

STAR TREK: ENDEAVOUR

VIGRID



BY
RIGIL KENT

Genre: Action/Adventure, Drama

Rated: PG ...mild language, violence, sexual innuendo and some sexual situations

Summary: Negotiations between Starfleet and the Boomers draw unwanted attention and a battle looms ...

Disclaimer: We've established earlier that (a) I'm not making any money (no, seriously, I'm not. It really sucks.); (b) the characters (mostly) belong to Paramount; (c) if I owned them, I'd be married to a long-haired T'Pol; (d) the Killer Bees should be stuck in an agonizer forever for TATV; (e) Manny Coto should have been in charge from the beginning; (f) I'm not a professional writer but would like to be one; and (g) There's not a chance in hell that I'm going to watch anything in which the Bees are even tangentially involved.

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

Author's Note:

Major thanks to **TJinLOCA** and **T'Leela** for being awesome betas and "devoted fic queens", thanks to **Distracted** for medical advice, and **pookha** for being my canon fiend. All of you rock!

This is the first part of the sequel to *Elysium*. The pacing is intentionally slower this time, although that will change in the second part. Also, since I'm introducing a number of new characters (crew of the *Endeavour*), expect a couple of seemingly unrelated POVs.

I'm also envisioning revised uniforms that appear much closer to the uniforms worn in the TOS pilot. Things have changed ...

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. September 2156.

The spy was patient.

He was still and silent as he observed the human's approach. The automated loading docks on the rundown station were hardly the safest location for a conversation, but they served the spy's purpose. Noise from the loading platforms made audio surveillance nearly impossible, while steam rising from the overstressed hydraulics made video capture equally difficult. Few would venture into such an inhospitable location.

It was ideal for his needs.

"Sovek," the portly human said by way of greeting. It was not his true name, but the spy who was not Sovek acknowledged it with the slightest of nods. "Ya got my creds?" A flicker of avarice flashed through the human's eyes but was hidden as quickly as it appeared, replaced by something else ... something disturbing.

In response, the spy frowned minutely and raised an eyebrow.

The human gave him a grin. "I planted the device just like ya told me." He grinned again, displaying teeth in dire need of cleaning.

Much like everything about this human.

"Was it some sort o' listenin' device?" the human was asking and the spy who was not Sovek chastised himself for his momentary loss of focus. He did not speak, did not reply in any way beyond pinning the human with his coldest stare. Surely this fool did not expect him to reveal its purpose? "Right," the human said with a curious gesture. "State secret an' all." Again the human flashed his unpleasant grin.

The spy experienced a sudden moment of concern. Why was the human trying to engage him in conversation? He had never done so before in their sixteen previous interactions; that he did so now was ... troubling. There were a limited number of reasons for the human to suddenly become so curious, so loquacious this late in their game of deception, and to the spy who was not Sovek, only one made sense.

The human was compromised.

Letting the disruptor slide into his left hand with a discreet motion, the spy gestured toward the partially concealed case that contained the credits, his eyes never leaving the human. The smile that appeared on the human's face held no trace of duplicity, and the spy who was not Sovek pushed away a moment of uncertainty.

There was no time for doubt.

"Good doin' business with ya," the human said, eyes gleaming with greed. "Ya know, for a Vulcan, you ain't half bad." As the human turned toward the case, the spy acted. He took a quick half step forward and reached out with his right hand, clamping down on the human's shoulder before the stocky man fully comprehended the action. In his haste, he applied more pressure than was entirely necessary, but the result was the same: without a sound, the human crumpled into a heap.

For long moments, the spy remained perfectly still, his eyes searching the darkness around the loading facilities for movement, his ears straining to hear the sound of breathing or footsteps above the rhythmic hiss of the loading platforms. He could not be captured ... not now, not at this stage of the operation. Minutes crept by as he remained frozen in place, disruptor held tightly in hand.

But no one came.

The spy who was not Sovek released a tension-filled breath and dragged his unconscious victim deeper into the darkness. Another long moment passed as he considered his next action. The human did not know what was coming, but clearly suspected far too much. Stretching his fingers out, the spy touched the contact points on the human's face and mentally prepared himself. Altering this human's memories would not be terribly difficult; like so many that the spy had been forced to deal with since arriving on this station, this one's intellect was substandard. Even for a human.

As the spy began to stretch out with his mind, a stray thought occurred to him, one that caused him to immediately break contact and pull his fingers free. A dark frown on his face, he stared at the human with hooded and troubled eyes. If the information his employers had provided him was accurate - and it had been, so far - there would soon be two on this station that the spy knew to be melder. He did not know how skilled they were, did not know if they could repair the neurological changes, and he could not risk discovery. Options were weighed in the blink of an eye, and the spy who was not Sovek made his decision.

Without hesitation, he put the disruptor to the human's face and squeezed the trigger.

ACT ONE

It had been a long flight.

Nine hours had elapsed since their departure from Starbase-1 and, though he had concealed it behind a mask of bored indifference, Lieutenant Commander Heinrich Eisler was eager for the flight to be over. The seats in the small shuttlepod had clearly not been designed with extended trips in mind, but he was far too proud to shift or fidget. An Eisler, Rick told himself, was unaffected by trivial matters such as a comfort or, in this case, the lack thereof. Junior officers or enlisted men, like Ensign Hayes or the five E.M.s that were crowded in the shuttlepod with them, could move around, or verbally complain about their discomfort, or just change their posture to relax muscles held rigidly in place for nine hours. An Eisler could not. An Eisler would not.

But he was tempted.

Beyond the cockpit of the shuttle, he could see the *Endeavour* and, mostly as an exercise in distracting himself from the stiffness of his spine, reviewed what he knew of it. The newest of the NX-class ships, she had been in service less than two months and had already seen action at Pacifica. Her crew was quite possibly the best ever assembled, with all but five of the surviving Expanse veterans serving aboard her. Compared to her sister ships, she was also the most heavily armed, carrying twice the payload of either *Atlantis* or *Challenger* and nearly three times what *Columbia* or *Discovery* bore. She was also among the fastest of the NX-class ships, capable of maintaining a steady warp factor of 5.8 for several hours.

And she was the only NX-class that had nonhumans aboard.

The murmur of conversation grew in the shuttle as the six replacements chatted with each other in voices that were louder than absolutely necessary. Even if he had not already known that they were Security detachment, it would have been easy to recognize them as soldiers. Five men and a single woman, they carried themselves with a casual aggression and their conversations were littered with slurs, insults, and acronyms whose meanings would escape most.

But not an ex-MACO company commander.

It was still a difficult transition for Eisler. He'd served in the Military Assault Command Operations for ten years now, rising to the rank of captain, but everything had changed with the Romulan attacks. Starfleet and the MACOs had merged almost overnight, with men like Eisler given an intensive crash course in starship operations and inserted into the command structure. He should be a major right now, not a lieutenant commander. Once more, he felt his jaw tightening as he considered his new duties; MACOs had a name for Starfleet personnel, and it burned him that he fell into that category. He was one of them now.

A fucking deck ape.

"Shuttle Echo-Two, this is the *Endeavour*. Stand by to release control to ALS." The comm crackled to life suddenly, startling the soldiers into silence; Rick had little doubt that this had been the pilot's intention, and he had to mentally salute the man for shutting them up without making it an order. He hadn't seen much of the pilot when they'd boarded and, for all he knew, the man was little more than a crewman.

Regardless of his rank, the pilot was efficient. Rick hardly felt the shuttle dock and knew that the automated landing system was only partially the reason. Without even glancing back to check on his passengers, the pilot began running through the post flight check and gave the all clear signal to disembark. Ensign Hayes shot Eisler a glance, his eyes seeking instructions, and Rick gave him a short nod, permission to assume command of the E.M.s. At his gesture, the ensign quickly organized the other five, speaking in short, clipped sentences. He was only a few years older than the other soldiers, but spoke with quiet authority. They moved from the shuttle in an orderly manner, the ensign in the rear.

Rick hefted his own gear - two duffel bags and a long case that contained his personalized pulse rifle - and followed. It was something of a struggle - the rifle case was more than a little awkward and both of the duffel bags topped thirty kilograms - but he persevered. Eislers always persevered. At the hatchway of the shuttlepod, he paused and took in the launch bay. This was the first time he had ever actually set foot on an NX-class ship and he was amazed to realize just how cramped the bay actually was. Two crewmen were hard at work on the other shuttlepod and he could not help but notice the battle damage it appeared to have recently suffered. The six soldiers that had preceded him from the pod were already moving through the hatchway, past the two senior officers that stood there. Each soldier saluted sharply as they passed the two, a crisp gesture that brought the right hand up to the right eyebrow; before the MACO integration, such a military sign of respect would probably have never been seen on a Starfleet vessel. As Eisler approached the two officers, he studied them with a critical eye.

The female was junior, a commander according to her rank scheme, and wore the blue Science Starfleet uniform while the male, whom he recognized as the captain, wore the gold of Command. Exotically beautiful, the commander was clearly a veteran; several small scars, nearly invisible to the naked eye, decorated her exposed skin and there was a distance, a coldness in her eyes that came only from extended combat operations - Eisler had seen it too often in the eyes of his MACO comrades to not recognize it. Somewhat shorter than he, the woman was slight without being thin, and her balance was absolutely perfect, lending her the appearance of someone about to spring into action. She seemed perfectly comfortable with the taller male's presence, indicating a close personal friendship or, if the rumors were true, something a lot more intimate.

She was also Vulcan.

The captain accepted her presence without hesitation and, from the way he stood, seemed to expect she would always be at his side. He was of slight to moderate build and perhaps a

meter-eight in height, but he had a presence about him that was nearly tangible. Like the female, he bore a number of barely noticeable scars from what had clearly been a difficult life, and the distance in his eyes was even greater than hers. Though Eisler had never met him, he recognized him at once.

"Lieutenant Commander Heinrich Eisler reporting for duty, sir," he said in greeting, dropping the duffel bag he carried in his right hand so he could give a proper salute. Captain Charles Tucker gave him a half-smile and returned the gesture in a way that indicated he was unpracticed with the motion.

"Welcome aboard, Commander," Tucker said as he offered his hand. He spoke with an accent that Eisler had heard only once before. "Sorry we couldn't pick you up at the Starbase itself." Rick nodded as he shook Tucker's hand, gratified that the man actually had a grip. He understood why they hadn't made the trip; with the Romulan propensity for ambushes, having the *Endeavour* lurking at the edge of the system and ready to go to warp in order to respond to a distress signal was tactically sound. Even if it required nine hour flights in a cramped shuttlepod. "This is my first officer, Commander T'Pol." The commander gave Eisler a nod of greeting and did not offer her hand. Vulcans never did.

"Ma'am," he replied with little more than a brief nod himself; he'd never cared much for Vulcans and doubted he'd have much in common with this one, even if she was his XO. His greeting came out a little sharper than he intended, though - a factor no doubt of the extended trip and his own bone-deep exhaustion - and internally, he winced. If even half of the rumors about these two were true, he'd just put himself on Tucker's shitlist, and that wasn't the smartest thing to do when reporting to a new CO. Shooting a glance at the captain, Rick was momentarily surprised to realize the man wasn't even looking at him.

"Well I'll be a sonova..." Tucker muttered before brushing by Eisler, his attention focused entirely on the pilot emerging from the shuttlepod. Rick frowned and gave the pilot a once-over, noting almost immediately his suspiciously furtive actions: keeping his head down and features concealed under a billed cap, the pilot was giving poorly disguised glances at the three. Instantly, reflexes honed by five and a half years of black ops kicked in and Eisler moved into a flanking position beside his new commanding officer, dropping the second duffel bag and the shockproof rifle case to the deck as he moved. He sensed rather than saw Commander T'Pol do the same on Tucker's other side. At least she had good instincts.

"Sure as hell wasn't expectin' you, sir," Tucker suddenly said as he stopped in front of the pilot, and Eisler gave him a look. *Sir?* The pilot sighed - loudly - and discarded his cap before turning to face them. Rick nearly gasped in surprise.

"That was kind of the point, Trip," Commodore Jonathan Archer said with a wan smile. "I'm here on official - if undocumented - Starfleet business." He accepted Tucker's outstretched hand and the two exchanged hearty grins.

"Commodore," the Vulcan greeted, her voice cool, her features expressionless, yet Eisler

couldn't help but notice that she seemed ... softer somehow.

"Starfleet blue looks good on you, T'Pol," Archer said with a completely open smile that stripped years from his face. He gave Eisler a brief look and Rick realized he was still balanced on the balls of his feet, poised and prepared for violence. He forced to himself to relax under Archer's gaze. The Commodore gave him an approving nod and spoke, his words aimed at Tucker. "We need to talk, Trip. In private."

"I shall escort Commander Eisler to the quartermaster to begin his in-processing," T'Pol offered almost immediately and Tucker gave her a look that Rick couldn't begin to decipher.

"That sounds like a plan, Commander. And then, you're to go straight to sickbay for that check-up Phlox scheduled." She blinked and, had she been human, Eisler thought she would sigh. Tucker suddenly smiled and looked at Commodore Archer. "And that's an order," he said, his smile broadening into a grin as Archer shook his head and rolled his eyes.

"Not going to let that go, are you, Trip?"

"Not a chance, sir." It was clearly a private joke.

"The quartermaster is this way," the Vulcan said, her voice brooking no dissent, and Rick followed her from the launch bay, mildly surprised at how easily she hefted one of his duffel bags.

He wondered what other surprises were in store.



There were no surprises on the scan.

"You may get dressed," Phlox told her as T'Pol emerged from the imaging chamber. Without a word, she began donning the Starfleet uniform in quick, economic motions. Her decision to begin wearing them had been one based in psychology; as long as she had worn her colorful jumpsuits, many of the Starfleet officers and crewmen continued to see her as a Vulcan first. While he had to compliment her on such an effective use of psychology, Phlox continued to worry about her health - the jumpsuits had been thermal-lined and helped her cope with the cooler temperatures humans preferred.

It was somewhat amusing that Captain Tucker also routinely complained about her change in wardrobe.

"The fracture in your pelvic ring appears to have healed rather nicely," Phlox told her with a slight smile. "Have you experienced any residual pain?"

"No," T'Pol replied as she zipped up the Starfleet uniform. "There has been a noticeable loss of lower body strength despite the physical therapy."

"That is to be expected," he pointed out. "You were bedridden for nearly three months." She gave him an accusing look at that; the enforced bed rest had been at his direction. "The severity of your injury demanded a slower than normal recovery plan." He studied her vitals for a moment longer before continuing. "I have compiled a new therapy program for you that should have you back to full strength in a few weeks." Standing in silence, he made additional notes to her medical record before finally looking up at her, his eyes narrowed. As he spoke, his voice was hushed; this was meant for her ears only. "How is your emotional control?"

"Adequate." She was clearly uncomfortable admitting this, but just as clearly realized that he had a need to know. "In recent weeks, I have experienced momentary flashes of uncontrollable anxiety, centered around ..." She trailed off and he gave her a discreet nod, recognizing at once that her distress had revolved around Captain Tucker's well being. Knowing the Vulcan propensity for personal privacy, he allowed his eyes to communicate his understanding as he spoke again.

"Not surprising given *Endeavour's* recent mission profile." Phlox nearly sighed. "The neural pathways damaged by the Pa'nar and the trellium have not regenerated despite my best efforts." She said nothing, simply stood before the biobed and awaited his next words. He felt as though he had failed her. "There has been no additional degradation but ... but the damage remains." T'Pol gave him a short nod; she knew better than he did what it meant to her. "However, I see no reason you cannot assume full duty status."

"Thank you, Doctor." Her tone was flat but he knew her well enough to see that she was eager to resume full duties. Offering her a PADD, he continued.

"This contains the new physical therapy plan in addition to a suggested nutritional regimen. I expect you to have gained at least two and a half kilograms by your next check-up." T'Pol gave him another blank look before turning to the door.

"I am cleared for *all* activity?" she asked and Phlox frowned. It wasn't like her to ask a question that he had already answered.

"Yes," he replied hesitantly, wondering why she would ask. A flicker of something ... predatory flashed briefly in her eyes as she glanced away.

Ahhh...

"Please inform Captain Tucker that he is overdue for his six month physical," he said abruptly with a smile that was broadening by the moment. "Tomorrow morning would be good." He made a mental note to have pain meds standing by.

Just in case.

"I will relay your request to him," the Vulcan said with no hint of what she was thinking. She gave him the slightest of nods and glided from the medical facility. As the door slid shut, Phlox chuckled; tonight would be a good night for the captain.

His amusement faltered as his thoughts turned to Charles Tucker.

By rights, the captain should not be alive. He should not have survived the silicate virus that nearly killed him over two years ago, should not have been up and walking around the next day. It had turned into something of a minor obsession on Phlox's part, and he had spent countless hours poring over the data and running hundreds of simulations, but the results were identical no matter what variables he plugged in.

Tucker should not have survived.

The radiation therapy would have worked, but not in time; both Sato and Tucker had been too far gone when it was implemented, their bodies too badly ravaged by the silicate virus. Every single simulation told him the same thing, told him what he already knew: they should not have survived. But they did.

And Phlox had no idea why.

To complicate matters even further, Phlox had later detected minor genetic changes in Tucker but not in Sato, changes that he could find no scientific reason for. At first, he had discarded the data as the result of errors on his part or scanning errors due to residual radiation from the therapy (that should not have worked). He kept his eye on the two though, studied their medical records with a focused determination and gradually began to believe that he was in error.

The incident with the Romulan holoship had convinced him he was not.

Exposed to levels of radiation that should have been lethal - would have been lethal to any other human - Tucker had walked out of Sickbay that day, healthier than he had any right to be. Then-Lieutenant Reed had spent more time in Recovery than Trip Tucker, and the engineer explained it away as having built up a resistance from working around warp reactors all his life. Phlox had briefly considered enlisting T'Pol's aid in deciphering the growing mystery, but his observation of the young Vulcan caused him to reconsider that plan. It was patently obvious to him that the two had been intimate a number of times and, from their strained interactions, he had begun to suspect they were a bonded pair, so he kept his suspicions to himself.

