likely killing him instantly. Letting go of Dan, Marie took two rapid steps to Eisler's side before cautiously reaching out to take over the job of keeping the girder balanced. The tactical officer let her do so without comment.

"Sir," the lieutenant commander growled to Tucker in that intimidating voice of his, "we have to move it before it slips." The captain grimaced as he nodded slightly.

"T'Pol?" he asked.

As if summoned, the Vulcan commander climbed to her feet from behind the SCI board, shaking her head as if to clear it, and her eyes sought out Tucker. Standing with her back to the TAC board, Marie had a clear view of the first officer and felt a jolt of surprise wash through her as the Vulcan's eyes widened in what could *only* be fear.



"Trip!" the commander all but cried out, emotion leaking into her voice. For someone with a leg injury, she was surprisingly fast, darting to the captain's side in a limping half-run. T'Pol said nothing as she shoved Commander Eisler out of the way, barely acknowledging the tactical officer's surprised grunt as he stumbled backwards. Without hesitation, the Vulcan grabbed the metal girder and lifted it free as if it weighed only a couple dozen kilograms. She dropped it to the deck, a surprising amount of emotion in her eyes as she stared intently at the captain. Marie gaped at the first officer with open shock on her face, more stunned by the feat of strength than at the depth of the commander's feelings for the captain. It was common knowledge that Vulcans were stronger than humans, but Devereux had always assumed the difference wasn't that significant.

Apparently, she had been wrong.

"Ow," Tucker muttered as the Vulcan touched his shoulder in concern, her features once more composed. "Starfleet really needs to reconsider this stupid design," he grumbled as he tried to stand. His bloodstained right leg buckled, and he collapsed back into the chair. "Status?" he demanded, not even trying to hide the wince as he began to remove his jacket.

"Captain," the Vulcan started to say, but Tucker interrupted.

"Not now, T'Pol," he said grimly as he began to tear strips from the uniform jacket. They exchanged a long look, neither speaking for an extended moment, before T'Pol nodded and limped back to her station. "I need status reports," the captain repeated.

"Sir." Eisler was crouching behind the DCO board; Marie realized that she hadn't even seen him move there. "Master Chief Mackenzie is injured. He has severe burns and appears to have trouble breathing; we need a med team up here ASAP." The TAC officer glanced at the damage control board with a look of incomprehension on his face. "And I don't know how to operate this station," he finished.

"My board is a total loss, sir," Devereux quickly volunteered, eyeing the captain as he began binding his wounded leg.

"Impulse is still inoperative," Dan announced. "Docking thrusters and maneuvering jets functional. Warp drive online." Once more perched at her station, Commander T'Pol spoke, her eyes glued to the sensor feed before her.

"I am detecting only one Romulan ship intact," she reported. "It has suffered considerable structural damage." There was a brief pause before she continued. "Significant damage among the Boomer fleet, but ships are continuing to transit to warp."

"Devereux," Tucker said into the momentary silence, "take the DCO board." She nodded and turned to obey as he continued. "Eisler, I need a weapons report. Hsiao, begin plottin' a course out of system. T'Pol, I want a threat analysis of the last bird of prey." He stabbed the comm button on his chair; it hissed and popped, but functioned. "Medical emergency on the

bridge."

As she took the seat before the damage control console, Marie winced at the sight of the COB. Sprawled out beside the DC console, he stirred but did not wake; ugly burns covered one side of his face and he seemed to be straining to breathe. Not for the first time, she found herself struggling to focus all of her attention on her duties.

As the data began crawling across the damage control board, she was suddenly glad for the cross-training that Commander T'Pol had insisted the bridge crew undergo following Pacifica; according to the first officer, it was a requirement for all members of a Vulcan bridge crew to know how to operate every station in the event of casualties. The captain had backed the idea at once and Devereux had to admit that the additional training was logical. Having been aboard *Endeavour* for just over a week, Lieutenant Commander Eisler hadn't even started the training program yet.

Engineering updated their latest assessment about repairs and, as she read the data, Marie mused that it would probably be quicker to list the systems that *weren't* damaged.

"Engineering reports multiple coolant leaks," she informed the captain. "They still haven't locked down that radiation leak and -"

"Four ships dropping out of warp," T'Pol interrupted abruptly, "unknown configuration." The Vulcan's pause was barely noticeable. "Multiple weapon ports, heavy shielding and armor detected," she continued before glancing up. "Warships," she concluded.

"Onscreen," Tucker ordered and the viewscreen snapped to life. Marie could almost hear the frown as Tucker spoke. "Those look like..."

T'Pol finished his thought, her voice grim.

"Romulans."

## ACT FIVE

"Romulans."

Staring at the image on the viewscreen, Trip frowned at T'Pol's identification of the newly arrived ships. Twice the size of the birds of prey, these new vessels were anything but aesthetically pleasing, bearing the unmistakably aggressive lines of ships meant solely for war. Dotted with disruptor cannon ports and torpedo tubes, they bore the stylized bird of prey along their hull like their smaller sister ships, although subtle differences made the image seem more sinister.

"What the hell is that?" Lieutenant Hsiao asked as he stared at the viewscreen; the helmsman was pressing a sleeve torn from his duty uniform to his forehead to staunch the flow of blood from his scalp wound.

"I believe," Trip replied calmly, "that you are lookin' at the Romulan version of the NX-class." It was the only explanation that made sense and, through the bond, Tucker could sense T'Pol's silent agreement. Starfleet had long suspected the existence of a heavier class of Romulan warship than the bird of prey but, until now, no hard evidence had ever been acquired. The fact that these new vessels hadn't been deployed until now made no sense...