And then, after baby Elizabeth died and the two commanders began to grieve, Phlox discovered the most amazing thing: Tucker was aging more slowly than a normal human. The Denobulan had no idea if it was a side effect of the mating bond or if it had something to do with those genetic anomalies, and honestly didn't know how to ask. Vulcans were notoriously

private and it had taken him nearly a year to get T'Pol to admit to having formed the bond in the first place. So far, he'd discovered no direct correlation between the mating bond and Tucker's slow aging.

But that didn't mean that it wasn't there.

It was enough to give him a headache. Phlox sighed, turning his attention back to more important matters. After baby Elizabeth died, he'd told Tucker that Human-Vulcan offspring were possible, and he had meant it.

That, of course, hadn't been taking Tucker's genetic abnormalities into account.

"Doctor?" The pained voice of Lieutenant Commander Drahn echoed loudly through the med-bay as the door slid open, and Phlox glanced up from his research. Cradling his left hand, the Andorian chief engineer stood calmly. Phlox shook his head in amazement; Drahn was worse than Tucker ever was ...

"Another burn, Commander?" The doctor grabbed his portable scanner and approached. "You really should be more careful." The Andorian gave him a look that was nearly identical to the one Charles Tucker had given him so many times in the past.

"Easier said than done," Drahn replied. It was amazing how quickly he was picking up human idioms. "Sometimes, I think this ship is trying to kill me."

"Let me see that hand," Phlox said with a broad grin as he slipped into his unofficial role as ship's counselor. "You look tired..."



He was tired.

It wasn't a new experience for him; since accepting the promotion and assuming command of *Endeavour*, Trip Tucker could count on one hand the number of full nights' sleep he'd had. In the weeks after the battle at Elysium, he had lived in either T'Pol's hospital ward or *Endeavour's* Engineering deck, subsisting on three hours of sleep and what seemed like fifty liters of coffee a day while trying to get the NX-06 out of Spacedock. He'd hoped things would settle down after the *Endeavour* launched.

Naturally, they hadn't.

These days, it seemed as if something *always* came up, usually at the worst possible moment, and was almost always bad. If it wasn't receiving new orders from Starfleet Command at zero-three in the morning or a reactor coolant leak in Engineering at twelve-thirty hours, it was a distress signal from the shipping lanes at zero-one or a possible Romulan sensor contact at

oh-four-thirty.

Even now, as he was returning to his quarters for some much needed sleep, three different problems were spinning around in his head and, as was all too common, none of them could be postponed.

Eisler was at the top of his list. As the new tactical officer and third in command, the German ex-MACO had some big shoes to fill: Commander - now Captain - Stiles was one hell of an officer and *Challenger* was getting an excellent CO. Mentally, Tucker ticked off the things he needed to do with Eisler, ranging from briefing him on his duties to introducing him to the rest of the command staff, not to mention getting him acclimated to Tucker's command style. Trip also wanted to get a better feel of the man's attitude regarding Vulcans; Eisler's less than warm reception of T'Pol earlier had not escaped his notice, although he'd been too distracted to call the tactical officer on it.

Right under that was dealing with the ongoing feud between the COB and Lieutenant Li. He'd not been able to learn the specifics of their problems - neither the Master Chief nor Li were very forthcoming - but their problems were becoming his problems; having the senior enlisted man and the damage control officer at one another's throats all the damned time was getting tiresome. Both had been transferred to *Endeavour* after the *Challenger* had been nearly crippled at Pacifica, and rumors of a failed romance between them there had reached even his ears. Li's battlefield promotion to officer could not have helped if those rumors were correct, and her near-celebrity status back home for the heroism she'd displayed at Pacifica could only exacerbate the problem.

His chief engineer wasn't exactly helping matters either, and Trip idly wondered if he had driven Archer as crazy as Drahn was driving him. The Andorian had an obsession with speed that bordered on the obscene, and the experiments he wanted to run gave even Trip pause. They'd butted heads on so many occasions lately that he was almost convinced Drahn was doing it on purpose just to see what would happen. At least the Andorian was even more accident-prone than Trip had ever been; in the two months since launch, Drahn had been in sickbay at least once every single day and Trip had done nothing to discourage the injury pool that had quickly sprung up among the junior officers.

Archer's unexpected presence only added to the load and, for someone who had insisted that they needed to speak in private, Jon had been surprisingly closemouthed regarding the mission.

"I need you to take me to the Vigrid system," he'd said once Trip had gotten him set up in guest quarters. "I'll tell you more later."

"I'm gettin' too old for this crap," Tucker muttered under his breath as he neared his quarters. The door slid open and he entered, already starting to unzip his uniform. A wave of heat washed over him as he passed through the entryway, and T'Pol glanced up from the desk where she sat. Her presence wasn't a surprise - she'd pretty much moved in once they'd left

Spacedock - but the image on the viewer caused his stride to falter.

Koss.

It was obviously a recorded message; the subspace buoys that allowed interstellar communications were invariably the first targets of a Romulan assault, thus limiting direct contact. But simply the image of T'Pol's ex-husband sent a jolt of alarm through Trip. She gave him a look of curiosity as she deactivated the viewer and, through the bond, he could sense she was distracted.

"Somethin' up?" he asked with false nonchalance.

"Merely a routine message regarding my marriage," T'Pol replied absently, her focus returning to the three PADDs scattered before her. For a moment, he admired the view - T'Pol in silk PJs was always a beautiful sight, especially Triaxian silk.

"Don't tell me you gotta go back and get married again," Trip finally said with a forced grin. He'd meant it in jest, but the moment the words left him he winced with remembered pain. Even without trying, he could recall that day with perfect clarity, could remember how astoundingly beautiful she had looked in her wedding dress, could still see the sadness in her eyes, could still feel the brush of her lips against his cheek. He blinked away the memory, and found her half-turned, staring at him with knowing eyes.

"You are my mate, Trip," she replied softly as she offered her right hand to him with two fingers extended. "I belong to you." She shivered as he touched her fingers with his own, despite the warmth of the cabin; he kept it hotter than he preferred, mostly out of deference to her desert upbringing. That, and he really liked seeing her in her PJs. "There will be no one else for as long as I live. Koss was just being ... polite." Tucker raised an eyebrow at that. "He is to marry another and wished to inform me so that I may make ... arrangements if necessary." She leaned forward and kissed him softly, her fingertips still caressing his.

"If there's any belongin' goin' on here, sweetheart, it's the other way around." He gave her a sheepish grin. "You must think I'm bein' silly," he muttered as she returned her attention to the work in front of her. T'Pol gave him a sideways glance and, though there was no hint of it on her face, he could feel her amusement.

"I do not," she declared before looking again at the PADDs. "You were just being ... Trip." He chuckled as he began to strip off his uniform, wincing slightly as the muscles in his back and legs protested slightly. Perhaps those extra kilometers on the treadmill this morning had been a mistake. "You are tired," T'Pol said abruptly, and he looked up to find her studying him with affection in her eyes. He loved it when she looked at him like that.

"Yeah." The uniform went into the hamper; she'd long since broken him of his habit of just tossing his uniform onto the floor until washday. "Tough day." He dropped down on the bed and, for a moment, just let his entire body relax. It felt wonderful. "Think you're up for..."

"Neuropressure?" She finished for him. He smiled again. She'd read his mind. Literally. Amusement flickered across her face as she stood up from the desk and approached the bed. "Not tonight," T'Pol whispered softly and he gave her a surprised look. She leaned forward, intent clear on her face, and captured his lips with her own. Through their bond, Trip felt her arousal spike and nearly groaned as it surged through him. As their tongues dueled, her fingers danced across his face, each touch a promise. She pressed forward, nearly climbing into his lap, and he felt his self-control slipping. Damn, but she was heaven to kiss.

"Darlin'," he gasped as he pulled away. Her mouth crawled down his neck and he felt her teeth against his skin. "Stop ... gotta stop ..." As she kissed her way back to his lips, her hands slipped lower, finding their way to his underwear. He had to stop this. Now. "Phlox ..." he panted under her unrelenting assault, hoping that she would recall the doctor's orders to avoid sexual intimacy while her body recovered. Damn it all, she was supposed to be the logical one! Their eyes met and he felt her open up her memories, felt her draw him into her mind, saw the Denobulan give her a clean bill of health. Her need, her desire, her want hammered at him and, with a broadening smile, he willingly drew her to him. If Phlox said they could ...

"Archer to Tucker." The comm echoed loudly in the relatively Spartan quarters, and Trip wondered where he could hide Jon's body after he killed him. He felt T'Pol's laughter in his mind as he rolled off of the bed and staggered to the comm panel, half bent over. How had she managed to get his briefs twisted around like that?

"Tucker," he snapped as he hit the transmit button. Yeah, he was addressing a senior officer but ... dammit ...

"I took the liberty of having Chef Killick prepare dinner." Jon's voice was entirely too cheerful and held that hidden tone of command; he was giving an order without actually giving one. "I'd like you and T'Pol to join me and Phlox for dinner, if you don't mind."

A phase pistol to the head was too good for his so-called friend, and it left a body behind.

"I can brief you on the mission at the same time," Archer continued. Transporter set on wide dispersion to beam the body into space? That might do the trick. "Say, thirty minutes?" No body, no crime.

"Sure thing, sir. Thirty minutes." Trip released the comm button and glanced back at T'Pol. She rose from the bed, now shamelessly nude, and gave him a look that he understood at once; his thoughts of homicide, however justifiable they may seem, had clearly reached her and he couldn't tell if she was amused or not. Taking in her mussed up hair and gloriously flushed skin, he cocked a smile at her. No jury in the galaxy would find him guilty.

"Share a shower?" he asked, and she raised an eyebrow before giving him that subtle smile that she allowed only him to see.

They were going to be late.



They were late.

Trip and T'Pol entered the Captain's Mess nearly an hour after Jon had commed Tucker, without even a word of apology for their tardiness. It wasn't hard to figure out why they were late; between griping Jon out for slacking off on his recovery regimen, Phlox had relayed that he had lifted the Vulcan's light duty restriction and Archer had little doubt they had been making up for lost time. The Denobulan gave both of them an appraising glance as they entered, noting without comment that their hair was still damp; he didn't even try to hide his amusement.

Archer wasn't doing such a great job either.

"My ship, my rules," Tucker said in response to the unasked questions, before in true Southern gentleman style he made sure T'Pol was seated and served. Archer grinned even more when he realized that his old friend was having the same mushroom risotto as the Vulcan instead of the steak that Jon himself had. *Only T'Pol could get him to eat rabbit food and enjoy it*, he thought to himself as he cut into the T-bone.

They spent most of the meal catching up: Jon filled them in on how Hoshi was doing and the strategic overview of the war while they gave him a front-line perspective that he couldn't get from reading reports in his San Francisco office. Midway through their discussion, Phlox was summoned to sickbay to deal with an injury - something about the chief engineer and plasma burns - which left the three of them alone.

"So," Archer said after dessert was served. "I suppose you're wanting to know why we're heading to Vigrid."

"There *has* been some speculation on the mission's objectives," T'Pol replied flatly, giving Trip a look that left no doubt who had been doing the speculating.

"Starfleet has instructed me to open a dialogue with the Boomers," Jon explained as he sipped his coffee. "They need protection, we need bodies and ships."

"Toldja," Trip muttered to T'Pol as he finished his pie. Fighting a smile, Archer glanced away, suddenly finding a need to need to look someplace, anyplace else.

She hated it when he was right.

She wouldn't tell Trip that, of course, probably wouldn't even think it, but, after nearly seven

years, Archer figured that he knew T'Pol pretty well. Even without looking at her, he could visualize the tightening of her face, the subtle grimace she always made when the realization sank in that Trip's ... *instincts* had prevailed over her logic. She would frown ever so slightly before shooting Tucker a brief glare as if it were *his* fault that she had been wrong, that, once more, he had *guessed* the correct answer without having all of the facts. Trip rarely tried to hide his amusement, didn't make an effort to conceal the smirk on his face as she glanced at him, and, on most occasions, would make a smart-ass comment that would spark an argument.

This was just such an occasion.

He tuned their argument out, paid no attention to their words or the passion in their voices, and allowed himself to reflect on the unlikely relationships that had sprung up since *Enterprise* had first launched. The year in the Expanse had seen the biggest changes in all of them, indelibly altering the survivors in different ways. No one had emerged unscathed but for some, like T'Pol and Tucker, the change had been for the better. It had brought them together, forged a bond between them that only death could break, a bond that Jon could barely comprehend. He'd seen their mutual attraction in the beginning, had noticed - and used - how well they worked together despite, or perhaps because of, their constant bickering. For a time, he'd harbored a romantic interest in T'Pol himself and unexpectedly found himself in an unspoken, unacknowledged competition with his best friend. When the mission into the Expanse began, he withdrew to focus entirely on the mission, ceased monopolizing T'Pol's time with "ship's business" and, like a moth to a flame, she had drifted right back into Trip's orbit. Their relationship struggled for a while, through her undesired marriage, her mother T'Les' tragic death, Trip's transfer to Columbia and finally the death of an unexpected child. He had honestly been worried that T'Pol's injuries would cause them problems and was glad to see how wrong he had been.

If anyone deserved happiness, it was these two.

"Before I left," Jon said into the momentary silence; their argument had turned into a staring match as it always did now. It seemed that they had forgotten he was even present. "Hoshi told me some things about the two of you." Trip at least had the decency to look embarrassed as he returned his attention to Archer.

"Like what, Cap'n?" The old nickname fell from his lips without Trip even being aware of it, and Jon felt himself unaccountably cheered at hearing it.

"Commodore Archer is no longer a captain, Trip," T'Pol said with the closest thing to a smirk Jon had ever seen.

"Old habit," Tucker replied. "Sorry." He didn't sound sorry and Jon didn't mind anyway.

"As I was saying," Archer interrupted before T'Pol could respond; sometimes she could be as bad as Trip was with their verbal foreplay, especially when she was in a playful mood as she

was tonight. That was a weird thought: a Vulcan in a playful mood. "She confirmed that she knew the two of you were ... uh ... bonded before Elysium." The unique couple exchanged a glance and he wondered what they were discussing as he continued. "How many knew? Off the record."

"Just three," Trip said. He reached for the coffee pot but hesitated when T'Pol discreetly shifted in place. Without a word, he grabbed the water instead and Jon bit back a comment about Tucker being housebroken, deciding to reserve that for a later date. "Phlox, Malcolm and Hoshi," Trip finished.

It hurt that they hadn't trusted him and Archer knew it showed on his face. Trip seemed to realize that he deserved an explanation.

"Telling Phlox was ..."

"... necessary," T'Pol finished for him; they had been doing that all night and Jon doubted that they were even aware of it.

"Yeah. I mean, I'm human-"

"*My* human," T'Pol corrected in a soft voice and Trip gave her another look even as Jon grinned. He felt an unexpected surge of emotion that she would let him see this side of her.

"-and there's not a whole lot of information on how humans take to bein' bonded to Vulcans." Jon nodded; it made perfect sense to bring the doctor in on this.

"Logical," he commented, trying to keep the hurt from his voice, but Trip had known him for far too long to not hear it. For that matter, so had T'Pol. "Why Malcolm?" It wasn't the question he wanted to ask, but grown adults didn't ask if one friend - even if that friend was no longer among the living - had supplanted another in 'best friend' status. Not if that adult wanted to keep at least a modicum of self-respect.

"Uhhh ..." Trip was stalling, his face flushing with something that could only be embarrassment. T'Pol shot him a glance and Archer thought he could see amusement in her eyes. "Malcolm's involvement was-"

"Inadvertent." Yep, T'Pol was amused. Jon's curiosity was abruptly piqued; anything Trip didn't want to talk about had to be good.

"Yeah. He found out by accident." Tucker refused to make eye contact as he rushed on, clearly hoping his old friend wouldn't push. "Malcolm brought in Hoshi to help spread disinformation and how did he put the other part, T'Pol?" Jon jumped in first.

"Wait. How did Malcolm find out?"

"Ummm ..." Again, Trip stalled. And again, T'Pol stepped in to elaborate, her eyes dancing.

"Commander Reed interrupted us during intercourse."

"Dammit, T'Pol!" Trip's face turned bright red as Jon started to snicker.

"You were going to lie to him," she replied calmly.

"I was gonna make something up, yeah!" Archer's snicker was threatening to degenerate into a full-blown laugh. "I sure as hell wasn't gonna tell him that Malcolm walked in on us during sex!"

"I believe your expression at the time was 'barged,' not walked."

"This I have to hear," Archer commented between chuckles. Trip shot him a look that promised vile retribution if the matter wasn't dropped. Ignorant of his embarrassment or more likely amused by it, T'Pol continued.

"Mister Reed entered Trip's quarters fearing for his safety." At Jon's surprised look, she elaborated. "*Enterprise* had only recently repulsed an Orion boarding party and there were concerns that some stragglers were still aboard." Jon remembered that; it had been three or four months after little Lizzie had died and a large number of the crew had still been on edge, none moreso than the chief tactical officer. At least this explained why Malcolm had gotten even *more* ... British around T'Pol at the time. Tucker suddenly snorted with laughter.

"You should have seen his face, Jon! He jumped into my quarters with his pistol drawn and just froze!" He made a face, eyes bugging out and mouth hanging open; Archer could easily imagine Malcolm Reed's face making those very same facial contortions. The two humans started to laugh.

"Commander Reed did turn an interesting shade of purple," T'Pol commented with laughter in her eyes.

"And then," Trip choked out through his laughter. "And then ... T'Pol looked at him ..." He broke down, laughing so hard that he couldn't continue.

"I merely asked him to reschedule his appointment with Commander Tucker to a more appropriate hour," T'Pol deadpanned. Their laughter echoed around them and, for the first time in a very long time, Jonathan Archer felt as though he had come home.

It was a good feeling.

ACT TWO

Breakfast with Allison Li was always interesting. In the month since she had come aboard, Dan Hsiao had discovered that the temperamental damage control officer pretty much had two moods this early in the morning: surly and pissed.

This morning, she was pissed.

It didn't take a genius to realize that whatever had her so angry, the Chief of the Boat was intimately involved. Her glaring eyes, for once not bloodshot from lack of sleep, never left Master Chief Petty Officer Mackenzie's form as he sat with Lieutenant Commander Eisler four tables away, and she responded to Devereux's soft questions in monosyllabic grunts that would have made a Klingon proud. The rumor mill - aka Marie Devereux herself - said that Li and the Master Chief had been quite the couple before Li's battlefield commission, but one couldn't tell that from their current interactions.

"So," Marie said in her third attempt to start a conversation with Li. "Any ideas on the Commodore's mission?" Allison's response was to frown and return to glaring at the Chief.

Dan sat through an uncomfortable minute of silence before offering his own contribution. "Since we're taking Commodore Archer to Thor's Cradle, it's logical to assume he's opening negotiations with the Boomers." Both women shot him nearly identical sardonic looks.

"Logical?" Marie teased with a gorgeous smile. He loved that smile and the throaty laugh that so often accompanied it, but the memory of Drahn explaining precisely what would happen if Dan turned his attentions toward Devereux stilled any amorous thoughts fairly quickly - well, tempered them anyway. "Trying to become a Vulcan, Danny-boy?" Hsiao returned the smile.

"Not likely." He recalled a conversation he'd had with a surprisingly forthright Vulcan named Kov some years back, and went for the punch line. "That whole seven years thing ..." An appropriately dramatic shudder caused Marie to laugh even as Allison snorted. *At least she's actually paying a little attention.*

"Maybe you could get a special dispensation," Devereux quipped right back, still chuckling, "for medical reasons." Pretending to think about it, he gave her his best Vulcan look, complete with the raised eyebrow. She laughed again and he glanced at the opening mess hall door.

An unfamiliar ensign entered the mess hall, and Hsiao frowned. He prided himself on his near-photographic memory, and disliked not recognizing someone. *Must be that new Security officer*, he mused as the young man approached Commander Eisler and, indeed, the newcomer did wear the red of Ship's Services. Dan's eyes drifted back to his meal.

"Nathaniel Hayes," Marie identified him without being asked. "Just came aboard yesterday with the commodore and Commander Eisler." She sipped her coffee, smiling again; once

more, Dan cursed Lieutenant Commander Drahn's very existence. "The COB had his team conducting training drills in combat gear before they even had billets assigned."

"Typical," Allison muttered, still stirring the adhesive gunk that Chef Killick called oatmeal. Her expression changed then, turning flat and emotionless. Without glancing back, Dan knew that Mackenzie had approached.

"Morning, COB," he offered as he turned his attention to the Master Chief. Hayes stood a little behind Mackenzie, looking very much like an officer newly graduated from the Academy.

"Lieutenants," the COB said by way of greeting. He stood in his familiar stance, almost a parade-rest with his arms clasped behind him. "This is Ensign Hayes." They gave him welcoming nods as the COB continued, his eyes zeroing in on Dan. "Lieutenant Hsiao, the captain has approved your flight training status. Ensign Hayes will be your first student." From where she sat, Allison bristled ever so slightly.

"A Security officer? He needs someone with a piloting background, not a ground pounder." No one failed to notice the lack of respect in her voice, least of all the COB. His tone chilled, now hovering about four or five degrees above absolute zero.

"Ensign Hayes already has a Class III atmospheric rating, Lieutenant." The younger officer straightened under their sudden re-appraisal; he obviously wasn't just a grunt in space. "Report to the launch bay when your duty shift begins, sir." It wasn't a request and, as he nodded, Hsiao was once again amazed that an enlisted man could wield such power; no officer on *Endeavour* - save the captain or Commander T'Pol - even thought about opposing Chief Mackenzie. Pissing off the senior noncomm aboard was *not* a good idea.

"Chief?" Devereux asked as he started to turn away. "Any word on the Salem colony?" Word that the colony had been hit had trickled onto *Endeavour* earlier yesterday while they waited for Engineering to get the warp drive back online, and everyone knew the Chief had family there. For the briefest of moments, a flicker of emotion flashed across Allison's face as she glanced at the Chief, a flash of concern that was gone almost before Dan even noticed it.

"No ma'am. It's likely that everyone is dead; Romulans don't take prisoners." Marie shuddered and Dan shifted his gaze to her; her brother had gone missing at Pacifica and she'd confided in Hsiao a secret hope that he would turn up after all. Dan fought the urge to reach out and comfort her. He damned all Andorian engineers everywhere. Speaking of which ...

"Any word on Commander Drahn?" he asked with a forced grin, hoping to change the subject to something ... lighter; the chief engineer's latest crazy experiment had been approved by Captain Tucker this morning and the injury pool was up to three hundred credits. To his surprise, Mackenzie gave him a grateful look, obviously recognizing the change in subject for what it was.

"Nothing as yet, Lieutenant. Given his record, however, it's only a matter of time." Dan's grin

faltered as he stared at Mackenzie with something reasonably close to shock; was the COB making a joke? He didn't think it was even possible.

"COB to the bridge." The announcement echoed loudly in the mess hall.

"Lieutenants, Ensign." Mackenzie strode from the dining facility as Marie invited Hayes to join them for breakfast.

"What's a matter of time?" the ensign asked, and Marie laughed. Dan chuckled and even Li cracked a smile.

"Doctor Phlox calls it the 'Tucker Syndrome,'" Devereux started to explain, smiling that gorgeous smile. "Apparently in honor of the captain. Every single time Commander Drahn is on an away mission -"

"Or in engineering," Dan interrupted with a grin.

"Or in the mess hall," Allison interjected, right on top of him.

"As I was saying," Marie started again, giving them both a frown. "Whenever the commander is on away missions, he is often injured." Hsiao couldn't help himself.

"Or abducted," he said with a chuckle.

"Or seduced," Allison offered with a wicked grin, completely ignoring the decidedly unfriendly look Marie gave her.

"Like that crazy Tellarite who chased him all over Risa!" Dan started to laugh at the memory from two weeks earlier and was pleasantly surprised when Allison started giggling; she was really quite attractive once you got past the attitude.

"What was it she kept telling him?" Li asked, her giggles threatening to turn into full-out laughter.

"I want your offspring!" they quoted together before erupting in laughter. Even Devereux had to smile.

He loved her smile.



She wasn't smiling any more.

In fact, it was an effort just to stay awake. With the completion of her initial comm checks,

system updates and ship wide status reports, Lieutenant Marie Devereux once more found herself parked in front of her COM station with nothing to do. She hated this part of the duty shift, hated sitting at her console trying to pretend that she was doing something constructive when she was actually just struggling to fight boredom. One would think that things would be more exciting on Alpha Shift ...

She let her eyes wander as she sat there and, as happened far too often, she found herself watching her fellow bridge staff. It was a little quirk of hers, a guilty pleasure that she got out of deciphering personal interactions more through unconscious body language than from what the person actually said. So much could be learned that way, much more than a lot of people knew.

Like Dan Hsiao, for example. Discreetly, she looked over the helmsman as she reflected on his unique body language. He was nowhere nearly as complicated as he thought he was, and the open way he smiled at her or watched her lips or unerringly made eye contact when he talked to her told her everything she needed to know about him. Truth be told, Marie was flattered by his obvious attraction to her and, had she not already been involved with Drahn, would have seriously considered starting something with Dan. He was smart and cute and made her laugh, even when she didn't want to. If she really thought about it - and she had once or twice - he was probably her best friend on *Endeavour* and seemed to know exactly when she needed to be cheered up.

From the NAV station, she glanced at the bridge engineering station - recently rechristened the Damage Control station - and nearly frowned at the DCO's bowed head. Allison Li's relationship with the COB was immensely complicated and Marie had wasted entirely too much time trying to figure it out. At times, their body language screamed torrid love affair, with one or both of them totally open and vulnerable toward the other. Just as often, however, she halfway expected them to tear each other apart in a frenzy of murderous rage. It was at those times that she made sure she wasn't in the vicinity.

Her eyes drifted to the TAC station and she nearly flinched at Lieutenant Commander Eisler's blank expression as he studied his board with a frightening intensity. She'd interacted with the new tactical officer only twice since he came aboard ten days ago and, in her opinion, that had been about three times too many. Initially, she'd been fascinated at his seeming lack of body language, at the fact that he gave no hint as to what he was thinking, at the realization that even Commander T'Pol gave more of a clue to her emotional state than he did; but one glimpse into his eyes - those cold, dead eyes - had caused that fascination to flee, screaming, never to return. She quickly turned her attention toward someone who didn't terrify her.

Captain Tucker and Commander T'Pol were always a joy to observe. It was an open secret that they shared quarters and, from the moment he'd assumed command, Tucker had let it be known that he planned to ignore Starfleet's non-frat policy as long as it didn't affect shipboard duties. There had been a couple of incidents in the first couple of days between crew members where he had been forced to intervene, but since then it had been surprisingly smooth sailing. At times, Marie was almost convinced the unlikely couple shared some sort of telepathic

communication, had such a thing been possible; it was simply amazing how they could carry on entire conversations with little more than looks or gestures or single words. Even now, as Captain Tucker lounged in the Command Chair with a PADD bearing shipboard status reports in hand and Commander T'Pol busied herself at the SCI board, they looked as though they were having a silent discussion: every now and then, the captain would shoot the Vulcan science officer an amused half-smile, as if she had just said something he found funny, or Commander T'Pol would glance in his direction with a cocked eyebrow or bemused expression on her face.

It really was the oddest thing ...

"Dropping out of warp," Dan suddenly announced from the NAV station and Marie quickly returned her attention back to her board before a senior officer noticed her apparent lack of work and decided to volunteer her for something.

"Let's have a look," Captain Tucker ordered as he lowered the PADD. Devereux heard Commander T'Pol's fingers tapping out commands and the vid-display came to life. Glancing up, she felt her breath catch.

She was familiar with the contours of the Vigrid Station; having originally been constructed by Vulcans, it looked no different from any other such station aside from its general state of disrepair. But Vigrid Station was different; in a word, it looked ... old.

Parked in a near-geosynchronous orbit above a dead planetoid, it immediately brought to mind a Vulcan ringship writ on a massive scale. The hull of the station was a dull metallic brown that had long since lost its luster; thousands of small impact craters from micrometeorites pockmarked the outer hull, giving it a battered and abused look. Instead of acting as an enclosing warp nacelle, however, the ring that surrounded the station served as an immense docking facility and was connected to the station proper by hollow columns housing equally ancient turbolifts and walkways. Like a great spoked wheel, the docking ring spun slowly around the station, completing a revolution every eight hours.

Hundreds of small ships surrounded the mammoth station, docking and undocking, loading and unloading cargo. Despite the appearance of age, Vigrid Station - Thor's Cradle to the Boomers - was a thriving hub, a port of call for those individuals who wanted to eke out a living among the stars at their own pace, under their own rules.

But it was not the station itself that captured Marie's attention. A massive nebula half-engulfed the system, narrowly limiting approach and exit vectors for warp-capable ships, and the colors it radiated were mesmerizing. Feathers of scarlet and gold stretched out over a stellar blanket of blue and green, swirling together in pockets of ionized gas that sparkled and flashed intermittently. The system's sun - a young orange-red main sequence star - was partially obscured by the gaseous field but glinted brightly, a stark reminder of its presence.

It was beautiful.

"Now that's a sight to see," Captain Tucker commented softly, his eyes glued to the viewscreen. For a long moment, the bridge was silent as the crew members were lost in their thoughts, amazed at the wonder of nature; but the moment passed. "Hail the station, lieutenant," the captain said, his voice reminding them once more that they were officers on a warship. "Let 'em know we've arrived." Marie's console beeped as she began to obey.

"Sir," she announced after a moment. "We're being hailed." She blinked. "It's a Vulcan ship." Tucker paused, his hand hovering over the intraship comm, and shot a look at Commander T'Pol. The Vulcan looked up from her own display.

"It is the *Ti'Mur*," she said and the captain blinked in what appeared to be surprise. More unspoken communication passed between them and Tucker shrugged, as if T'Pol had made some sort of comment. Marie wished they would stop that.

"On screen," he said, straightening his duty jacket as he spoke. A white-haired Vulcan appeared on the display and the captain suddenly smiled. "Soval! What are you doin' in our neck o' the woods?"

"Captain Tucker." The Vulcan inclined his head in a slight nod. "Administrator Maddox requested Vulcan mediation for your negotiations. I trust you will inform Commodore Archer regarding my presence?"

"Oh yeah," the captain said with a broad grin. "I'll let him know." He shot T'Pol a look that Marie recognized as two people sharing an inside joke. Even the commander looked amused ... for a Vulcan, anyway.

"Then I shall see you on-station, captain." Soval's eyes flickered to T'Pol and Devereux saw an unspoken acknowledgment flash between them. "Soval out." The screen returned to the spectacular system view.

"All right, Lieutenant Hsaio," Tucker said, his grin fading as he reasserted his rank. "Take us in. Devereux, hail the station." He rolled his tongue inside his cheek and shot T'Pol another look.

"Commodore Archer will not be pleased," the Vulcan deadpanned and Captain Tucker nodded.

"I know." He grinned. "Can't wait to tell him."



No one had told him that he would be dealing with ... children instead of diplomats.

Had he been human, Soval of Vulcan would have long since thrown his arms up in disgust and stormed from the conference room, pausing only long enough to nerve pinch the two primary "negotiators" into unconsciousness. For a brief moment - heartbeats only - he let himself bask in that fantasy, let himself envision the stunned expressions on the faces of Jonathan Archer and Paul Mayweather as he applied the necessary pressure at the appropriate nerve cluster, but just as quickly returned his attention to their ongoing argument, chastising himself for the momentary distraction.

"Gentlemen," he interrupted in a voice that was carefully and perfectly measured. "We have ranged far from the point of the discussions." And indeed they had. Captain Mayweather - representing the Earth Cargo Authority - had spent much of the morning in a diatribe regarding Starfleet's failure to provide adequate protection to the shipping lanes, while Commodore Archer - representing Starfleet - countered with arguments that revolved around the number of ships and a lack of loyalty on the part of the 'Boomers.' As was all too common with humans, when their logic failed, they raised their voices. The current disagreement had escalated into a shouting match; both sides had stopped listening to one another long ago. "Regarding the matter at hand," Soval continued with a composed look at both of them, "the ECA representative has yet to discuss the Starfleet proposal for integration."

"That's because it isn't a proposal!" Mayweather snapped, his eyes flashing. "It's a demand!"

"In case you didn't notice, there's a war going on!" Archer responded, his own words heating. "Some compromises have to be made!"

Soval nearly sighed.

As the two wasted even more time arguing over points identical to ones they had made 2.3 hours earlier, the ambassador allowed himself a discreet frown and wondered once again whether this was a complete waste of time. The administrator of the Vigrid Station - which the humans had renamed Thor's Cradle for reasons that completely defied explanation - had requested Vulcan mediation, and Minister T'Pol, recognizing the opportunity to regain some much-needed influence with the Humans, had promptly assigned the duty to him. Having the most experience with humans, he was, after all, the logical choice; but, not for the first time, he wished someone else had been available instead.

Anyone else.

Archer's irritability was entirely understandable; he was still recovering from the injuries he had sustained at the battle of Mu Virginis and appeared to still be in some pain, although he masked it well. Despite that, the decision to have him represent Starfleet was a remarkably sound one; as one of the public faces attached to the Expanse mission that had saved Earth from destruction, Archer still had considerable gravitas with humans, even those not born on Terra. Having the man who had commanded the mission that saved Earth from the Xindi offer the integration proposal to the ECA was an excellent diplomatic move.

And yet, despite Archer's reputation, despite the surprisingly amenable proposal, despite the Earth Cargo Authority's clearly inferior bargaining position, the ECA representative was not budging. Very little was known about Paul Mayweather beyond the facts that he was the captain of a cargo ship named *Horizon* and that he had recently become active in ECA politics. A hardliner, Mayweather did not only appear to be anti-integration, but was openly hostile toward Archer. Mentally, the Vulcan reviewed the files that he had scanned involving the participants and his mind latched upon a single name, a name that suddenly explained the hostility.

Lieutenant Travis Mayweather.

"Gentlemen," he interrupted once more, his voice hard and demanding attention. As one, their eyes swiveled to him and he let a silent moment pass as he gave them both appraising looks, wishing that he could instill in them some sort of control. "The purpose of these negotiations is not to discuss the failings of the past, but to focus on the future."

"Starfleet has a record of not protecting ECA assets," Mayweather immediately pointed out, once more on his way to arguing that history would repeat itself.

"That's because we didn't have the ships!" Archer countered, once more on his way to arguing that things would be different now.

"And now that you do, you expect us to fall in line!" Once more, the argument flared up.

And once more, Soval nearly sighed.

Tuning out their voices for the fourth time in as many hours, he let his eyes wander around the conference room. He blinked in momentary surprise at the sudden presence of both Captain Tucker and Commander T'Pol; wondering when they had arrived, he could not help but notice that both appeared to be slightly amused at the proceedings, although it was quite subtle on the part of T'Pol. The two glanced at one another and, even from this distance, Soval could feel the telepathic bond that linked the two. For a moment, he let himself marvel at its strength.

His musing on the nature of their bond immediately brought to mind the mystery that was Charles Tucker. Questions yet surrounded the young man, questions involving the curious genetic aberrations that had been detected following Tucker's near-death experience with a silicate virus. A copy of Phlox's research had found its way into Soval's hands, and he had studied it with a great deal of fascination; he did not try to find out how the research came into his possession since the answer was so readily apparent.