"I'm really starting to hate these guys," Hsiao muttered under his breath, unaware that he spoke Tucker's very thoughts in that moment. Had the situation been any less grim, Trip would have smiled.

"I want a full tactical scan of those things," Tucker said with as much authority as he could manage, wincing as another stab of pain shot through his leg. He hoped it wasn't broken. "Find me a weakness, T'Pol." He felt rather than saw her nod of acquiescence even as another wave of concern for his well-being washed over him through their bond.

For a moment, he was strangely reminded of their first meld, conducted in the days after they had buried little Elizabeth. T'Pol's emotional control had been almost nonexistent at the time; not yet fully recovered from the death of her mother, she'd suddenly found herself reeling from the loss of the parent bond that Vulcan mothers experienced with their offspring, a bond that Trip could barely comprehend. At first, he'd been hesitant to meld with her, afraid of what he would discover ... or more accurately, of what he wouldn't discover. The fear that she was with him simply because the bond demanded it had nearly paralyzed him, but the moment their souls – their *katras* – merged, her agonizing pain and desperate need for his support had swept those fears away and buried them under an avalanche of emotion.

And the emotions that she felt! For the first time, he *truly* understood why Vulcans had to maintain that rigid self-control at all times. T'Pol's emotions had struck him with hurricane-force strength, shredding the meager barriers that he possessed and *forcing* him to share. He felt anger that could tear steel, and *all* of it was focused at the xenophobic monsters who had taken the most precious of experiences – one she had so desperately wanted to share with him

firsthand – and twisted it into something horrifying. Her confusion at why the universe had granted them two children, only to steal them both away, became his confusion. The despair that they might never know the joy of being parents made him want to scream until he could not scream any more. Her grief at losing a child that she had barely known yet wanted to cherish for eternity bordered on suicidal and, in that moment, mirrored his own grief.

But the love she felt for him ... it had destroyed him and remade him into something better, rendered him awestruck at its potency, and silenced any doubts that he could possibly conceive about the two of *them*. He had clung to that emotion, had used it to buttress his waning mental barriers, and together they had clawed their way out of the miasma that had tried to swallow her whole. Things had been different for them after that moment ... and at times, Trip found himself grateful to little Elizabeth for the final gift that she had bestowed to them: in death, the child that Terra Prime thought an abomination had brought her genetic parents closer together than anyone had thought possible.

"The Romulans are moving to intercept the remaining ships in the convoy," T'Pol declared, and Trip felt his stomach clench as their present situation reasserted itself. His face grim, he gave her a look.

"Is there anything we can do?" he asked, already knowing the answer.

"Not at this range," came the reply. To everyone but him, she appeared uncaring about the Boomers' fate; but Trip could sense her simmering anger at the unnecessary loss of life. The hiss of the turbolift announced the arrival of PO1 Simons; without a word, the Roughneck corpsman moved toward the unconscious COB.

"How many are left?" Trip asked of the Boomers. He really didn't want to know the answer, didn't want to know how many men and women and children were going to die because he had failed them, but he forced himself to ask.

"There are thirty-three ships that have not yet reached the warp threshold," T'Pol answered and Tucker hid another wince, this one not born of physical pain. His mind blurred with mental calculations: a minimum crew of two per ship with a maximum of twelve resulted in casualties between sixty-six to three hundred and ninety-six. All dead, because he had failed.

"And there's nothin' we can do," he half-stated, half-asked in a soft voice.

"Not at this range," his mate repeated. No one else could hear the sadness in her voice. Trip nodded before glancing toward Eisler. The TAC officer seemed to recognize what he wanted, and spoke.

"One torpedo tube functional," Eisler reported, features grim. "Two phase cannons fully operational. No other offensive capability." The German tactical officer's face appeared carved from rock as he continued. "Shield generators are inoperative and hull plating emitters are functioning at barely fifteen percent."

"So, we've got no offense *or* defense," Tucker summed up. "Just like last year's Gators," he muttered, retreating into sarcasm to hide the pain. Eisler gave him a flat look, clearly not recognizing the reference, but Trip decided against explaining. Now wasn't the time. "Marie, status of the impulse drive?" Devereux looked up from her board.

"Commander Drahn reports he'll need fifteen minutes minimum," she replied. Tucker almost reminded her that they didn't *have* fifteen minutes but from the expression on her face, she already knew that. "He's still trying to lock down those coolant and radiation leaks," the COM officer continued.

"The Romulans are engaging," T'Pol abruptly announced. "I am detecting multiple detonations." The urge to close his eyes and pray swept over Trip. Doing so, however, was not an option; soon, the Romulans would turn to *Endeavour*...

"T'Pol," he asked, "how long will take 'em to reach weapons range once they're done?" She recognized what he was asking at once.

"Approximately three point three six minutes," she replied, and he fought a heavy sigh.

"How close to the warp threshold are we?"

"Ninety-six thousand, two hundred and sixty-six point four eight kilometers," T'Pol answered smoothly. She continued, more for the benefit of the bridge crew than for him. "There is a twenty-seven point nine zero percent chance that the nacelles will self-destruct if *Endeavour* goes to warp from our current location." Nothing was said of the repercussions that could occur even if the nacelles didn't blow up; she knew that no one was more familiar with the design of the NX-class than Captain Tucker.

"Mister Hsiao," Trip said calmly, "stand by to go to warp."

"Romulans have ceased fire," T'Pol stated moments later. She spent a few seconds consulting her sensor feed. "No other functional human ships remain within the system."

"How many got out?" Tucker asked. He felt T'Pol's sadness merge with his own; she understood why he needed to know.