The Ministry of Security.

Concerned at his apparent intimate relationship with a former member of the M.o.S., the Ministry had been keeping a close eye on Tucker since his visit to T'Pol's home following the

Expanse mission. While he recognized the concern the Ministry had about Tucker, Soval found that he was unable to share it. In their brief interactions, he had grown to appreciate the young human, had enjoyed the man's blunt honesty and had grudgingly admitted - if only to himself - that he approved of T'Pol's chosen mate. As he had no biological relationship to T'Pol it wasn't really his place to approve of Tucker or not, but the affection Soval held for T'Pol was difficult to repress. She had been more than an effective aide; her background in intelligence had also made her an ideal bodyguard and an exceptional observer.

Even now, her eyes were studying the layout of the room and Soval found himself watching with a smile in his eyes. His amusement vanished however, when her eyes narrowed and she met his gaze. T'Pol's fingers twitched in an unmistakable gesture, one that he had not seen in a long time, and one that he had not wished to see again for even longer.

Evacuate.

He didn't hesitate, rising to his feet in a smooth gesture that silenced the two arguing men and drew everyone's attention.

"I recommend a recess," he said, his tone allowing no disagreement. "Let us adjourn for one standard hour." He was already striding from the room, not waiting to see how Archer and Mayweather responded.

T'Pol would explain it later.



She didn't have time to explain.

The moment T'Pol had entered the conference room, she had sensed something amiss. It had taken nearly three visual sweeps of the room to notice the discrepancy, to observe the misaligned lamp fixture and the slight discoloration around it that indicated it had been recently removed and then replaced. Almost instantly, the amusement that she had been sharing with Trip regarding the negotiations vanished. Soval reacted as she had hoped he would when she signaled him, clearing the room in seconds, which allowed her to pull her scanner free and activate it. Trip said nothing as she worked, recognizing her desire to be uninterrupted.

The scans revealed exactly what she suspected. With no sign of her deepening anxiety, she studied the wall light fixture as she returned the scanner to its belt holster. Behind her, she felt Trip stir, aware of her intense focus on the wall, but not yet cognizant of what she was studying. He drew breath to comment but she spoke first.

"Captain, please step outside." He gave her a long look, clearly straining to read her intentions through the bond, but she revealed nothing as she placidly returned his gaze. At

Tucker's side, Lieutenant Commander Eisler glanced in the direction of the light fixture, the slightest of frowns on his face. Incredibly, he tensed and T'Pol realized that he had seen the danger.

Interesting.

"Why?" Trip asked, and she fought the urge to roll her eyes.

"Captain, please. Step outside." Had Eisler not been present, she would have personalized the request and, as her mate shifted anxiously at her side, she considered doing so anyway if it would get him to safety. Their eyes met and she read the question there; he would not leave unless he knew why. "Trip, please." He blinked; she rarely called him that in the presence of anyone else. "It isn't safe here."

"She's right, sir." Eisler had inched toward the fixture, surreptitiously placing himself between it and Tucker. Noting this, she revised her assessment of the new tactical officer upward; he had been nothing but coolly professional toward her since arriving on *Endeavour* and she had sensed he was uncomfortable around her, but his desire to keep Trip out of harm's way impressed her. "Let us do our job, Captain," the tactical officer said earnestly and, had she been human, T'Pol would have laughed at her mate's expression. Two days earlier, following a command staff briefing, Trip had complained - off the record, of course - to Commodore Archer that Starfleet Command wasn't letting him do his job.

Apparently, Commander Eisler had been listening.

"Fine," Trip grouched, visibly annoyed at having his own words used against him. As soon as the captain was through the door, Eisler turned to study the fixture. Without a word, he removed his duty jacket and tossed it onto the conference table. T'Pol raised an eyebrow; concealed underneath the jacket, he wore a web harness to which numerous items were strapped. She counted four blades of various sizes, two slim boxes of undetermined origin, several objects whose purpose completely eluded her, and what appeared to be a hand-sized laser pistol in a curious under-arm holster.

None of it was standard Starfleet issue.

"May I?" Eisler asked, nodding to her scanner. She passed it to him without a word and observed quietly as he cycled through several different scans. As he cautiously approached the light fixture, it was obvious that he had done this before - several times, if his efficiency was any indication.

"Ma'am," the tactical officer said suddenly. "You should join Captain Tucker outside." He met her eyes and T'Pol gave him the slightest of frowns.

"What tools do you require?" she asked, ignoring his suggestion as he returned the scanner.

"None." Eisler slid one of the slim boxes free of the web gear and opened it, revealing a small tool kit - a tool kit, T'Pol realized, that was expressly designed for dealing with explosives.

Fascinating.

Within seconds, he had taken down most of the lamp fixture, revealing its inner workings. The explosive itself - a squat, featureless device that bore a striking resemblance to a recording device - was attached to the lamp's power cell, and he studied it with an expression that revealed nothing. Demonstrating a level of proficiency that told her more about his previous MACO career than his actual service record, he removed the device's outer casing and studied its components.

"It's of Andorian manufacture," he commented idly as he reached for the micro-calipers and hand-laser. She passed them to him without comment, accepting the role of assistant without comment or complaint.

"That doesn't make sense," Trip said abruptly, his voice so close to her ear that T'Pol nearly jumped. She gave him a hard stare; he was supposed to be outside, where it was safe. That she had not even heard him re-enter concerned her only slightly less. "Why would the Andorians want to bomb this conference?"

"They wouldn't," T'Pol replied coolly, reigning in her irritation at her mate's presence as she watched Eisler study the detonator's placement with a practiced eye. She could not help but wonder how many Andorian explosives he had disabled before. "But we are meant to think they did."

"Romulans," Trip muttered and she gave him a slight nod, her eyes never leaving Eisler's hands. "That means there's probably an assassin on the station."

"A likely assumption." She made no mention of the probability of spies inside Starfleet, knowing that Trip was already considering it. Eisler leaned back, the detonator now safely removed and in his hands, shaking his head slightly. "Commander?"

"Detonator was misaligned," he said in reply to her implied question. "Whoever placed it didn't know what they were doing." T'Pol considered that for mere heartbeats before arriving at the most logical assessment: the individual who had placed the explosive was likely not aware of its true purpose.

"We need to look into this," her mate muttered softly, his thoughts centered around the danger Commodore Archer might be in.

"Commander T'Pol should conduct that investigation." Soval's sudden voice drifted from the doorway and she gave him an even harder look than the one she had given Trip; he knew better than to be in the conference room until she had given the all-clear. Beside her, hovering slightly too close to be entirely professional, her mate tensed.

It was moments like this that gave T'Pol pause. Trip's concern for her well-being was tangible, clear to anyone who cared to notice, and, though it warmed her that he cared so much, she could not help but wince internally at the same time. Once, many years earlier, then-Captain Archer had all but admitted an attraction to her, an attraction that she had not reciprocated; but rather than telling him so and possibly damaging their growing friendship, she had pointed out how inappropriate such a relationship would be. How ironic, she thought to herself, that she found herself in just such a situation now.

It had been easier when Commander Stiles was aboard. T'Pol had very nearly convinced Trip to officially name Stiles as First Officer and remove her from the chain-of-command due to their relationship when Starfleet promoted the tactical officer to captain and offered him the *Challenger*. Now with Lieutenant Commander Eisler as the third highest ranking officer aboard *Endeavour*, there were no official reasons that T'Pol should not be First Officer.

There were only personal ones.

"I am the most qualified," she pointed out softly in response to Soval's suggestion, not needing to remind him of her intelligence background. Already, she was planning her next move: the station had to have recordings of movements to and from the conference room, and studying those would be the logical first step, particularly if no usable genetic material could be located near the explosive.

"I know," Trip grudgingly said, his lips turned down at the corners. For a moment, T'Pol thought he would invite himself along, believing that his presence would keep her from harm, despite Commodore Archer's earlier instructions that he be present during the negotiations. Instead, her mate surprised her once more. "Commander Eisler will go with you," Trip declared abruptly. The ex-MACO blinked from where he stood, but that was the only reaction he gave. T'Pol very nearly frowned, however, and let Trip know of her displeasure through their bond. Did he not trust her?

"His presence is not necessary," she pointed out verbally, quite aware of Soval's appraisal of her. It was disconcerting how her old mentor was observing their ... discussion: his expression, as always, revealed nothing, but his eyes danced with poorly contained mirth. T'Pol felt her ears heat.

"Too bad," Trip replied, his expression set, his brow furrowed. "He's going." She very nearly sighed then; he was intractable when he was like this, and it was usually easier to simply accept his over-protectiveness. They would talk later, she decided, and determine how to avoid this in the future. "And I'll expect you to check in every thirty minutes."

"Impossible." Her frown deepened. "An investigation of this sort requires subtlety. Four hours." They locked eyes.

"One. Or I send Reynolds and his Roughnecks after you." Trip crossed his arms as he spoke.

"You are being unreasonable. Three hours." She felt Soval's eyes on her and wondered what he thought of the spectacle they made.

"Two. And that's final." A moment passed before T'Pol nodded. She quickly turned her attention to Eisler but noticed the flash of triumph in her mate's eyes and mentally added another subject to be discussed. It could wait, however.

"Return to *Endeavour*," she ordered. "Dress appropriately for a covert investigation." The ex-MACO nodded acknowledgment of her order and T'Pol squared her shoulders. "We have work to do."

ACT THREE

Jon was frustrated.

As Soval declared yet another recess - the third in as many hours - Archer stood up from his uncomfortable chair and struggled against the urge to punch something, *anything*. For the first time in his life, he found himself wishing Crewman Daniels would make one of his surprise visits and whisk him away to some distant century, or that a Suliban would show up and make death threats, or that Trip would get a message from Starfleet that would call them both away from this damned table ... anything that would give him a break from Paul Mayweather.

The Boomer didn't even acknowledge Jon's nod as he strode away from the table, and Archer let himself wonder what punching the younger man would feel like. *That's counterproductive, Jon*, he told himself as he clenched his fists and moved away from the table himself, glad for Trip's quiet but steady presence at his side. This entire "negotiation" was getting to be more and more frustrating as time passed: they'd just wasted another four hours arguing over what he thought to be trivial nonsense, and Archer wondered just how many times he'd heard the same refrain about Starfleet not providing appropriate protection for ECA ships.

At least some progress had finally been made, though. Mayweather had grudgingly acceded the point that the integration proposal was a good one, but then had promptly balked on the little details about how and when the integration would actually take place. They'd gone around in circles for the last forty-five minutes, bickering about the pay scale for ECA crews or how much autonomy ship captains would have or how rank would be determined until finally even Soval appeared to have had enough and ordered the latest break.

"You're not helping, Soval," he grumbled as the Vulcan moved by him. His chest ached as he spoke and Archer barely managed to keep himself from rubbing the scar tissue in a futile attempt to ease the pain. Phlox had advised him against overdoing it but Jon had ignored the Denobulan, confident of his ability to ignore the pain until negotiations were over.

Now he wasn't so sure.

Soval gave him an almost amused expression in response; it was a subtle lightening of his features, a softening of his eyes and fractional curve of the lips, but it was unmistakably amusement.

"Can't you get them to stop being so ..." Jon trailed off, trying to find the appropriate word.

"Intransigent?" Trip offered, not bothering to hide his smile.

"I am an arbiter, Commodore," the Vulcan replied, his voice absent of the condescension that had been there when *Enterprise* first launched. "Not an advocate." He pinned Archer with a

steely gaze and Jon got his meaning at once: Soval would *not* pick sides, even if he favored one over the other.

Dammit.

"Commodore. Captain." He gave them both slight nods before turning away and walking across the room to join the station administrator. Archer sighed in frustration, shooting a glance at Mayweather and the other ECA representatives. They stood clustered in a semi-circle, deep in discussion. As if sensing Archer's eyes on him, Mayweather looked back and their eyes met; Jon shivered at the hate he saw there.

Archer looked away first.

"You're not helping much either, Trip," he pointed out, and Tucker gave him a funny look. "Soval gets along with you. Can't you ...?" He trailed off, knowing his old friend would get the point.

"Can't I what?" Trip gave him an unreadable look; these kinds of expressions were all too common now. T'Pol had influenced her human lover more than either of them knew. "You heard him, sir; he takes this whole arbiter thing pretty seriously." Trip sounded almost approving.

"You like him," Jon accused, and Tucker shrugged.

"Afraid so." He smirked at Archer. "He's a grumpy old man ... just like you." As he gave Trip a glare - a glare that just seemed to broaden the younger man's smile - Jon couldn't help but notice the Vulcan's head swivel in their direction and the flat, unamused look the ambassador gave Tucker. *Damn Vulcan hearing*, Archer mused to himself as he shook his head, half in amazement, half in disgust. Not long ago, Trip would have cut his arm off before admitting that he liked any Vulcan.

Especially Soval.

"How's the investigation going?" he asked in an attempt to get his mind off Vulcan diplomats and - what had Trip called them? - intransigent Boomers. Tucker sobered almost instantly, transforming into a Starfleet Captain within the span of a single heartbeat.

"Okay." He frowned, poorly concealed concern for T'Pol lurking in his eyes. "T'Pol's following up some promising leads now." Trip looked away and, for just a moment, took on an almost alien expression as his eyes focused inward. Jon was silent, disquiet swirling in his stomach as he observed the man he loved like a brother. He trusted T'Pol with his life, had grown to think of her as one of his closest friends, but found that he was still not entirely at ease with the idea of a telepathic bond. It just seemed ... inhuman.

And that, perhaps, was the crux of his problem.

Jon had only just learned of the bond's existence in the aftermath of Elysium and still hadn't quite come to terms with it yet. Logically, he knew that he should just move on and accept it as a result of T'Pol's Vulcan biology, but doing so was turning out to be a little bit more difficult than he'd anticipated. The stress of his recovery and his crushing workload at Starfleet Command barely allowed him time to reflect on what it could mean for Trip down the line and Archer would be the first to admit that his deep-rooted issues with Vulcans played a role in his discomfort."

"So how are you and T'Pol really doing, Trip?" he asked softly. His old friend gave him something of a surprised look and Jon smiled. "No bullshit."

"No bullshit?" Trip grinned; it had been something A.G. had said all the time back in the days of the NX-Alpha. "We're doing fine, sir." Tucker's amusement dissolved and he narrowed his eyes. "You asking as Jon or as Commodore Archer?"

"As Jon," he replied. He gave Trip another smile. "I'm just concerned, that's all." For a moment, Archer hesitated, wondering if he should ask about the bond or mention his own fears about what it meant for his friend. In the end, he retreated into official business; Trip was an adult and could make his own decisions. "Off the record, Starfleet Command is still a little ... concerned about chain of command issues." Tucker nodded.

"So are we," he said with a sigh as he ran his fingers through his hair. "We're tryin' to be discreet, but pretty much the entire crew knows where she's sleepin'!" He shot Jon a disgruntled look. "Wouldn't be a problem if you hadn't promoted Stiles."

"Meaning?"

"T'Pol wanted me to make him First Officer." Trip shifted in place. "Had me convinced too. It wouldn't have solved all of the problems ..."

"Just most of them," Archer finished. They stood in silence for a moment, both keeping an eye on the ECA representatives. "Command will probably look the other way while the war's going on, Trip." He gave Tucker a cautious look. "After that, I can't promise anything." Trip frowned. "They may decide to give you different duty stations."

"We've discussed that possibility." Tucker's words were flat and utterly without emotion, so Vulcan-like that he hardly sounded like himself. Archer gave his old friend a look, recognizing the unspoken meaning at once: T'Pol and Trip would leave Starfleet if faced with being separated. He gave Trip a tight smile, letting his eyes communicate his understanding and his acceptance of that fact. For a long moment, they stood quietly, an easy companionable silence that Jon realized he had missed more than he had realized. Of their own volition, his eyes drifted back to the ECA group and he made a decision.

It was time to clear the air.

With a confident air, he approached the group, Trip a step behind and to the right of him. As he neared them, the Boomers ended their muted discussion and turned to face him, faces going blank. Mayweather took a half step forward, effectively putting himself at their front and forcing Jon to interact directly with him, which was fine with Archer.

That was what he wanted to do anyway.

"Captain Mayweather," Jon said with a nod. This was the first time he'd had a chance to interact with Travis' brother outside of the negotiating table and, from the bleak look on the Boomer's face, it would probably be the last.

"Commodore," Paul Mayweather replied darkly, his lips narrowed with anger. He gave Trip a brief nod. "Captain Tucker."

"Captain, I'd like to express my condolences for your loss," Jon said sincerely. It wasn't the first time he had tried; he'd sent no less than six subspace messages from his sickbed at Starfleet Medical, but each time the attempt had been rebuffed.

"Your condolences are noted." Noted but not accepted; Jon tried not to sigh as Mayweather pinned him with an angry glare. Behind the Boomer, two of the three ECA reps - the two women - frowned at the words.

"Travis was a hell of a pilot," Trip spoke up suddenly. "He saved a lot of lives at Elysium. Includin' mine."

"He's still dead," Mayweather snapped, his eyes never leaving Archer. All three of the ECA reps were shifting awkwardly now, their desire to be elsewhere obvious. "You promised our dad that you'd look after him," Mayweather continued. Archer tried not to flinch at that memory, tried not to show how much that had hurt. "Where the hell were you when my brother died?"

"I was unconscious on a lifeboat," Jon replied calmly. "Doctor Phlox was trying to restart my heart." Mayweather's expression flickered, softening for the briefest of moments before he turned cold once more.

"Too bad he succeeded," the Boomer declared bitterly before pushing by them as he returned to the table. As the other three ECA reps followed him, their eyes averted, Jon sighed. Into that moment of silence, Trip spoke.

"That could have gone better."



Things couldn't be going better.