"Unknown." She paused as she ordered her thoughts. "The destruction of Vigrig Station created significant sensor distortions," T'Pol continued. "I have no way of accurately determining the number of survivors." Trip nodded again, glancing away; even as he did so, the Vulcan looked up from her board. "The Romulans are altering course toward *Endeavour*."

Tucker frowned before pressing the intra-ship comm button on his command chair.

"All hands, this is the captain." Trip paused, drawing in a steadying breath. He could feel

T'Pol's eyes on him, and could sense her concern over his emotional state. "Rig for emergency warp," he continued, consciously concealing the worry he was experiencing. If this didn't work, they'd all die...

"Lieutenant Hsiao," he ordered, his eyes on T'Pol. If he was going to die, he wanted her face to be the last thing he saw. "Take us to warp one." Visibly worried, the young helmsman responded hesitantly, a far cry from his normal ebullient self. A loud whine echoed through *Endeavour* as the Starfleet ship leaped from a dead stop to warp one; the whine shifted in pitch seconds later, becoming a loud shriek. Alarms screamed, and the engineer in him was already running through the options. Had this been *Enterprise*, he would be down there where he belonged...

"Massive radiation leak!" Devereux reported, her eyes wide as she studied the damage reports crawling across her screen. "Five sieverts and climbing!"

The ball of ice that had been floating in Trip's stomach turned to lead, and he wanted to curse. It was exactly as he had feared: the sudden leap to warp with no gradual acceleration, combined with the gravitational anomalies, had made things much worse in Engineering. Even now, he could imagine Drahn ordering his team into protective suits, knowing that it was already too late, as lethal doses of radiation spilled out from the unstable warp core. The loss of the impulse drive meant the loss of core containment; powered by the sublight engine, the containment field protected engineering teams from being exposed to levels of radiation that would be nearly instantly lethal. It was a design weakness that hadn't been noticed until well after *Enterprise* became operational; Michael Rostov had been the first to recognize the problem and had brought it to Anna Hess' attention. Trip had been working on an engine redesign ever since, but he had not yet found a way to get around it.

"Is the leak contained?" he asked more calmly than he actually felt. Once more, he felt T'Pol's emotions skitter across his consciousness. She knew what he had to do, and knew how badly he didn't want to do it, but said nothing, instead offering her silent support. For that, Trip was grateful; he was going to need it. At Devereux's blank look, Trip elaborated. "Check the internal sensors," he ordered. *I must be in control*, he told himself as she glanced down at her board. Devereux input additional commands, and froze.

"Radiation is spreading from the Engineering deck," she announced and frowned again. "Nearing ten sieverts and still climbing, sir!" With panic in her features, she looked up at him. Tucker nodded.

"Do you still have override control?" He asked calmly. Her nod was accompanied by a slowly dawning look of understanding. "Seal off the engineering deck," he ordered, using his sternest voice.

"Sir!" The horror in Marie's voice and in her eyes nearly broke him, and he suddenly remembered the rumors about her and Drahn. "The engineering team will die!"

"Yes," Trip said softly, his voice carrying across the eerily silent bridge, "they will." He allowed her to see how much this was killing him as he spoke again. "Seal off the engineering deck, Lieutenant." At odds with the expression on his face, the steel in his voice left her no option but to obey.

In the back of his mind, he could feel T'Pol's presence offering him solace; but he held himself back, sending her a sad look instead. Silently, he began reciting names and attaching faces to those who would soon be dead, men and women whom he had hand-picked and, in many cases, trained. Many of them had survived the Expanse and more than a few had been with him since before *Enterprise* launched.

*Drahn. Burke. Gomez. Montoya. Dillard. Ling. Suborov. Almack.* The list went on and Trip committed their faces to memory, swearing that he would never forget them.

Because he had killed them.



She was dead.

Shoulders slumped with exhaustion and eyes devoid of their familiar merriment, Phlox loosed a deep sigh as he pulled the sheet up over the corpse. Almost mechanically, he began to input the appropriate data into the PADD that he carried, recording the time of death of Lieutenant Burke with a heavy heart. He had been so sure that she would pull through.

"Phlox?" Captain Tucker's voice jarred him back to the present and Phlox pulled his attention away from the still and silent form. The captain stood with a grim expression on his usually cheerful face, his leg encased in an auto-splint. Tucker was tired; that much was evident in his stance, but there was a sadness lurking in his eyes that had not been present for a long time. Everything about the captain appeared tense, knotted up in some internal struggle that he seemed to feel he had to deal with entirely by himself. From the rigidity in Tucker's posture, Phlox suspected that the captain wasn't sleeping very well either. The image was altogether too reminiscent of the weeks after *Enterprise* had entered the Expanse. Idly, the doctor wondered if he could exercise his medical authority and order Tucker to undergo a neuropressure session; he doubted T'Pol would resist the idea as she had the first time Phlox had suggested it.

That thought caused the doctor to smile slightly.

"How can I help you, Captain?" he asked with forced levity.

"Who'd we lose?" Tucker inquired softly, staring at the shrouded corpse. Rubbing the bridge of his nose, Phlox answered.

"Lieutenant Burke," he said flatly, noting the captain's fractional wince. "I really thought she would make it," the doctor admitted sadly. He straightened his shoulders. "Providing the computer cooperates, I will have a revised casualty list to you within the hour."

"You're havin' computer problems?" Captain Tucker asked, narrowing his eyes.

"Sporadic system failures and data corruption. I presumed it was battle damage." Inwardly, Phlox grimaced. The data loss had been particularly bothersome; the trauma records of twelve crewmembers had simply vanished or been so corrupted that they were of no use. Although he was not a computer technician, he was familiar enough with their operation to hypothesize that it was a database error: nothing else explained why only records ranging from Gomez to Konikowski were affected.

"I'll have Riggs take a look at it," the captain said before frowning. "How much of a priority is this? Riggs is pretty swamped right now." That was an understatement if ever there was one; the death or incapacitation of the entire Alpha shift engineering staff left the acting chief engineer critically shorthanded at a time when they could least afford it. Phlox had handed out more stims in the last four days than he had in his entire time with Starfleet.

"It's not an urgent problem, Captain." Phlox drew a steady breath. "But that's not why you're here, is it?"

"Not really." Tucker rolled his tongue around the inside of his cheek before speaking. "I understand you relieved Lieutenant Devereux," he said after several moments of silence. Phlox nodded.

"She was suffering from extreme emotional distress," the doctor explained. He paused, remembering all too well the image of the lieutenant staring in shocked horror at Lieutenant Commander Drahn's radiation-scarred body. Lieutenant Hsiao had helped her to her quarters, a conflicted expression on his face as she clung to him and sobbed; Phlox had recognized the reason for the conflict that the helmsman was experiencing. Before *Endeavour* had launched, the doctor had noticed the sexual attraction that Hsiao harbored toward the COM officer, but had said nothing. He had learned his lesson about dabbling with the personal lives of his fellow crewmates. All too well, he recalled offering advice to Captain Archer regarding T'Pol, advice that Archer had not heeded, despite the *clear* evidence that the Vulcan was attracted to Tucker.

Inwardly, the doctor sighed and wondered if humans would ever make sense.

"You were aware of her ... relationship with Commander Drahn?" he asked a moment later. The captain nodded grimly.

"I'd heard the rumors," Tucker admitted. He was silent for a long moment before adding, "Do what you think best, Doc. I'll sign off on it." The captain shifted his balance, his expression still grim. Finally, he spoke. "Your staff," he said as he crossed his arms over his chest, "is



worried about you, Doc." Phlox gave the captain a surprised look. "You've been on duty for over ninety-six hours without stoppin' for food or rest."

"There hasn't been time, Captain," the doctor retorted with a frown.

"Make time," Tucker ordered. "An exhausted doctor is a useless doctor," the captain said, quoting something that Phlox had told both the commanding officer *and* the chief medical officer of *Columbia*.

"Captain," the doctor began, intent on arguing the point, but Tucker cut him off with a sharp gesture.

"Lieutenant Cutler!" he barked. From across the Sickbay where she was checking the vitals of a patient, Liz Cutler looked up. "Can you handle things for a while?"

Cutler nodded, casting a defiant look at Phlox and, without asking, the doctor knew who had spoken to the captain. "Good," Tucker continued. He speared Phlox with a look that demanded obedience. "I'm relievin' you of duty, Doc." The harshness faded and he spoke again, this time with a friendlier tone. "So," the captain said, "first you're gonna come with me and eat, then you're gonna go to your quarters to rest for six hours."

"I can give you two," Phlox argued, his thoughts immediately turning to which patients were the most critical. He trusted Liz – he had trained, after all – but she didn't have his experience, and he resisted the thought of abandoning his patients.

"Four and not a minute less," Tucker countered, offering a smile that never reached his eyes. "Haven't we had this conversation before?" he asked. Phlox gave him a blank look for a moment before suddenly remembering; had he been any less emotionally drained in that moment, he would have chuckled at the memory of negotiating with the then-Commander Tucker over how long he would sleep, years ago in the Expanse.

"I believe we have, Captain," he replied with a weary smile of his own.

"Then you know how it ends." The captain uncrossed his arms and gestured toward the exit. With a sigh, the doctor preceded him through the door.

As they entered the mess hall, Phlox realized how long it had been since he had been out of Sickbay. Fewer than ten crewmen were present in the hall and, as he and Tucker walked quietly toward the Executive Mess, the doctor could not help but notice how no one looked up at him. Every single one of those present had at least superficial injuries, and Phlox recognized two that should not have even been out of bed yet. He said nothing to them, however, knowing that actually *doing* something other than resting was how many were coping with what they had been through.

It was, after all, how he dealt with loss.

The door to the captain's private dining room was locked in the open position, an indication to the crew that the "Old Man" was available. It was an "open door" policy that Captain Tucker had adopted shortly after assuming command of *Endeavour*, one that had been suggested by Commodore Archer who, in a moment of candor, had admitted that he should have implemented such a policy from day one. Had Archer done so, Phlox mused, the Expanse mission might not have isolated the captain nearly as much as it had.

Commander T'Pol was already inside, seated in her usual place and engrossed in various PADDs scattered before her; the Vulcan first officer sat quietly with her back to the viewport facing the doorway and looked up they entered, her eyes automatically seeking out Tucker. Had he not known her as well as he did, Phlox would have missed the glint of worry in T'Pol's eyes as she studied her mate's profile.

"Have a seat," the captain said as he took his own chair at the head of the table, unaware of or perhaps ignoring T'Pol's silent observation of him. The moment that Phlox sat, a wave of fatigue washed over the doctor and he realized that he couldn't actually remember the last time he had sat down for more than a few minutes; in a moment of dark amusement, he wondered how difficult it would be to stand back up after the meal. Reaching back over his shoulder, Tucker triggered the comm panel. "Killick," he called. The response was instantaneous.

"It will be ready when it's ready, sir," the chef of *Endeavour* snapped and the captain rolled his eyes as he released the comm button; everyone was accustomed to Chef's sharp tongue and short temper. Only his culinary genius kept him out of trouble.

"How are we lookin'?" Tucker asked, finally looking at his first officer. She inclined an eyebrow.