Rick Eisler stood quietly in the civilian apartment, a little amazed that they had covered so much ground in so little time. It was difficult to impress him - his standards were impossibly high - and yet, in the four hours that he'd spent in the company of Commander T'Pol, the Vulcan had done exactly that. From her analysis of station recordings involving the conference room which had identified their primary suspect, to tracking him down - in the morgue, unfortunately - to arranging for an autopsy of the body, the commander had demonstrated a frightening efficiency at investigation.

There was *no* way she was *just* a science officer.

By the time Eisler had returned from *Endeavour*, dressed now in dark civilian clothes that were loose enough for him to conceal his non-standard tac-vest, Commander T'Pol - in a silver jumpsuit that left nothing to the imagination - was already racing through station records, analyzing everything on the screen at an amazing speed. Two and a half hours passed before she had isolated a suspect and, by that point, Eisler was hardly surprised at how quickly she was able to get the man's entire station history. The administrator of Thor's Cradle - a large Boomer by the name of Maddox - had balked at giving her complete access in the early minutes of her investigation and she had broken his will with a single imperious stare, a look that promised black and terrible retribution against any who opposed her, without even a single gram of emotion displayed.

Administrator Maddox hadn't been seen since.

When her efforts revealed that Reginald Perkins - her chief suspect for planting the explosive - had turned up in the morgue, Commander T'Pol hadn't even seemed surprised or particularly bothered. They made the quick trip to the morgue, and it took her less than five minutes to arrange for the body to be transferred to *Endeavour* for Phlox to conduct an autopsy; she then spent nearly an hour examining Perkins' personal effects before deciding to visit his rented quarters on the station.

In a particularly rundown part of Thor's Cradle, the apartment itself was quite small, an economy with only a single room that served as sleeping quarters, living room and kitchen all at the same time. A small refresher - barely the size of a walk-in closet - was in the far corner, its door half-ajar. It was patently obvious that Perkins had been a slob as the entire apartment reeked of weeks-old laundry (most of which appeared strewn haphazardly on the floor) and was littered with half-empty food containers, many of which had begun to grow mold. An offensively bright purple couch dominated the room and, from the pillows and blanket that were draped over it, had served as the occupant's bed; oddly, two duffel bags were propped up on the sofa as well and both appeared to have been packed in a hurry. Two wall hangings immediately drew the attention upon entrance and Eisler felt his lip curl in disgust. One of the hangings was of two extremely (some might say impossibly) well-endowed Andorian females involved in an explicitly intimate embrace. The other was a framed velvet

print of dogs.

Playing poker.

Commander T'Pol barely looked at the pornography beyond giving it a cursory glance, but she studied the second picture for an inordinately long time, tilting her head several times as she took in the improbable situation. Twice she shifted her stance, as if attempting to see the picture from a different angle in order to discern its secrets.

"Fascinating," she murmured and, had he not been utterly embarrassed for the human race at that moment, Rick would have found the sight of the slim Vulcan examining the picture with such intensity to be hilarious. The way she stood, one would think that she'd just found the Holy Grail, or at least her culture's equivalent.

He just wished he had a camera.

Turning away from the dogs, T'Pol let her eyes roam over the room, taking in the mess without even a hint of condemnation on her face. She gave no sign as to what she was thinking, no hint about what clues - if any - she was deciphering from the chaos, but Rick had grown accustomed to her silence and waited patiently for her next move. He'd be loath to admit it, but he found himself ... eager to see what she did next. It was almost exciting.

Despite himself, he began to see why Tucker was so infatuated with her.

Among the dirty clothes in the two duffel bags, T'Pol found a civilian PADD and quickly downloaded its contents to her scanner - a specialized scanner/PADD combination, Rick realized. She then spent nearly twenty minutes in complete silence as she studied its contents.

"It appears," she informed Eisler as she lowered the scanner, "that Reginald Perkins recently booked first class transport to Andoria." The last was said with a brief scornful glance toward the pornography that decorated the Rimward wall.

"First class?" Rick frowned, glancing around the apartment once more. "He can't afford that." Not without a decent-sized payoff anyway ...

"Indeed." Her communicator suddenly beeped and she pulled it out, flipping it open with a practiced gesture. "T'Pol."

"Ah, Commander." Phlox's voice sounded odd coming from the communicator, hollow and flat yet still exuding cheerfulness. "I have completed my autopsy. Do you wish me to forward the results or should I summarize?"

"Both. Forward the complete results to my scanner."

"Very well." There was a brief pause before the commander's scanner beeped, an indication that data had been received. "Your Mister Perkins was killed by a single disruptor shot to the face, fired from a distance of no more than ten centimeters." That much had been obvious from the state of the body; Eisler had seen a lot of nasty things in his life, but the ruin that had been Perkins' face ranked near the top.

"Time of death?" The Vulcan had yet to study her scanner as she looked over the room once again. Rick imagined that he could almost hear the wheels spinning.

"Between twenty and twenty-two standard hours ago. I cannot narrow it down any further."

"Was he conscious at time of death?" Eisler gave her a look from where he stood; clearly she had seen something that he hadn't.

"Unlikely." Phlox paused briefly. "There was bruising on the left shoulder suggestive of a nerve pinch." Rick tensed up; as far as he knew, only Vulcans were able to do the pinch. "There is also a trace amount of theta-3 radiation in his system. I don't know if that is helpful ..."

"It is. Thank you, Doctor." T'Pol closed the communicator and replaced it on her belt before turning her eyes to the scanner. Eisler watched her absorb the information for a moment, wondering how to ask what he wanted to ask. She must have felt his gaze on her. "You have a comment, Commander?"

"You knew about the pinch?" He tried to keep accusation out of his voice, tried to sound as if he were discussing something bland and boring ... like golf or or bowling or water polo.

"I suspected." She inclined an eyebrow slightly at the data that flashed across the tiny screen.

"So a Vulcan killed him."

"That appears to be the most likely explanation." For a moment, she was quiet. "The time of death presents an alibi for the crew of the *Ti'Mur* but not for any unregistered Vulcans on Vigrid station."

"Unregistered?" His distrust of her began to dwindle, followed quickly by self-recrimination.

"Vigrid Station has extremely lax security; infiltrating it on a mission of deception would hardly be difficult." She sounded as though she knew what she was talking about, and Eisler wondered briefly how many such stations she had infiltrated on 'missions of deception.' Frowning slightly, she continued to study the small viewscreen. Silent minutes crept by.

"You told Doctor Phlox that the theta radiation is helpful ..." He prompted. Deactivating the scanner, she returned it to the belt holster she wore as her eyes drifted back to the dogs playing poker.

"Theta-3 radiation in these levels on a space station is indicative of malfunctioning class II grav plating," T'Pol replied. One of her eyebrows crept up as she once more tilted her head, studying the print with open curiosity. "The docking ring is the only zone on this station that still utilizes class II plating." As she finished speaking, she gave him a sideways glance. "Commander, please explain the purpose of...this," she said, gesturing to the velvet print.

Oh ... God.

"It's an American thing, ma'am," he replied hesitantly, hoping that it would be enough. "You should really ask Captain Tucker." She gave him a brief appraising glance before nodding slightly.

"I look forward to his explanation," she said wryly. "I am sure it will be ... elucidating." Giving the print yet another long look – this one complete with a slightly inclined eyebrow – she turned and walked from the apartment. Without a word, he fell into step behind her.

Around them, lights began to dim ever so slightly as Vigrid Station began to enter its artificial night shift.



Night shift on Vigrid Station had already begun when the spy who was not Sovek entered the bar. Nothing about him was memorable, not his face nor his voice nor even his clothes, and that was, in and of itself, a memorable thing. He passed a cred-stick into the meaty green hands of the hulking Orion innkeeper and received a single gesture in return. The two locked eyes for the briefest of moments, one making a silent threat of dark revenge should his business be thwarted this night, and the other assuring him that the night's business would be good. They parted, each to his own devices, each to his own intrigues.

Not a word had passed between them.

Packed to the durasteel rafters with weary Boomers, visiting Tellarite cargo haulers, and other ne'er-do-wells, the bar was a raucous place, especially for so early in the artificial evening. Tucked unobtrusively in the Green Sector of Thor's Cradle, it had no name, no *official* owner, and would not turn up on even the most detailed search of station schematics. Unless one knew where it was, it could not be found.

And that was exactly as it was meant to be.

Known by most as the Orion Quarter, Green Sector was the center of all things illegal on Vigrid Station and was the most popular sector of the station for visitors and station-dwellers alike. Whether it was prostitution or drugs, information or prohibited arms, anything and everything was for sale in the Quarter; rumor even whispered of a slave market concealed

somewhere within, but few had the courage to investigate. The Administrator of Thor's Cradle refused to admit that three-quarters of the Boomer problems with the Orion Syndicate could be traced here, refused to acknowledge the goings-on in the Quarter or even its existence, and for good reason.

The kickbacks were too good.

Since the beginning of the Earth-Romulan War, though, an unofficial truce had existed between the ECA and the Syndicate, an undeclared cease-fire that would end the moment the war did. Both sides in this truce understood this; but, until that time, business was good between the two, and Boomers unconcerned with ECA and Terran regulations expended hard-earned capital to equip their cargo ships with weapons and defensive suites that only the Orions could provide.

The war had been hard on those that dared to venture into this bar, and with rumors of an alliance with Starfleet looming on the horizon, those that could afford it came here to piss away their fortunes.

Or earn them, as the circumstances warranted. A tall human, broad in chest and face, wearing what appeared to have once been a Starfleet field jacket, loudly boasted of his unlikely exploits along the Romulan border, completely oblivious to the fact that the Orion whore he entertained was robbing him blind with her talented hands. Another human, this one wearing what could only be a Klingon longcoat, frowned hard at the louder man, never noticing the cutpurse at his side. For many, tonight would be a good night.

Crossing the floor without attracting notice, the spy who was not Sovek found his table and mentally smiled. It was exactly as he had requested it, situated with a wall to his back and a view of the bar floor. Dark shadows draped the table, allowing him to remain mostly unobserved as he did the observing. An exit to the corridor beyond was nearby, available for a rapid escape if it became necessary. Yes. It was perfect. He slid into the darkness and set his back to the wall, gesturing briefly for an alcoholic beverage as he readied himself for a long wait. The bartender brought the drink - an Orion beer - and, as he set it down, let his eyes drift to the left. With the slightest of nods, the spy indicated his understanding and accepted the beer, waiting until the bartender was long gone before allowing his own eyes, seemingly of their own accord, to slide to where the bartender had indicated.

A nondescript human wearing equally unremarkable clothes sat quietly in another dark booth. Like the spy himself, nothing about this human drew attention, and it was this very fact that attracted notice for those properly trained. Once identified, other small things stood out. A full mug of Andorian ale was at hand and, no matter how many times the human lifted it, it never emptied. His eyes were never still. He ignored the green-skinned whores around him with the casual indifference of a eunuch. Their eyes met across the bar and the spy who was not Sovek knew he faced his contact.

An hour passed before the contact rose from his table. With exceptional ease, he faked a

slightly drunken man and staggered toward the spy on unsteady feet, seemingly intent on the nearby restroom. Twice he nearly fell, drawing the amusement and scorn of those in the bar. Four steps away from the spy, the human did fall, spilling dozens of coins onto the floor in his "drunken" stupor and immediately causing a small riot as bar denizens – always strapped for money – scrambled to seize the loose credits.

Not all of the coins were the same, however. One bounced and rolled directly to the spy's boot, drawn by the magnetic attractors in the boot sole. In the mad dash to get the free money that clattered across the floor, no one noticed.

And that was as it should be.

His business concluded, the spy who was not Sovek rose and departed the bar, allowing the chaos of the near riot to conceal his quiet departure through the side exit. He gave no additional thought to his contact, could not find it within himself to care what the man's fate was. Pausing long enough to pull the coin free from his boot and pocket it, he quickly strode toward the nearest tram.

He spent another hour on a seemingly haphazard trip through the station itself in an attempt to shake or identify any potential pursuers. A brief stop in a public refresher gave him the privacy he required to extract the information from the modified coin, information that turned out to be remarkably cryptic instructions from his mysterious benefactors. *Sow chaos*, they had instructed him previously, and he had spent over five Standard months doing exactly that. Armed with trade routes and flight paths that he had stolen for them, Romulan assault groups had wrought havoc on the Earth Cargo Authority, showing up at the worst possible moment to inflict maximum carnage and destruction. Thousands had died by his actions.

Such thoughts ... *aroused* him.

When he had learned of the planned conference between the ECA and Starfleet, the spy had passed on the information as quickly as possible before relocating to Vigrid Station and implementing his own intrigues. The explosive in the executive conference room would have been a coup, would have caused so much chaos that the humans would not have been able to recover. It was disappointing that Archer had escaped death but, in retrospect, the spy wasn't particularly surprised that Perkins had failed: the human had demonstrated a complete lack of efficiency of late. He should have eliminated Perkins weeks ago.

Inserting the modified coin into an equally modified reader that fit into his palm, the spy quickly input his access code. A field of letters crawled across the small screen and he quirked an eyebrow in momentary surprise as he studied them: *Prepare the way*, they ordered, and he took it to mean that the Romulans were coming. Ejecting the coin, he stared at it with a grim smile that barely touched his eyes. The plan would have to be accelerated.

From the refresher, he made his way quickly to Corridor GS-A, stopping only once to dispose of the coin in a public waste receptacle that instantly reduced it to its component parts for

future Station use. He should not have found that amusing, but he did.

A rarely used section of the docking ring, GS-A was now little more than a number of short-term storage warehouses, each equipped with an outer docking port that would allow a transport craft to offload its cargo and move on with a minimum of delay. Perkins had recommended the warehouse as a base of operations, noting that Boomer smugglers used them quite often. At the time, it had seemed a logical decision.

Now, the spy wasn't so sure.

The two aliens said nothing to him as he entered Warehouse GS-A-19C, barely reacted beyond giving him a single glance, and continued their tasks in silence. He gave them an equal amount of thought as he studied their progress: another five of the explosive vests had been fashioned in his absence and the two aliens - Red and Green as he thought of them due to their differing eye pigmentation - appeared to be nearing completion on two more. They had come with strong recommendations from Perkins, and the spy had experienced no difficulty with them aside from their disgustingly barbaric eating habits. A frown touched his face then; they were another potential link between him and the unlamented human, a link he would have to sever in the very near future. Leaving them to their tasks, he crossed to another section of the warehouse, fighting the smile that threatened to blossom upon his face.

Two humans were strapped in a pair of large chairs, awaiting his Touch. Neither of them would be missed by the community at large, as they were either derelicts pulled from the lower decks or temporary workers fully expected to disappear without warning. Both were already heavily sedated, and they stared at his approach without comprehension or fear in their eyes; the drugs had become necessary to keep them from struggling, and the spy who was not Sovek had discovered it was easier to reprogram them this way. Seven others were already in place throughout the station, each awaiting the appropriate command word or sequence of events that would trigger the sleeper personality.

A grunt from one of the aliens – Green, he thought – demanded his attention, and he frowned at the alarm that flashed. He recognized the nature of the alert at once.

The warehouse was being scanned.



The scan was being blocked.

With a frown that briefly marred her expression, T'Pol readjusted the settings on the specialized scanner and directed a second scan at the target warehouse. The investigation had brought them here, to this location, and all of her instincts and training were directing her toward the nondescript building at the far end of Corridor GS-A.

"Ma'am," Eisler said softly, nodding toward GS-A-19C. "It's that one." She gave the structure in question another brief glance before directing a third scan at it. The readings remained indeterminate and T'Pol nearly frowned once more: although she agreed with his assessment, she disliked acting without incontrovertible proof, disliked 'acting on her gut' as Trip would put it.

"Elaborate," she ordered and the tactical officer gave her a sidelong look, as if to determine whether she was merely humoring him. At her blank expression, he spoke again.

"Everything about it screams 'go away,'" he replied. "It's the most rundown of the five, yet has the best view of this ..." he trailed off, studied the corridor for a moment before deciding upon the most accurate word, "street. Aside from the outer airlock it has only one entrance, which can be easily defended if necessary. The viewports are sealed up indicating a lack of use, despite the state-of-the-art comm dish on its roof." T'Pol blinked - she had not noticed the dish - but his reasoning was nearly identical to her own. Once more, she found herself revising her opinion of Lieutenant Commander Eisler.

"It is likely any occupants are aware of our presence," she mused aloud, reaching for her communicator. Eisler nodded in agreement as he drew his phase pistol and checked its charge. "T'Pol to *Endeavour*." Static was the only reply, and she fought the urge to frown yet again. "T'Pol to *Endeavour*." At her glance, the lieutenant commander drew his own communicator.

"Eisler to *Endeavour*." He flipped it shut without making a second attempt and replaced it; from his expression, T'Pol surmised he was waiting for orders. She did frown then; it was not an ideal situation.

Flicking another glance at the unassuming-looking structure, she raced through the options she had at hand even as she reflected on what she had gleaned from studying the station layout. Squat and wide, the warehouse was a standard storage facility built directly into the docking ring itself. If it had not been modified – of which there was no guarantee - it would consist of two separate chambers: the warehouse proper and the docking airlock beyond.

The probability that the mystery Vulcan was inside remained quite high, and each moment that they did not act was another moment for the rogue to slip away. Contacting *Endeavour* for reinforcements would require one or both of them to withdraw out of the range of whatever was jamming the communications, an option which T'Pol found entirely unacceptable. It would further take (she did some rapid calculations in her head) a minimum of twelve point seven minutes for a security team to arrive. In the end, there really wasn't any other choice.

"Set your weapon to stun," she told Commander Eisler as she drew her own phase pistol from its disguised holster on her belt. Without a word, he began moving toward the warehouse and she fell into step a little over two meters behind him.