"There is no indication of pursuit," she replied crisply. "The Romulans appear satisfied in taking the system." The captain's expression darkened and he glanced away as she spoke; Phlox could almost see the human's jaw muscles tighten. T'Pol continued, her face devoid of expression but her eyes gleaming with concern. "*Endeavour* is maintaining warp two without difficulty. We should arrive at Starbase One on schedule." Tucker nodded, still looking away with a grim expression, and the worry on T'Pol's face grew. She gave Phlox a sideways glance and he offered her a shrug in return; if the woman with the telepathic mating bond couldn't figure out Tucker's moods, how was Phlox supposed to?

Incredibly, she reached out and touched the captain's hand.

Almost at once, Tucker's demeanor changed. He gave her a sad smile that seemed to convey some sort of private communication; their fingers touching in an unmistakably Vulcan caress, the two sat quietly for a long moment. This time, the smile on Phlox's face wasn't forced.

It was moments like this that made the suffering worth it.



It was moments like this that Jonathan Archer hated the most.

The hum of the air recyclers was a comforting sound, a reminder that he was still in space where he belonged, but the absence of the subtle vibration from a functional warp engine bothered Jon more than he wanted to admit. It was surprising – and a little depressing, actually – how much he missed the sounds of a ship.

From where he lay, Dumas yawned widely and Jon gave the puppy a sad look. The young beagle had been a gift from Erika during his recovery, and looked so much like Porthos that Archer occasionally almost forgot that the dog *wasn't* Porthos. At times, he found himself missing his old pet more than some of the crewmembers also lost at Elysium.

He hated himself in those moments.

"Commodore?" The voice of PO2 Tyner sounded abruptly from the comm panel on his desk and Jon hit the receive button without even looking up from the data he was studying.

"Yes?"

"Captain Tucker to see you, sir," the petty officer announced and Archer smiled, glad to hear some good news for a change. Anything Trip had to say was better than sitting here and reading the latest list of casualties, or another diplomatically-worded report concerning a battle lost.

"Send him up, Tyner," he ordered before rising from his desk and glancing toward the stairwell. Trip's head soon appeared and Jon's smile started to fade at the sight of the sheer exhaustion that seemed to weigh on Tucker's shoulders. A haunted look lurked in the younger man's eyes, one that Archer saw every single day when he himself looked into the mirror.

"Commodore," Trip said in greeting, glancing around the office with something close to wonder. "Helluva view," he commented with approval.

Originally intended to be an observation deck, Archer's office was at the very "top" of the Starbase. Ten meters wide, the deck was a circular room with transparisteel viewports that wrapped around it, providing a 360 degree view of space beyond and an even more incredible view of the Starbase itself. The only entrance was the small stairwell in the floor and, aside from the desk and three chairs that sat in the middle of the office, there were no furnishings or facilities.

Which was exactly how Jon wanted it.

"That it is," he replied to Trip's comment. He watched quietly as Tucker limped straight from the stairs to the wraparound viewport; Trip ran his fingers across the port, pausing to tap in several places, and Jon hid a smile when he realized that his old friend was looking at the whole thing from an engineer's perspective instead of admiring the starfield with the awe it deserved. *You can take the man out of Engineering*, Archer smirked inwardly as he watched Tucker.

"God, that is an ugly ship," Trip said suddenly as one of the two *Daedalus*-class ships attached to the Starbase lumbered into view, flanked by a pair of NV-class ships. Fresh out of the shipyards, the *Daedalus* was slower, less maneuverable, and, in general, all around inferior to an NX-class; but, since they could crank out five *Daedalus*-class ships to a single NX-class, Starfleet had diverted all resources to their construction. A little larger than the NX, the new ships required only half the crew complement thanks to extensive automation. The extra space allowed the *Daedalus* to pack heavier armor and larger shield generators. They may not be able to pack as big a punch as an NX-class, but the ugly-as-sin ships were tough.

"Get used to seeing them, Trip," Jon said as he came to stand alongside his old friend. "Starfleet is diverting all resources to cranking them out."

"All resources?" Tucker asked, lips pursed in thought.

"Keeping our NX-classes operational takes priority," Archer quickly stated, recognizing a captain's concern for his ship when he heard it, "but *Endeavour* is probably the last new one we'll see for a while."

"What about *Enterprise*?" Trip questioned and Jon couldn't hide the momentary stab of anger that flooded through him.

"Starfleet Command has decided," he all but growled, "that repairing her is not a feasible course of action at this time." Clenching his fists tightly behind him, Archer tried to bring the frustration back under control; that was a battle he'd lost long ago. "Unofficially," he continued, "she's apparently a better recruiting tool as a floating wreck over Earth." He snorted in dark amusement before stating, "Admiral Gardner told me that recruiting drives are *particularly* effective after they broadcast that damned docudrama about Elysium that's making the rounds on the vids right now."

"I'm sorry, Jon," Tucker said, dropping his hand onto Archer's shoulder for a brief moment. "Doesn't seem right, leavin' her like that." He shook his head before sighing heavily. "Guess that leaves you without a job after all," Trip smirked and Jon returned the smile.

"Officially, I'm still listed as the commanding officer of the NX-01," Archer revealed with a laugh that was equal parts amusement and bitterness. "Starfleet Personnel can't seem to get that straightened out. Knowing how slow they work, it'll be another four or five years before..." He trailed off, suddenly realizing what Trip was doing.

It was something of a skill that Tucker had almost perfected: Completely diverting attention away from any pain he was suffering by focusing on 'being there' for his friends, or hiding it behind a smile and a joke. Jon had seen it before, far too many times; but, just like the other times, he'd very nearly been distracted and drawn into an entirely different conversation than he had intended.

"How are you doing, Trip?" he asked, his eyes locked on the face of his oldest and best friend.

"Leg hurts, but other than that I'm doin' fine, sir," Tucker replied evenly, his eyes never leaving the starfield; but his body language betrayed his tension. For some reason, it reminded Jon of when his friend had requested a transfer to *Columbia*. It was clear he was hurting inside and refused to let anyone else in to help.

"Trip." His tone told Tucker everything, and *Endeavour's* captain visibly deflated.

"How do you think I am?" he asked grimly. "I just lost my chief engineer, my damage control officer, and my entire alpha shift engineering staff." Emotion was thick in his voice but, to Jon's surprise, Trip's expression never changed and he spoke in a calm, measured tone. "Three hundred and seven Boomer ships followed me from the station." He closed his eyes, as if to block something from sight. "One hundred and twenty-two survived. *One hundred and twenty-two.*" His eyes popped open and he speared Archer with a hot look. "A hundred and eighty-five didn't make it. God only knows how many died..."

"You did your best," Jon said softly.

"And it wasn't good enough!" Trip snapped. He took a steadying breath and, just like that, the simmering fury seemed to vanish; it was absolutely amazing, Archer thought with a sliver of awe, just how much Trip had changed since *Enterprise* first launched. As if he had reached a decision, Tucker turned to face Jon, pulling out a PADD from the right cargo pocket of his duty uniform pants. "Sir, I'd like to tender my resignation effective immediately," he said calmly, offering the PADD without a trace of emotion on his face.

"What?"

"Sir, I'm the wrong guy for this job," Trip declared firmly. "The Boomers trusted me and now ... now, they're dead." He ran his hand through his hair and the haunted look in his eyes redoubled. "We lost a station – and a system! – because I screwed up."

"That's bullshit, Trip," Jon replied angrily. He took the PADD from Tucker and tossed it aside, ignoring the clatter of it hitting the deck. "Thor's Cradle was lost before *Endeavour* even showed up, and the Admiralty knows it." He grabbed Trip's arms to make his point. "How many would have died if you *hadn't* been there?" Jon didn't let Trip answer that. "Every damned one of them, that's how many!"

"Sir," Tucker started to say.

"You listen to me, *Captain*," Archer interrupted, intent on getting through his friend's thick skull. "There was *nothing* you could do for the people we lost, and the fact that you got out of there at all with the information on these new Romulan ships is amazing!" Trip frowned, glanced away, but Jon kept on talking. "I have dozens of statements on my desk from the survivors and every one of them singles out *Endeavour's* actions as the only reason they got out of Thor's Cradle alive. I've personally spoken to a half dozen captains today who want to sign on with Starfleet immediately *because* of what you and people like your Lieutenant Li did." That caused Tucker to look up with surprise on his face, an expression so amusing that Jon very nearly laughed. "Hell, I talked to Paul Mayweather this morning and *he* asked about signing up!"

Finally, Trip gave a slow nod, his expression twisting into one of grim acceptance. Once more, Archer recognized the expression as one he wore far too often.

"All right," Tucker said sadly, "you've made your point." He took several limping steps away and retrieved the PADD before shooting Jon a frustrated look. "Sorry about that, sir," he muttered as he returned the PADD to his pocket.

"I've felt the same way, Trip." *More times than I want to admit.* "That chair isn't as comfortable as it looks, is it?" Jon asked with a sad but knowing smile. Tucker shook his head.

"No sir," he replied glumly, "though I think it's the rank more than the chair." A smile appeared, despite the sadness. "Mayweather, huh?"

"Yep," Archer said with a grin. "I'm thinking about suggesting that Starfleet give him one of the NVs currently on Homeworld Defense."

"The *Horizon*?" Trip asked with a weary grin.

"Ironic, huh?" Jon chuckled at Trip's headshake but sobered a moment later. "I think Travis would approve." He gave Tucker an appraising look. "Are you going to be okay?"

"I will be, sir," came the serious response. "Don't worry about me."

"You're my friend, Trip. Worrying comes with the territory." Archer smiled as Tucker rolled his eyes. "Have you gotten any sleep?" he asked, already suspecting the answer.

"No sir. Too much work to do." As Archer watched, Tucker became the battle-weary starship captain once again, and Jon silently lamented the change in his old friend. He missed Trip. "I've got progress reports to review," Tucker said, "not to mention repairs to oversee and letters to write." Archer flinched at the last words; he knew all too well how difficult *that* task was. "T'Pol's keeping the fort down right now, but she's not at a hundred percent yet."

"Speaking of which, how is she?" Jon asked as he walked back toward his desk. Without asking for permission, Trip dropped into one of the chairs in front of it; he leaned forward to rub his sore leg as he spoke.

"Phlox gave her a clean bill of health," he replied. "That Vulcan physiology is nothing short of amazin'," Tucker remarked with a tired smile. "Woman's in better shape than I am."

"That's not what I meant." Archer took his seat, glad that all but the slightest twinges were gone from his chest injury. "How is she ... emotionally?" It was weird, asking about a Vulcan's emotional well-being, but Jon had come a long way himself in recent years.

"She's okay," Trip responded. He paused, and then continued, "We did this mind meld thing that helped out a lot." He gave Archer a sad smirk. "I'll tell her you asked."

"While you're here," Jon said, already hating the direction that the conversation was going to take, "you can take a look at these possible replacements for your chief engineer." Tucker winced almost imperceptibly at the pair of PADDs Archer pushed toward him. As *Endeavour's* captain exhaled a deep sigh and rubbed his eyes, Jon leaned back in his chair and wondered whom he could recruit to help him convince Trip to get some rest.