They reached the warehouse entrance without incident, though no one could mistake their approach as anything but aggressive. T'Pol studied the access pad as Eisler drew something from his jacket. It was unmistakably a grenade but of a make that she did not recognize: spherical and perhaps 6 centimeters in width, it had two narrow strips of metal along its surface that she recognized as magnetic attractors. The ex-MACO armed the explosive and hurled it upwards at the comm-dish; unerringly drawn to its target, the grenade attached itself to the base of the dish and detonated with a hollow boom, shredding the comm equipment in a flash of fire. Another grenade appeared in his hand - this one a stun grenade instead of an actual anti-personnel device - as she input a code hardwired into all Vulcan stations, a code that few outside the Ministry of Security knew.

With barely a sound, the warehouse door slid open.

Eisler sent the stun grenade sliding through the entranceway before the door was fully open and, mere seconds later, it exploded with a strobe of blinding light that would ostensibly incapacitate all within ten meters. Through the door he went, his pistol out and braced; T'Pol followed a mere heartbeat later, peeling off to face the opposite direction as he.

The warehouse itself was surprisingly small - perhaps ten meters square at its largest - and was packed with dozens of large crates, many of which were covered by airtight plastic. Very little light illuminated the room and what little did exist was faint and erratic, flickering at odd moments to cast long and sinister shadows across the floor and walls. A high-pitched buzz could be heard from somewhere deeper in the room, drowning out most ambient noise. She nearly flinched at the overpowering stench that assaulted her olfactory senses as recognition came at once.

Detonex.

A whisper of movement was her only warning; but it was just enough, and she let herself flow into a defensive roll as a figure lunged out of the darkness at her. Strong hands wrapped around her wrist but her sudden collapse and her own not-inconsiderable strength caught her foe by surprise, dragging him off-balance long enough for her to send him flying into one of the crates with a defensive throw. As she quickly rolled to her feet, the sound of a struggle let her know that Eisler was engaged as well.

Light illuminated her opponent for the briefest of moments and she felt surprise wash over her: she had been expecting a Vulcan. Topping two meters in height, the alien bore a striking resemblance to a reptilian Xindi, prompting her to immediately suspect an offshoot species of some kind. A curiously familiar scent covered the reptilian but she did not pause to identify the smell as the creature sprang up from where it had fallen. With a hissing growl, it lunged at her, talon-tipped fingers curved in anticipation of rending flesh.

So she shot it.

The stun beam caught the reptilian square in the face, staggering but not dropping it. She

squeezed the trigger again, not bothering to shift her aim, and sent another stream of phased energy into it. With a half hiss, half whimper, it collapsed at her feet, still twitching. She shot it again, just to be sure.

Eisler limped toward her, blood running down the side of his face from a ragged gash. Glancing behind him, she was unsurprised to find his opponent down. What was surprising, however, was the sight of the knife hilt standing out of the reptilian's chest. She frowned; they needed prisoners, not corpses. He opened his mouth to reply to her unspoken criticism, no doubt to defend his use of lethal force.

He gave no warning.

Moving faster than a human had any right to, Commander Eisler suddenly gave her a powerful shove, knocking her to one side even as a stream of light flashed out of the darkness. It struck the tactical officer low in the stomach, hurling him backwards and into a large stack of crates. Without a sound, he collapsed under an avalanche of boxes that buried his unmoving form. Her phase pistol at the ready, T'Pol was already spinning in place.

She wasn't fast enough.

Searing light burned through her upper chest, slicing into the trapezius muscle just below her clavicle, and she cried out in pain. Involuntarily, her arm spasmed and the phase pistol clattered to the floor. Another pulse of fire slashed out and cut into her left leg, slicing into her hamstring with a caress of flame. Suddenly unable to support her weight, the leg folded, dropping her to her back with a jarring thud that sent spikes of pain up her spine. Her head struck something hard as she fell and, for a moment that seemed to last an eternity, her vision wavered. With the last gram of her inner resolve, T'Pol struggled against the pain, fought to maintain her tenuous grip on consciousness. Distantly, she was aware of Trip's sudden panic as her mate felt her distress.

She reached for the phase pistol.

A boot came down on her hand and a scream was torn from her lips as she felt bones fracture under the impact. Agony raced up her arm, burning away coherent thought. Struggling to maintain focus, she looked up at the face of the boot's owner. Terror overwhelmed her then as a familiar scent flooded her nose and a voice drifted out of her nightmares.

"How interesting." A smile touched his lips but not his eyes.

Tolaris.

ACT FOUR

He floated in a sea of pain.

A great weight pressed down upon him, crushing him onto the unyielding floor and making the very act of breathing a near impossibility. Fire burned in his oxygen-starved lungs, accompanied by a hollow ache in his abdomen that felt as though someone had hit him in the gut with a sledgehammer a half dozen times. The stench of seared fabric and burnt flesh filled his nostrils, fouling what breaths he did manage to take. With agonizing slowness, consciousness returned and Rick Eisler opened his eyes to find himself staring at the floor.

Memory came more quickly; he recalled fighting with the lizard alien, remembered seeing a shadowy figure drawing a bead on Commander T'Pol and vividly recalled knocking her out of the way. Beyond that, his recollection was hazy and indistinct. He'd been shot, that much was clear, and the reflec-mesh he wore under the modified tac-vest had saved his life once more.

Called a 'twinkle suit' by some more vocal detractors for its distinctive appearance, the mesh was made up of thousands of tiny lenses atop a flexible underlay and immediately brought to mind an obnoxiously sequined shirt. The lenses were meant to absorb and disperse the lethal power of most particle beams, while the underlay was designed to reflect the killing heat of such an attack. Against blunt trauma such as a physical blow or slugthrower, however, the twinkle suit was worse than useless as the shattered lens fragments often became embedded in flesh wounds. MACO black ops had been experimenting with the twinkle suits for several years, but the prohibitively high price tag and the difficulty in maintaining them meant mass production was unlikely.

Forcing himself to concentrate on the here and now, Rick looked up, eyes seeking out the First Officer.

A Vulcan male - presumably the one they were after - knelt atop T'Pol, pinning her to the floor with his knee and left arm. The fingers of his right hand were pressed against her face - for what purpose Rick didn't know - and she struggled unsuccessfully to free herself, fighting against his hold. Soft words were exchanged in a tongue that Eisler did not understand, but the man's expression and T'Pol's obvious fear clearly declared the attacker's intent.

Rape.

Fury washed his pain away, fueled Rick's muscles and spurred him into action. For a split second, he was sixteen again and face down in a Frankfurt street, held in place by strong arms as his blood spilled onto the pavement and his baby sister shrieked for help against the gang that abused her. *Never again*, he snarled mentally, demanding obedience from uncooperative limbs. Up he pushed, up against the boxes that anchored him to the floor, up against the crushing weight of despair and guilt and madness, and his body quivered with strain. Unbalanced by his effort, the boxes that held him down slid to one side, smashing into the floor with a loud crash. He wasn't entirely free - his legs were still pinned - but it was enough

for action. His hand darted into his torn jacket, ripping the laser from its holster and sliding the safety free in a smooth, practiced gesture. Hearing the boxes shift, the Vulcan looked up, fingers still pressing against T'Pol's face as Eisler drew the laser.

Though it was an illusion, time seemed to slow to a crawl. In what seemed to be a warped mirror of Rick's actions, the Vulcan drew his own weapon, leveling the disruptor at the tactical officer in an impossibly swift motion. Unhindered by the pain of injury or limited mobility, the Vulcan was much, much quicker and had Eisler dead to rights. The Vulcan's finger tightened on the trigger but he did not shoot.

Instead, he winced.

It was the briefest of hesitations, lasting perhaps half a second, and such a fractional tightening of the eyes that Rick wouldn't have even noticed had his gaze not been focused entirely on the Vulcan's face. The part of Eisler that wasn't running on pure instinct understood that somehow, in some way, Commander T'Pol was responsible, that in some unfathomable manner she was fighting the Vulcan herself. Giving it no further thought, Rick braced the laser with his left hand and fired.

It was an old weapon, first purchased and used by his grandfather nearly a century earlier, but excellent craftsmanship and careful maintenance had kept it in near-perfect working condition. Rick's father had christened it 'the Nailgun' due to its unusual look, and that unfortunate name had stuck; instead of the standard pistol configuration, the laser fit in the palm and was fired by a thumb stud on its top.

A pencil-thin beam of scarlet light flashed out, slicing through disruptor and bone alike with the ease of a white-hot knife through warm butter. The fingers of his right hand still welded to T'Pol's face, the Vulcan recoiled in pain. He opened his mouth ...

And T'Pol screamed.

In a blur of motion, the Vulcan ripped his hand free of her face and dove to one side, the ruined disruptor clattering to the floor. As Commander T'Pol slumped to the floor, Eisler tracked the Vulcan male with the laser, sliding its selector switch off 'pulse' mode and onto 'continuous.' Designed more for use against solid objects like doors or locks, continuous mode was generally inefficient against a living target for a number of reasons, not the least of which was its voracious power consumption. Eisler had used it only once against another sentient being, an Andorian mercenary who had been intent on taking Rick's head off with a dull knife.

The wisdom of using a continuous-beam laser inside a space station didn't bother him too much; he'd never managed to burn through more than ten centimeters of durasteel before the charge ran out, and the station's hull was significantly thicker than that. He depressed the firing stud as the Vulcan dove toward the exit; a solid stream of searing light lanced out once more and Eisler scythed it across the room like a burning whip. It sliced through nearly

everything that it crossed and briefly caressed the Vulcan's left shoulder before he vanished through the doorway. A cry of pain followed him out of the warehouse.

"*Scheisse!*" Rick growled as he struggled to free himself. It took long moments, a span that seemed to stretch on for an eternity, but he finally struggled to his feet. His head swam and he squeezed his eyes shut in a brief effort to recover his equilibrium. Staggering to the door, he triggered its release, bracing the laser for a sudden attack by the Vulcan as the hatch slid open.

The corridor was empty.

Eisler cursed again, shooting a glance back at the unmoving form of Commander T'Pol. Quickly he limped to her side, hoping that she was still alive even as he realized he had no idea how to check her vitals. He was no medic. Were her organs even in the same place as a human's? Her breathing was steady and calm but her features were scrunched up in a grimace. She clearly needed medical attention he couldn't provide.

His eyes roamed around the darkened warehouse, noting with some surprise two still forms secured to a pair of chairs. Near the chairs and concealed from the main entrance by a stack of crates, a table was covered with what appeared to be blocks of detonex. He could see two vests resting atop the table as well, both covered with strips of the volatile explosive. His eyes widening, he took another look around the warehouse; his stomach lurched as he calculated just how much explosive material was present. Suddenly, using the laser on continuous didn't seem like such a wise decision. In fact, getting clear of this building seemed like an idea whose time had come. Kneeling down, he reached out to pick up Commander T'Pol when his gaze fell upon something lying alongside the halved disruptor.

Fingers.

With a cold smile, Eisler pocketed the three digits. The mystery Vulcan may have escaped for now, but the fingers could be used to identify him. And once that was done, Rick intended to retaliate with the full might and power of Starfleet.

There would be no mercy.

A groan snapped his attention to the lizard that T'Pol had stunned, and Eisler readjusted his grip on the laser. Incredibly, the creature was beginning to stir, prompting Rick to wonder if the stun setting on the damned phase pistols even worked. He glanced at the commander again, weighing his options: she didn't appear to be getting any worse, and they needed answers. Taking three quick steps, he approached the waking lizard and gave it a strong kick to the chest.

"Wake up," he snapped. He was done playing by the rules; it was time to get intel *his* way. The lizard groaned but did not open its eyes so he kicked it again. "Wake up," he repeated a bit louder as his foot hammered into its torso. This time, the alien opened its eyes, tensing to

act but instead freezing in place at the sight of the laser pointing at it. "You have answers," Eisler said in an icy voice. "I have questions, so let's talk."

"You Starfleet!" the lizard hissed, speaking Standard through a mouth that was never meant to utter such words. It bared its teeth in what Rick took to be a smile. "You no hurt!"

"I'm a different kind of Starfleet," Eisler replied coldly. "Answer my questions and there will be no pain." He glared at the alien. "What was the Vulcan's plan? How many suicide vests are active?" The lizard's smile-like expression faded.

"No talk," it responded almost defiantly. "Want deal." Without hesitation, Eisler shifted aim and thumbed the firing stud on the laser. The scarlet beam - still set on continuous - slashed through scale and bone like a scalpel of fire. Shrieking, the lizard hugged its wounded limb to its chest, staring at him in surprised terror.

"Talk," Rick ordered, his expression perfectly blank. "Or I take off your other hand." There was no rancor in his voice, no malice or anger, just a simple statement of fact.

The lizard whimpered in pain.



The pain was barely tolerable.

His arm hung limply at his side, a slab of dead meat that resisted nearly all efforts to lift it, and Tolaris ground his teeth against the sharp spikes of fire that raced through the limb when he shifted his shoulder. The human's laser had sliced cleanly through the clavicle, instantly cauterizing the fracture but vaporizing the half-centimeter wide slice and leaving his entire arm virtually useless. If the damaged collarbone wasn't bad enough, the human's first shot had taken off his index and middle finger along with much of the thumb; the continuing pain from that felt as if he had stuck his hand in a live warp plasma energy stream and then decided to leave it there.

Moving in a half-hunch, he darted from the turbolift that had carried him from Corridor GS-A. Tolaris was running on pure instinct, acting without a plan beyond carrying himself away from that lethal laser and the cold-eyed human, and he grimly forced himself to concentrate on his situation. *Focus*, he ordered himself as he entered the nearest tram and slid into an unoccupied seat.

Throbbing in time with his pulse, a hollow ache hammered through his skull and he closed his eyes in a vain attempt to control it. T'Pol had surprised him with her mental fortitude, and he loathed surprises. When his initial telepathic assaults were repulsed, he'd been immeasurably aroused by the promised challenge and found himself looking forward to breaching her barriers, mental and physical. She'd proven more than resilient, however, and when he'd

channeled into her all of the pain that he had experienced from the first laser shot, T'Pol had done something completely unexpected.

She had retaliated.

Even now, as his damaged neurons struggled to compensate and recover, he could feel the after-effects of her telepathic assault; it hardly seemed possible that she would have been able to counterattack through the pain he'd caused her, but she had. If he let himself dwell on it, he would liken the sensation to having dozens of tiny nails driven into his cerebral cortex, resulting in massive sensory distortion. The result was not fatal - not yet, anyway - but the mental trauma some called *shad'yontau* had some immediate and potentially lethal results. Even now, his vision swam in and out of focus, a shrill ringing echoed in his ears, his sense of balance was radically off, and the smells that assaulted him could not be identified. The distortions would only increase if he didn't find an opportunity to meditate and focus himself on countering the unexpected assault.

He doubted that the humans intended to give him that time.

Capture was not an option. Apprehension would lead to interrogation and Tolaris had no delusions that he would last long under the less than gentle treatment that he would receive, especially once the Vulcans got involved.

And they *would* get involved.

The transition from dissident to traitor had been a smooth one for him. After he'd been diagnosed with advanced Pa'nar syndrome some weeks following his first interactions with the crew of *Enterprise* he'd been furious at the official indifference to finding a cure for the disease, and had fallen in with a group of like-minded individuals. Though they draped themselves in mostly honorable labels like patriot or freedom fighter or even insurgent, Tolaris had harbored no illusions that they were anything but terrorists. In the span of sixty Standard days from his introduction to them, he participated in no fewer than seven acts of mayhem against the Vulcan government, four of which resulted in deaths. In the wake of their abduction and murder of a high-ranking member of the Ministry of Security, the group found themselves suddenly promoted to 'high threat' status; Tolaris was among the few survivors of the Ministry's aggressive crackdown. On the run, he came into contact with agents of the Romulan Empire who offered him a potential cure for the debilitating disease in exchange for continued service. He'd accepted without hesitation.

Too late, he realized that the Romulans had deceived him about the cure. By the time he learned this, however, he was far too deep in the shadowy world of espionage for it to matter. Discovery of the *Kir'shara* led to a restructuring of the Vulcan government - and a cure for Pa'nar - but Tolaris had found his calling and embraced the role of spy. He no longer cared that he knew next to nothing about the Romulans, or that their motives remained enigmatic, or that he was just another tool in a game of deception that spanned light years. Ever a slave to sensation, he had discovered a new thrill, an addiction that nothing could replace.

The tram slowed to a halt and Tolaris struggled to his feet, ignoring the looks of curiosity on the faces of the five humans with whom he shared the interstation 'train.' Twice he stumbled on the short walk from the tram to the slidewalk that would carry him to Green Sector, and both times he was aware of the eyes of the humans on him. One of them took a step toward him, hand extended as if to help, but Tolaris gave the woman a glare so dark that she quickly reconsidered.

Gripping the slidewalk's moving handrail to keep himself upright, he frowned and struggled to formulate a plan through his mental pain. Clearly his links to the late and unlamented Perkins had brought T'Pol to the warehouse at GS-A-19C, so any other locations the human had helped him acquire were now suspect. Briefly, he considered the two aliens in the warehouse; at least one of them was still alive, but the knowledge that Red possessed was negligible at best. The two derelicts were equally irrelevant; Tolaris had not even Touched them yet, so they would know nothing.

A member of Station Security gave him a once-over as the slidewalk ended and Tolaris said nothing as he offered a cred-stick; the dark-skinned human accepted with a nod and let him pass without incident. Vulcan security would never be so lax and, though Tolaris exploited it without remorse, that he was able to do so filled him with disgust. Greed seemed to dominate everything these humans did, and it was yet another reason to see them scourged from the galaxy ...

The hulking Orion bartender gave him a look of surprise as Tolaris entered the bar for the second time this night, but the shock was quickly replaced by concern and caution. Without hesitation the Vulcan approached him, trying desperately to ignore the raucous noise from the bar proper.

"I require medical attention," Tolaris said softly, dropping another cred-stick on the bar, and the Orion gave it a long look. One could almost sense the wheels turning in the green-skinned humanoid's brain, and Tolaris placed another cred-stick beside the first. The Orion finally glanced up, nodding once to a female of his species; the creds vanished as if suddenly beamed away.

"D'Kesh will take you upstairs," the bartender said, then turned his attention away from the injured Vulcan, appearing uninterested in Tolaris' fate; but the Vulcan knew better.

It was fortunate that the stairs had been designed for intoxicated visitors to the second-story brothel, or Tolaris would have been unable to navigate them as the *shad'yontau* wreaked havoc on his internal sense of balance. He ignored the Orion whore's offer of assistance and silently cursed T'Pol's very existence. Vengeance would be sweet, he promised himself as he staggered into an empty bedroom and sank onto the floor.

Minutes crept by as he struggled against mental collapse, and he was vaguely aware of someone manipulating his arm. Voices drifted to him and he forced himself to focus on them,

gradually resurfacing from the partial meditative state that he'd allowed himself to slip into. Normally, he loathed the practice of meditation but there were times that he had to admit its uses. The hiss of a hypospray at his neck fully roused him and he found himself staring into the green eyes of an old Orion woman.

The bartender stood at the doorway of the small room - a cell, really - as the crone leaned back from the immobilizing strap that she had attached to Tolaris. It was wrapped around the Vulcan's body and shoulders but allowed use of the hand and lower arm. Tolaris frowned at the gauze that enclosed his left hand and slowly rotated his wrist to test the mobility. Much of his pain was dulled, even the needles in his brain, but his mental faculties remained clear; whatever pain suppressor the woman had used, it was efficient. Satisfied, he gave her a discreet nod. The ostensible medic said nothing as she silently left the room.

"Was it Starfleet?" the bartender asked as he sealed the door behind the medic, and Tolaris gave him a glance.

"I need to arrange transport off the station," the Vulcan said in response and the bartender glowered, recognizing the unspoken 'yes.' He started to speak but Tolaris continued over him. "It would be wise for you to do so as well." Locking gazes with the hulking man, he waited.

"Why?" the Orion asked after a moment of contemplation, and Tolaris inclined an eyebrow. For a heartbeat, the bartender looked ready to ask another question, but understanding dawned immediately. Better than anyone else, the Orion knew - or at least strongly suspected - whom Tolaris worked for. "I'll need some time to get a ship for you," the bartender said instead, and Tolaris gave him another expressionless look.

"It would also be helpful to have access to a comm panel," the Vulcan said softly, his face betraying nothing. It was time, Tolaris decided, to bring his sleepers into play. If nothing else, they would sow sufficient chaos to hinder Starfleet's investigation and perhaps provide him the opportunity to escape.

"Encrypted or unencrypted?" the Orion asked without pause, and Tolaris nearly smiled.



Smiling was an effort.

Having done what he could to ease Commander T'Pol's pain and make her comfortable while she slept, Doctor Phlox took a long moment to study the biobed's readouts as he tried to force his face to a more neutral expression. He was confident that she would recover quickly and, knowing her, would be on her feet as soon as the sedatives wore off regardless of his recommendation otherwise. Her neural activity was what troubled him, though; it reminded him far too much of her readings immediately following Tolaris' attack on her so many years ago.

"A Vulcan did this?" he asked as he turned to face Lieutenant Commander Eisler. The tactical officer gave him a short, abbreviated nod as he reached into the cargo pocket of his pants. Phlox felt his eyebrows climb in surprise as he realized what the human had pulled out: fingers.

"Dare I ask how you acquired these?" he wondered aloud and Eisler shrugged, wincing slightly at the motion.

"Laser," the human replied. "I thought you could use them to identify that *hurensohn*." Although he did not know the word, the doctor recognized a slur when he heard it. Taking the offered digits, he gave them a rudimentary examination as he took a step toward the med-scanner.

"With the *Ti'Mur's* assistance," Phlox said, "I can indeed." Placing the severed fingers in the scanning tray, he activated it and gave the lieutenant commander an appraising look, noting the slight hunch the human had affected.

"How long will it take?" Eisler asked, frowning at the scanner, and Phlox gave him a small smile.

"Not long, Commander." The Denobulan gestured to an empty biobed as he continued. "Remove your shirt so I can assess your injuries." For a moment, the human hesitated, shooting a brief glance at Commander T'Pol's unconscious form before finally relenting. He began to slowly remove his jacket and Phlox returned his attention to the med-scanner. The doctor was pleased to discover that the computer had already mapped out the mystery Vulcan's DNA sequence and, with an ease borne of long practice, Phlox keyed in an information request to the *Ti'Mur*, asking to cross-reference the genetic markers with the Vulcan database. The request sent, he turned back to his patient.

As he picked up his hand-portable scanner, Phlox could not help but wince at the angry splotches of purple and brown that covered Eisler's abdomen. The flexible body armor the tactical officer had worn clearly worked as intended; but the kinetic impact of the disruptor shot had still done considerable damage, leaving behind bruising so extensive that the human should have been weeping with agony. Instead, he only hissed in pain and flinched at Phlox's touch.

Eisler's torso was a veritable maze of scar tissue and Phlox paused for a moment in muted acknowledgment of the human's difficult life. Several of the scars he recognized: most were pulse weapon injuries or disruptor burns, but at least three came from archaic slugthrowers and several more from blades. He blinked in sudden surprise at a particularly gruesome ridge that climbed up much of Eisler's right arm in a familiar wound pattern: it had come from a Klingon *bat'leth*. Lieutenant Commander Eisler, it seemed, had led an ... interesting life.

The hiss of the sickbay doors opening was his first hint that Captain Tucker had finally arrived

with Ambassador Soval and Commodore Archer; Master Chief Petty Officer Mackenzie had combed the captain the moment the two commanders were transferred to Sickbay and it appeared to have taken longer than expected to recess the ongoing negotiations.

Releasing a breath that he had been holding, the Denobulan finally let himself relax: though very badly bruised, the tactical officer was not suffering from any internal bleeding or fractured bones. Phlox reached for a hypo as Commodore Archer spoke.

"What the hell happened, Commander?" Archer asked, his tone harsh but controlled. Out of the corner of his eye, Phlox noted that Captain Tucker had made a beeline to T'Pol's bed and now stood there like a statue, staring at his mate without a trace of emotion on his face.

"We were ambushed, sir," Eisler replied as Phlox injected a painkiller into his neck. Giving the doctor a grateful nod, he continued, his voice a little stronger now. "Two lizard aliens and a Vulcan." Ambassador Soval tensed at that. "Both lizards are dead," Eisler continued, "and the Vulcan was injured but escaped."

"Injured how?" the commodore asked.

"I shot him with a type II hand-laser, sir," Eisler responded as he began to pull his tactical vest back on. Phlox frowned at him in the most disapproving manner he could but the lieutenant commander ignored him as he continued to speak. "Took off three fingers and clipped his shoulder."

"I have already sent the Vulcan's DNA sequence to the *Ti'Mur* for identification," Phlox interjected, still eying Eisler.

"According to one of the lizards," the tactical officer continued, "there are between five and eight suicide bombers on the station." Archer frowned as Tucker slowly turned toward the four.

"It just volunteered this information?" Archer asked suspiciously. Eisler gave him a flat look.

"There *was* some coercion involved, sir," the tactical officer replied.

"And this reptilian," Soval asked abruptly, his eyes narrowed, "how did it die?"

"It miscalculated, sir, and saw an opportunity that was not there," Eisler said coolly. Both Archer and Soval frowned at that and the tactical officer bristled ever so slightly. "I was doing my job, Commodore."

"Your job," Captain Tucker suddenly growled, his expression dark as he stalked forward, "was to protect T'Pol." *Endeavour's* commanding officer was flushed with anger, balling his fists so tight that Phlox could see the knuckles go white.

"With all due respect, sir," Eisler responded, his expression blanker than even Soval's, "I am a soldier, not a bodyguard." His words seemed to intensify Tucker's anger and the captain's face darkened with a fury that Phlox had never seen before.

"Commander T'Pol's injuries do not appear to be life-threatening," the doctor said quickly into the moment of silence, hoping to defuse the situation. For a moment, it appeared that his words would have an effect as Captain Tucker gave the still form of his mate another look. Silence reigned for a long heartbeat.

The beep of the med-comp echoed loudly in the quiet sickbay, drawing everyone's attention as it announced the results of his information request from the *Ti'Mur*. An image appeared on the viewscreen, displaying the face of T'Pol's attacker, and Phlox felt his blood run cold.

"Tolaris," Commodore Archer whispered, his tone anguished as he paled visibly. At his side, Tucker quivered with anger, his eyes narrowed and his face hot with emotion. Soval did not appear to recognize the Vulcan, but their reaction to the image was unmistakable.

"I want Reynolds up here now," Captain Tucker snapped and Eisler went rigid. Even Phlox recognized the captain's insinuation that his senior tactical officer wasn't good enough.

"With respect, sir," Eisler said through clenched teeth, for a moment not appearing to be completely in control of himself. His guttural accent, usually so faint, was thick in his voice. "I am the senior tactical officer. You want this piece of *scheiss* brought in, then let me do my damned job!"

"Why?" the captain asked with a snarl. "You haven't exactly inspired me with confidence so far!" Eisler tensed, taking a half step forward as if he meant to confront his superior officer, even as Commodore Archer looked at his old friend askance, eyes wide with shock that Tucker would lay into the lieutenant commander with such abandon. Ambassador Soval's eyes quickly darted between T'Pol and Tucker before widening slightly as something occurred to him. It took Phlox a heartbeat longer: the mating bond was fueling Tucker's wrath.

"Ambassador," Phlox said quickly before either man could say or do anything that one or both would regret. "I would appreciate any suggestions you might have in accelerating Commander T'Pol's recovery." The Denobulan gave Soval a wide-eyed stare, hoping that the Vulcan would recognize his intent.

He did.

"Having one's mate present is often the most effective means of treatment for injured Vulcans," Soval replied smoothly. His voice was like a soothing wave of reason, prompting an immediate response that could not be missed by anyone in the medical facility.

Captain Tucker flinched.

"Commander," he said softly, the overwhelming rage appearing to evaporate in the blink of an eye. His eyes flicked to T'Pol's biobed. "I apologize for losin' my temper." Tucker clenched his hands into tight fists once more as he returned his gaze to his tactical officer. "Bring him in."

"I have full command authority?" Eisler questioned, his face once more cold and unemotional. There was something new in his eyes, however: an eagerness or lack of human compassion that abruptly reminded Phlox of a predator. It was chilling.

"You do." Tucker frowned. "Take whoever you need. Do whatever you have to." From where he stood, Commodore Archer tensed, opening his mouth to interrupt but closing it just as quickly. He cast a forlorn look at Commander T'Pol and Phlox could see guilt in his expression.

"I want him alive, Eisler." Tucker speared his tactical officer with a fiery gaze. "*Alive.*"

"Yes sir," the tactical officer said in response as he grabbed the remainder of his gear and headed toward the sickbay door. Phlox frowned at the lieutenant commander; he was in no shape to be heading out again so soon.

"Captain," the doctor said quickly, "Commander Eisler is injured." Both the captain and the tactical officer gave him a look and Phlox pressed on, hoping they would see the light of reason. "He should be resting, not leading an assault force."

"I'm fine, Doctor," Eisler insisted as he disappeared through the sickbay doors. Tucker turned his eyes back to T'Pol, barely acknowledging the tactical officer's departure, and Phlox sighed resignedly; no one ever listened to him anyway.

"How is she, Doc?" the captain asked softly as he approached T'Pol's biobed. All traces of the fury were gone as his eyes drank in her still form. For the briefest of moments, he appeared to be on the verge of emotional collapse, but Tucker blinked the moment away.

"She is currently sedated." Phlox offered the captain a smile that he did not feel. "Commander T'Pol was shot twice by a disruptor; one of the blasts did damage to her biceps femoris muscle ..." At the look of incomprehension on the faces of the humans, the doctor quickly amended his explanation. "... ah, the left hamstring but I have already created a muscle graft and cleaned up the damaged tissue. The second shot was considerably worse." He paused, his smile fading quickly. It was fortunate that the weapon had been set to narrow beam as a normal disruptor shot dispersal would have likely been fatal. "The beam punctured the pectoral muscle and the right lung but fortunately missed the major blood vessels and did not penetrate through the chest. I've already reinflated her lung and begun the muscle regeneration process; she should be up and around in forty-eight hours or so." Mobility would be hampered and there would be considerable pain, but Phlox suspected that T'Pol would not let that slow her down; he could already imagine her displeasure at the additional physical therapy that would be required for full recovery. "Three bones in her left hand were

fractured and ..." He paused, not looking forward to his next words. "And I have detected neural activity comparable to an aborted mind meld."

The reactions from the three could not have been any more different: Commodore Archer hung his head in shame, no doubt blaming himself for not dealing with Tolaris more harshly the first time, while Captain Tucker winced with empathic pain, reaching out with his hand to caress his mate's cheek. Ambassador Soval ...

Ambassador Soval got angry.

Phlox had never seen Soval lose control, had never thought it was even possible despite having seen T'Pol in fits of artificially induced rage, but the Vulcan now turned hot eyes to the image of Tolaris on the viewscreen. Visibly, the ambassador fought for control as he glared at the features of the younger Vulcan, his own expression darkening to something ... bleak. Eisler had looked dangerous when he stalked out of the medical bay but Soval ... Soval looked positively primal. For just a moment, he appeared ready to storm from the medical facility himself, to join the commander in the hunt for the rogue Vulcan, to tear the offender limb from limb.

The moment passed.

"Oh, darlin'," Tucker whispered softly, his anguished words not meant for anyone but his mate, as he stroked her face with two fingers - the index and middle fingers of his right hand - and the gesture seemed to affect Commodore Archer like a physical blow. Phlox could not recall ever seeing him so disconsolate, so broken.

"You said aborted mind meld," Soval pointed out, his control once more in place. "Are you sure the apostate did not touch her *katra*?"

"No," Phlox replied sadly. "I'm not." Archer seemed to wilt even further and Phlox gave him another appraising look. He really didn't look very good at all.

"Soval." Tucker's voice was calm and collected, completely at odds with the tortured expression on his face. "Can you ... find out? Find out how we can help her?"

"If that is your wish," Soval replied softly, his eyes gentle. The captain gave a small nod and moved slightly to one side. Without a word, the Vulcan took his place. "A complete meld is ill advised," he informed Tucker. "I will merely ... Touch her to ascertain her condition." He paused for a moment. "She should recognize me and I will convey your concern." Again, Tucker nodded and Soval reached out, touching the unconscious Vulcan's face with his long fingers. He murmured something in his native tongue, allowed his eyes to slide shut, and, for a long moment, was silent.

"Her *katra* is unharmed," Soval announced as he opened his eyes and pulled his fingers away from her. Phlox felt relief wash over him, relief he saw reflected in Commodore Archer's face.

The ambassador continued. "The attacker was injured before he could complete the forced meld upon her." The ambassador frowned for a moment. "Her mind was stressed by the wound he received. He transferred his pain to her." Incredibly, Soval reached out, dropping his hand on Tucker's shoulder. "Your mate will fully recover, Captain." Tucker slumped in sudden relief, as if a great weight had been lifted from him. "You should meditate," Soval suggested abruptly as he pulled his hand back. "I will join you." The captain gave him an incredulous look.

"Meditate?" Tucker asked, anger tightening his features. "All I wanna do is rip that bastard's arm off and beat him to death with it." The captain began to stroke T'Pol's arm and Phlox suspected it was an entirely unconscious action. "What do *you* do when you're that pissed?"

"I meditate," the ambassador replied calmly, and the two locked gazes.

"It's a good idea, Trip," Commodore Archer said softly, his voice tight with barely restrained anger and sadness and pain. "There's nothing for us to do but wait," he continued. "And we could all use a little rest."

"Indeed," Phlox agreed, smiling slightly. "Commander T'Pol will not regain consciousness for several hours." He pinned Archer with a firm look. "And I want you on that," the doctor said, pointing to an empty biobed.

His mouth creased in a frown, the commodore opened his mouth to respond, no doubt to argue that he was fine, but Phlox crossed his arms and gave Archer his most unyielding gaze. It was an expression the doctor had perfected with his children, one that brooked no dissent, and worked equally well on recalcitrant patients. As Ambassador Soval and Captain Tucker settled into chairs alongside T'Pol's bedside, obviously preparing for mediation, the commodore sighed and relented. Phlox smiled tightly as Archer leaned back onto the bed, and once more silence filled the sickbay, broken only by the muted beeps of med-consoles. As the doctor had hoped, the silence worked its magic on the still recovering commodore.

He was asleep in minutes.



He'd barely gotten to sleep with the door chime sounded.

Scott Reynolds opened his eyes, the last vestiges of the dream already fading from memory. It had been a good dream too, one involving Cole wearing nothing but a smile and those sexy black stiletto boots she wore on ... special occasions. Pizza had been involved somehow - real pizza, not that crap the Chef *called* pizza - and there had been frictionless bedsheets. He wished that he could remember the particulars; it was a damned sight better than most of the dreams he had.

The door chimer buzzed again, incessant and more than a little annoying. Reynolds shot the door a pissy look as he rolled into a sitting position on the narrow slab of plastic Starfleet called a bed. Across from the bunk, the semi-holographic wall hanging that he'd bought on Risa flickered into an endless starfield, suddenly making it appear as if the entire room were suspended in the hard vacuum of space and not buried somewhere on E Deck. Even before she had rotated back Earthside to begin pre-Med courses, Amanda had refused to stay overnight; though she'd never admit it, Scott knew that waking up to nothing but a starfield had freaked her out. She had liked it at ... other times though.

Not for the first time, he reflected that the woman was absolutely insane.