It was a short list.



T'Pol stepped out of the turbolift, studying the corridor before her with narrowed eyes. Two Roughnecks stood at the door to the Observation Deck and silently observed her approach. She recognized Lieutenant Reynolds at once from both his stance and his familiar scent; he took a step toward her, pushing the faceplate on his helmet up as he spoke.

"Good evening, Commander," he said in her native tongue; he spoke to her thus quite often, to – as he put it – 'keep in practice' with her language. "The captain gave orders that he wasn't to be disturbed." T'Pol slowed her pace as she approached, inclining an eyebrow at Reynolds' words and wondering briefly if she would have to order him to stand aside. To her surprise, the lieutenant smiled softly and gave a discreet hand signal to the other security officer; without hesitation, the younger man moved out of the way of the door and T'Pol gave Reynolds an amused glance, acknowledging his knowing expression with the slightest of nods. He knew more about the depth of her relationship with Trip than most.

"Thank you, Lieutenant," she said as she neared the door.

"Good luck, ma'am," Reynolds whispered as the other security officer triggered the door release. It hissed open and she entered the darkened Observation Deck.

Trip sat quietly in front of the immense window overlooking the damaged *Endeavour*, his

shoulders hunched as if in defeat, and a tangible sense of sadness seemed to surround him. The moment that she crossed the threshold onto the Observation Deck, he straightened his posture, once more seeming to don the professional officer mask that he had worn for so long. T'Pol frowned, momentarily confused by a curious sense of *deja vu* that she could not explain. Behind her the door slid shut, and she started forward.

As T'Pol neared him, Trip held up his right hand, offering his index and middle finger without looking back. A flicker of pleasure washed through her as she observed how easily and completely he accepted Vulcan traditions. She touched her fingers to his and, for a heartbeat, allowed herself to luxuriate in the warmth of his *katra*.

"You haven't eaten today," she said by way of greeting and Trip glanced up at her, smiling softly. Though he concealed it well, she could sense a crushing fatigue bearing down on him.

"Wasn't hungry," he replied and T'Pol frowned again. Through the bond, she could tell that hunger had been gnawing at him for several hours and, without a word, she set the covered dish she carried down before him, pushing the PADDs that were scattered atop the table out of the way. He hesitated, giving the bowl a glance, before finally sighing and reaching for it. "Noodle salad?" he asked with a look of not quite disgust.

"Yes," T'Pol replied simply as she took a seat beside him. "You eat too much meat," she pointed out, and he chuckled. A long moment passed in agreeable silence as he slowly ate and she organized the PADDs into a more efficient stack.

"Spoke to Jon earlier," Trip said in between bites. "Admiral Black is makin' noises again." She nearly frowned; the grim admiral was their most vocal opponent and had staunchly opposed assigning her to *Endeavour* under Trip's command.

"Did you give the commodore our proposal?" she asked and her mate nodded as he chewed. It had been more Trip's idea than hers, but his logic was sound; she had only offered a few suggestions to refine it. Giving the senior tactical officer authority to initiate a command change if his commanding officer and executive officer proved to be unfit for duty was, at best, a temporary measure to assuage the concerns of the Admiralty about their relationship, but it demonstrated to Starfleet Command that she and Trip were willing to compromise. Such an action to initiate the removal from command process would require considerable evidence but, from her brief interactions with him on Vigrid Station, T'Pol had little doubt that Lieutenant Commander Eisler would be efficient in that regard; the tactical officer had been brutally honest when Trip approached him with the proposal and asked for his opinion.

"Jon said he'd forward it to Starfleet Command," came Trip's distracted reply. "I told him that I'd sic Soval on 'em if they tried to transfer you." T'Pol fought to keep from frowning at that; she strongly disliked using such a strong-arm tactic against Starfleet Command, and she suspected the Admiralty would appreciate it even less. Despite her control, some part of her disapproval must have leaked through the bond as he turned his eyes on her. "You might be able to handle being away from me for long periods of time, sweetheart," he pointed out, "but



I sure as hell can't take it." Trip abruptly smirked. "I'm only human, after all," he said with a hint of amusement in his eyes.

Once more, she could not argue with his logic.

"My human," she reminded him affectionately, and he smiled at her. He glanced back at the viewport overlooking *Endeavour* and his grin faltered. The amusement that had been in his eyes disappeared almost at once. A long moment passed as T'Pol picked her words carefully. "I also spoke to Commodore Archer earlier," she finally said, and he grunted; from his expression, she could tell he knew what was coming. "Why did you offer him your resignation?" she asked softly, and her mate sighed heavily.

"I'm tired of doin' this, T'Pol," he said in response, gesturing toward the PADDs with his fork.

"Doing what, Trip?" A wave of frustrated despair rolled off of him as he stabbed his fork in the last of the salad before grabbing the topmost PADD.

"Dear Mister Li," he read from the data device, "I regret to inform you that your daughter, Allison, was killed in action aboard Vigrid Station on one October, twenty-one fifty-six." He tossed the PADD back on the table with a flick of his wrist and it spun off the side, sliding a half meter toward the observation window as he continued reciting from memory. "Words alone cannot express the depth of my regret for your loss." Trip closed his eyes as he pinched the bridge of his nose. "Her actions saved the lives of dozens, perhaps hundreds of people, and is in the highest traditions of the Service."

"Trip," she started, laying her hand on his arm.

"I'm tired of bein' a soldier, darlin'." Without asking permission, her mate drew her to him in a tight hug; she wondered which of them was deriving more comfort from it. "I'm tired of comin' up with better and faster ways to kill. I'm tired of sendin' these kids off to die," he continued, his voice calm and composed even as waves of emotion bled through the bond. "I'm tired of doing nothing but writin' these goddamned letters!" Easing his hold on her, he continued, his voice sad and soft. "I never signed up with Starfleet to be a soldier," he whispered, "and I don't wanna do this anymore."

"What *do* you want to do?" T'Pol questioned as she rested her head on his shoulder. It wasn't proper Vulcan etiquette, she admitted to herself, but she had long ago given up trying to be a *proper* Vulcan.

"I wanna be just an engineer again," Trip replied, kissing the top of her head and stroking her back with one hand as he spoke. "I wanna marry you in a really big ceremony so everyone in the damned galaxy knows how I feel about ya, and then have lots of babies. *That's* what I want."

"Which of us will be the mother?" T'Pol asked, the hint of a smile on her face. "You *do* have

more experience with pregnancy than I."

"God," Trip chuckled, "you're never gonna let me live that down, are you?"

"Obviously not," she replied simply and he smiled again. His good humor faded far too quickly as he stared at the damage to *Endeavour*.

"I feel like a fraud," he finally whispered. "Every time somebody calls me Captain, I wanna look around for Jon, or for you." He sighed again. "I can't help but to think that if you had been in command, or Jon, things wouldn't have turned out like they did."

"I was in command at Azati Prime," T'Pol reminded him, regret tingeing her words, "and Commodore Archer commanded at Elysium. Neither situation turned out as desired." Trip drew breath to argue but she pressed on. "You are afraid of failing." It wasn't a question but he nodded anyway. "Cast out fear, *adun*," she said pointedly and, through the bond, she felt his sudden surprise at her words, "there is no room for anything else until you cast out fear."

"You're quotin' Surak to get me out of a funk?" he asked incredulously, and she leaned back out of the circle of his arms to give him a measuring look.

"Is it working?" she asked, and he rolled his eyes. T'Pol leaned closer to him again. "Trip, Starfleet Command selected you for this job because you are the most qualified for it." He opened his mouth, no doubt to disagree, but she placed her fingers across his lips and continued. "You have the most deep space experience among the Starfleet corps of senior officers," she pointed out in as rational a voice as possible. "You also have an instinctive understanding of human behavior that I cannot duplicate." He frowned and T'Pol knew he was going to argue that point. "If I had given the order to seal off Engineering," she asked softly before he could comment, "would Lieutenant Devereux have obeyed?"

"Maybe not," her mate muttered, sadness clear in his eyes. He glanced away, once more turning his eyes to the viewport, and T'Pol could sense his thoughts racing. "She would have argued with you," Trip said. A flash of memory that was not hers flickered across her thoughts, a recollection of a human commander furious at the cold Vulcan subcommander so willing to leave their captain behind; she inclined an eyebrow as he gave her a sheepish smile. "Just like I woulda done a couple of years ago," he acknowledged.

"Your decision was the correct one," T'Pol said firmly, "but it *had* to come from you." It was something she had learned to accept upon entering Starfleet: she could command the humans, but it was a far cry from being *in* command. Rare was the human officer who didn't immediately think of her as Vulcan first and a Starfleet commander a distant second; Trip had been the first to do so. Finally, he nodded in understanding and she could feel his grudging acceptance.

"When did you get so damned smart?" he asked with a soft smile and mischief welled up within her.

"I have always been this way," she replied quickly, her lips curved ever so slightly in the barest hint of a smile. "It has just taken you this long to notice." He chuckled as she reclined back against him, allowing his arm to drape once more over her, and they sat in silence for long minutes, a growing sense of contentment humming through the bond. The black mood that had enveloped him for so long slowly lifted and he relaxed the mental shields that she had taught him months earlier. Almost at once, a jumble of confusing emotions bombarded her and T'Pol inhaled deeply, illogically finding comfort in them.

"Trip," she started before pausing. She gathered her thoughts, considering her next words. It would be a sensitive subject and she wondered how best to broach it.

"Hmmm?" her mate asked sleepily. The exhaustion that she had sensed was catching up to him.

"I saw something on the station that ... that I did not understand." Unconsciously, she frowned; there were few things that she disliked more than having to admit that she did not comprehend something. "Lieutenant Commander Eisler suggested that I ask you for clarification."

"Okay." From his voice and her sense of him, she could tell Trip was becoming curious. "What was it?" he asked.

"A picture," she replied before pausing again. That definition wasn't entirely correct, and she hated inaccuracy.

"A picture?" he repeated, not even bothering to hide his confusion. "What kind of picture?"

"It was a stylized representation of canines involved in a card game." T'Pol pursed her lips, wondering how such a thing could be possible; canines did not possess the necessary opposable digits, not to mention their lack of cognitive ability. She wondered if it was perhaps a metaphor. "Commander Eisler told me that it was an ... American thing, and that you could explain its meaning." In response, Trip did something completely unexpected.

He began to laugh.



Laughter could be heard through the sealed doorway, and Scott fought the smile that threatened to fracture his poise. No one ever believed him when he told them that a Vulcan could make the captain laugh. It was good to be proven right.

With a sidelong glance at the surprised Crewman Hensen, Reynolds triggered his throat mike.

"Roughneck Six to Commodore Archer," he said softly, abandoning the fight against the smile as the sound of Tucker's amusement echoed from the observation deck. "Mission accomplished, sir," he reported with a grin. His peculiar sense of humor caused him to add, "Peace is restored in the streets of Verona." Archer's answering bark of laughter over the commline was indication enough that he understood the literary reference.

Everything was as it should be.

**END**