Again the buzzer sounded and Reynolds contemplated throwing a boot at the door. He glanced at the chronometer: 0036 Local. *Sonuvabitch*, he thought to himself, *is it too much to ask for some sleep?* Trying to rub the grit from his eyes, he glanced around the clutter that dominated his quarters without noticing much of it. A rack of hardback books covered the port side wall; nearly all were history texts, but a couple of the newer ones were treatises on tactics. Dirty uniforms were piled in a corner, awaiting laundry day, and his personal pulse rifle hung next to the door along with the rest of his combat gear. The rifle's presence always made him grin; according to Starfleet regs, it was supposed to be stored in the Armory along with rest of the weapons aboard.

That regulation had been tossed out once Commander T'Pol had assumed the position of First Officer aboard *Endeavour*.

One of the Vulcan's first actions was to implement new security policies originally drafted by Lieutenant Commander Reed prior to his death. These policies, now unofficially referred to as the Reed Protocols, required security personnel to be billeted throughout the ship, hence his own quarters here on E deck instead of D Deck where he would normally be. All security personnel were further required to have immediate access to firearms in the event they had to repel unexpected boarders, which explained the presence of the rifle in his quarters. The only lingering concern regarding the Protocols involved unsecured weapons and sloppy security crewmen, but Scott had aggressively combated that by severely punishing anyone who left a weapon unmonitored.

Clambering to his feet, he muttered a curse at whoever was at the door as they buzzed it a fourth time. He smacked his foot against a discarded boot halfway to the door and barely kept himself from falling on his ass in the ensuing near-stumble. Fatigue still clung to him as he staggered the final half-meter to the door; in the fraction of a second after he hit the 'Open' button but before the door moved aside, two things occurred to him.

First, his sleep-starved brain reminded him that he hadn't even tried to find out who it was at the door; for all he knew, it could be the captain dropping by to shoot the shit or possibly Dan Hsiao looking for a stinking card game at oh-dark-thirty. Second, and quite possibly more important, he realized that he was stark naked.

The door slid open.

"Did I catch you a bad time?" Lieutenant Commander Eisler asked coolly after a shocked moment passed. Scott rubbed his eyes, trying hard to think of a reason not to punch the senior officer.

"It's nearly one in the morning, sir," he snapped in response, crossing his arms in defiance to his unclothed condition. "I *was* asleep." Reynolds frowned as he tried to identify a familiar smell that seemed to hang over the TAC. "Is there something I can do for you, Commander?" Eisler's face hardened further ... if that was possible.

"I want your team on a combat footing in thirty minutes." He turned away.

"What squad, sir?" Scott asked.

"All of them," came the cryptic response as Eisler stalked toward the nearest turbolift. Reynolds shot him a frown and started to back into his quarters when he noticed Gunny Karanja lurking nearby. She gave him one of her patented smirks and he felt himself flush.

Technically she held the rank of Senior Chief Petty Officer, but Anita Karanja had been a Gunnery Sergeant in the MACOs before the integration and anyone who tried to call her anything *other* than 'Gunny' usually learned first-hand how bad a mistake that was. Standing nearly two meters in height, she was the biggest, blackest, meanest woman Reynolds had ever met; her temper was legendary among the ex-MACO contingent aboard *Endeavour*, and it was said the only thing worse than pissing her off was amusing her.

She looked pretty damned amused right now, and the cold air on his lower body reminded him why.

"Get the team squared away, Gunny," Scott said with as much authority as a naked man could muster, and retreated into his quarters before she could respond. The door to his quarters slid shut and he leaned his forehead against the cool metal. *Please, let me wake up*, he prayed silently, knowing it was futile. *Let this all have been a bad dream*. His eyes abruptly snapped open as his tired brain finally recognized the smell that had covered Eisler.

Blood.

He dressed quickly and was out of his quarters in under five minutes, the rifle slung but loaded and ready for use. Karanja was already in the Armory when he entered, her gear primed for action. She gave him another smirk as he approached.

"Roughnecks should be assembled in another five minutes, sir," she informed him and he nodded. Already several of the senior non-comms were drifting in, their faces betraying no hint of fatigue. Scott felt a flicker of surprise at how quickly they were responding to the alert as he glanced at his senior NCO.

"Any idea what's going on?" he asked Karanja, and she shook her head.

"COB said Eisler and the XO beamed aboard." She replied as Ensign Hayes entered the Armory. "Both were beaten up, XO's in the sickbay." Reynolds frowned at that – he rather liked T'Pol and hated the idea of her being injured. The memory of Captain Tucker's face at Elysium when he thought the Vulcan wouldn't survive still haunted Scott's dreams sometimes.

Lieutenant Commander Eisler breezed into the Armory minutes behind the last of the team, fully geared up and carrying a battered pulse rifle that had clearly seen a lot of use. At a glance, every member of the SecForce – the Roughnecks, as they called themselves – could tell that he seemed more comfortable in the combat armor than he ever had in the Starfleet uniform.

"Five hours ago," the lieutenant commander began without preamble, "the XO and I encountered a rogue Vulcan on the station." Eisler paused briefly as his eyes swept over the silent members of the SecForce. "He injured the commander and came damn close to killing me before escaping." Aside from the newly transferred members of Hayes' Second Squad, the Roughnecks visibly stiffened; despite being Vulcan, T'Pol was well liked for her no-bullshit policies. "Captain Tucker has authorized me to bring him in, so we're going hunting."

"Rules of engagement, sir?" Scott spoke up immediately. He didn't care for the unspoken hint that Eisler would be commanding the Roughnecks when it was Reynolds' job. The TAC gave him a brief feral smile.

"We will be utilizing ... MACO diplomacy," the lieutenant commander said in response.

"So that means set your weapons to stun," Karanja interjected and several of the senior non-comms snickered at the old joke. Eisler nodded briefly to her before continuing.

"The target is in the Orion Quarter." That caused some brief ripples of surprise. "So bio-masks are to be worn at all times." He locked eyes with Scott as he finished. "We leave in ten minutes."

"Sir, we'll need a CQ," Karanja abruptly said from Reynolds' side, her voice soft, and Scott nodded absently. Having someone stay aboard *Endeavour* and be 'charge of quarters' wasn't entirely necessary but he suspected she had an ulterior motive, one that he agreed with.

"Recommendations?" he asked, using his official 'I know what you're up to' voice, and she smirked again.

"Ensign Hayes isn't checked out with all of the gear, ell-tee." It wasn't exactly a lie. Unsaid was her concern that the green ensign wasn't yet field-tested.

"Agreed," Scott said in response. The symmetry of it all felt weird to him: Major Hayes had

looked out for him in the Expanse out of respect for Scott's dad, and now Reynolds was doing the same for the major's son. "Get everyone squared away, Gunny."

"Hoo-rah, sir." Moving with that frightening grace, Karanja turned away as Scott crooked his finger at Hayes in a clear 'come here' gesture.

"Drop your gear, Hayes," Reynolds told the ensign once the younger man responded. "You're on CQ."

"Sir," Hayes started to complain and Scott pinned him with an unyielding look.

"That's an order, Ensign." Hayes very nearly snapped to attention.

"Yes sir," he said sullenly. With a slight frown on his face, Reynolds watched him march away.

"What about the commander?" Karanja asked suddenly, her voice so close to Scott's ear that he jumped before giving her a glare. For someone her size she could move entirely too quietly, and the crooked smile on her face told him that she had sneaked up on him purposely.

"I was just about to ask him before you tried to give me a damned heart attack," he hissed as she flashed her predatory grin at him. Without another word, he approached the TAC.

"From your gear," Reynolds said without a trace of emotion on his face, "can I assume you'll be joining *my* team, sir?" Eisler gave him a look, recognizing the not-so-hidden meaning. For a moment, Scott halfway expected the senior officer to declare his intent to lead, thus interfering with the team's chain of command.

"That would be correct, Lieutenant," Eisler replied. He paused for a fractional moment before continuing. "What squad do you recommend I attach myself to?" Scott nearly sighed in relief as he recognized the olive branch being offered: there would be no pissing contest after all.

"Second squad, sir." Scott nodded to the appropriate group. "Ensign Hayes will be pulling CQ duties, so Chief Gray is senior."

"You know your team better than I do, Lieutenant," the tactical officer said as he turned toward the waiting Second Squad. Hefting his rifle, Eisler readjusted his tactical vest, then said without turning, "Let's go hunting."

ACT FIVE

He was going insane.

Perched on the edge of his bunk and wearing nothing more than a sheet, Master Chief Petty Officer Colin Mackenzie watched quietly as Ally Li searched for her uniform. Stark naked herself, she moved easily around his cabin, totally comfortable with her nudity in his presence. Although a part of him stirred at the sight, another part - a deeper part - was silently shrieking.

She'd shown up at his door just hours after they'd had an explosive argument in Engineering. Mac couldn't even remember what they were arguing about, only that it had ended with Lieutenant Commander Drahn breaking them apart before they came to actual blows. The Andorian had been furious at the two of them and, as he left Engineering, Mac just knew he'd be seeing Li later that night. When his door buzzed at twenty-three thirty, he let Ally in without a word. They hadn't said a word since.

They were too busy.

Things had made a lot more sense when they were on *Challenger*. Since coming to *Endeavour*, their ... relationship had turned into a frustrating mess, one now based more on sex than any real emotion, and it was slowly driving Mac crazy. They would bicker and argue, growing more furious at each other with every passing day until one of them would show up at the other's quarters. Hours would pass as they vented their frustrations in the most passionate way possible. Afterwards, things would be back to normal for a while; they'd be able to get along for a couple of hours and sometimes even days. In rare instances, they might even be able to act like an honest to God couple, but it wouldn't last.

It never lasted.

"Are you going to get dressed or just watch me?" Ally asked with a grin as she bent over to pick up her bra, presenting him with a glorious view of her naked ass. For an unnecessarily long moment, she stayed in that position and Mac felt his body responding.

"We need to talk, Ally," he said instead of grabbing her and throwing her onto the bed as he wanted to. His tone told her everything but then, that wasn't a surprise. How many times had they had this conversation since *Pacifica*?

"Strewth," she muttered as she straightened, "not this again." Spearing him with an annoyed look, she frowned. "Can't you just enjoy what we've got?"

"What do we have?" Mac asked as he leaned forward to rest his face in his hands. "Bloody good sex, but is that it?" He rubbed his temples as she pulled on her panties. *Damn, but that was right sexy.*

"I don't believe this," Li muttered, giving him another frustrated look. As always, her Perth accent was thick when she was frustrated. "Uncomplicated sex and you're bitching about it?" Her bra went on as she continued her mini-rant. "Next you'll be wanting a commitment or something." She pinned him with a look. "You sure you're not a sheila?"

"Don't dodge the sodding issue!" he snapped. "We can't keep doing this! What the hell are we?" His question, long avoided by them both, hung in the air.

"I ... I don't know," she finally said in response after a long moment of consideration. Her shoulders slumped as if in defeat and Mac knew exactly how she felt. Dressed only in her underwear, she dropped down beside him on the narrow bunk and they sat together in silence. "We're really bugged up, aren't we?" Ally asked softly. She leaned into him and he draped his arm over her shoulder.

"DCO to Engineering," the shipwide comm announced suddenly, breaking the moment, and Ally stirred. Without a word, Mac pulled his arm free and she stood. Their eyes met and he offered her a sardonic half-frown.

"Duty calls," he muttered, and she gave him a sad smile. Dressing quietly, she watched him as he watched her.

"Can I come by later?" Ally asked as she pulled on her duty jacket. He gave her a look, not entirely understanding what she was asking. "So we can talk," she finished and he nodded. "Just talk," she warned, and Mac gave her an indignant frown.

"You started it this time," he pointed out sharply, and she opened her mouth to respond. "Sorry," Mac muttered as he realized they were sliding right back into their old habits. Ally smirked at him as she headed to the door. For a moment, she paused there, hesitating as she gave him a long look that he couldn't hope to decipher. Finally, she nodded and disappeared through the doorway.

He dozed for a couple of minutes after she left, eventually forcing himself to get up at the behest of his bladder. Quickly dressing, he stepped out into the narrow corridor and made his way to the Enlisted Head. Having spent more than a little time in Ally's quarters, Mac was a bit jealous that the officer quarters had their own bathrooms. It was ironic, he mused as he walked the short way to the Head, that the enlisted personnel made up the bulk of Starfleet and did most of the actual work, yet the commissioned officers hogged the glory and the credit. On paper, the officers provided overall management and leadership in their areas of responsibility, but in reality, too many of them couldn't lead their way out of a paper bag. It fell to his NCOs, senior enlisted personnel who actually had a clue about commanding men and women, to pick up the slack.

As he entered the Head, Mac noticed two of his younger crewmen - Bernstein and al-Rishawi - horsing around with wet towels. The moment they saw him, both apprentice crewmen snapped to attention, their faces betraying their sudden anxiety at his presence. It was

understandable: as the Chief of the Boat, he had nearly absolute power over the enlisted personnel; and only the captain or the first officer dared to question his decisions.

"Knock it off," he ordered with as light a tone as he could muster.

"Aye aye, Master Chief," the two replied in unison and Mac nearly shook his head as he walked to the nearest empty stall. That was something else he was having to get accustomed to. When he had joined Starfleet nearly twelve years ago, rank was more of a courtesy than an actual job description and, aside from determining seniority among equals, had little real bearing on day-to-day activities. All that changed with the integration of the MACOs.

Seemingly overnight, Starfleet became an actual military force. Rank suddenly meant something and, by dint of being the senior-most enlisted man aboard *Endeavour*, Mac found himself holding the unexpected job of being an administrator instead of an engineering specialist. Now the only times he was on the Engineering deck were those rare instances where duty required his presence or an emergency meant that extra bodies were needed.

On the bright side, it gave him unprecedented access to Captain Tucker, which allowed Mac the opportunity to really look out for the enlisted crewmen. Tucker actually listened to Mackenzie's concerns and usually implemented requested changes; on those rare instances where he didn't, the captain generally had a good reason.

Only cold water was coming out of the communal sink and he made a mental note to flag it to Engineering later. Drying his hands under the heated blower, he studied the floor of the Head with a critical eye, noting that it was dirtier than he liked it. Mac paused for a moment as he mentally reviewed the duty roster and tried to recall what department's turn it was to clean the Head. He smiled slightly at the realization that the Roughnecks were scheduled next. Karanja would probably get a kick out of having her battle-hardened grunts clean these floors.

As he leisurely wandered back toward his quarters, it finally occurred to Mac that there was an unusual amount of activity taking place and it irked him that he didn't know why; as Chief of the Boat, it was his job to know everything that was happening aboard *Endeavour* before anyone, even the captain.

"What's going on?" he asked a passing crewman, ignoring the look of muted surprise that flashed across the engineering specialist's face.

"Everyone's just worried about the Roughneck op, Master Chief," was the reply and Mac frowned. He'd warned Karanja to have her team standing by for combat operations shortly after the captain returned, but he should have been informed once the green light was given. That Karanja hadn't felt the need to give him a heads-up could only mean that she'd heard about his argument with Ally in Engineering and had correctly assumed he would be ... busy; though the ex-MACO pretended to be nothing more than a grunt, Mac had learned she was dangerously intuitive and had probably long since figured out the nature of his contentious relationship with Li. Guilt washed over him then; his men and women could be in harm's way

even now and he'd just spent the last three hours in Ally's arms. *This is why we have to stop*, he told himself.

Within minutes, he was on the bridge, detouring only briefly to visit his quarters and finish dressing. The bridge was a hive of activity which, given the circumstances, was to be expected; what was surprising, however, was the presence of the Alpha-shift comm officer. Lieutenant Devereux was not scheduled to be duty officer for Gamma-shift, which meant that someone had roused her specifically for the operation. Once more, guilt surged through Mac; normally, he'd be the one to do that as a subtle way to remind the junior officers of his own unique power on the ship.

The viewscreen was dominated by a grunts-eye view of the target building, an image no doubt transmitted from some piece of Lieutenant Commander Eisler's specialized combat gear. As he took in the situation, Mac couldn't help but to think that, despite the fact it was on a space station, the building looked just like his favorite pub in London.

"...and twelve Orion bio-signatures on the lower level," Commander Eisler's voice was saying, his voice being broadcast to everyone on the bridge. "We can't get a clear reading on the second story; *Endeavour*, can you assist?" From her station, Devereux gave the officer at the SCI board a telling look, a clear indication to speak.

"Negative, TAC-Six," Lieutenant Ricker replied, her voice tinged with annoyance. "Our scans are being blocked."

"Then we do this the old-fashioned way," Eisler declared. "Roughnecks are a go. TAC-Six out."



"TAC-Six out."

His face creased in a frown, the lieutenant commander ended the transmission before returning his attention to the building before them. Crouching at his side, Scott felt his heart rate begin to accelerate and focused on keeping his breathing steady. Around him, the members of his team began to fidget, eager to get moving, to actually do something. Sometimes this was the hardest part of a combat operation, and Reynolds once more silently cursed Captain Tucker for talking him into the battlefield commission.

Use of the transporters had figured heavily in the assault plan. Unable to penetrate the pattern scrambler that seemed to surround the Orion bar, the Roughnecks had instead deployed into numerous adjacent buildings. The lateness of the hour helped somewhat; few of the buildings that the Roughnecks beamed into were even occupied. Unfortunately, the bar itself was filled to capacity: their best estimates placed the number at around seventy.

Turning his eyes back to the target building, Scott was momentarily amazed at how ... normal this entire section of the station looked. Despite knowing they were surrounded by durasteel, the entire corridor looked as though it could have been plucked from Anytown, USA. Many of the buildings - including the target - had a faux stone exterior, and more than a few had actual roofs; though what purpose a roof served on a space station completely eluded him. After a brief moment of reflection, he decided it must have some sort of psychological effect on the station-dwellers; Green Sector was, after all, one of the three sectors most heavily modified from the original Vulcan design.

"How many did you have to kill to get this location?" Karanja softly asked Commander Eisler, her tone light.

"Just two," Eisler responded flatly and Scott gave him a look: he didn't sound as if he was joking. At his words, Gunny Karanja's smile broadened into an actual grin; she clearly liked the new TAC officer and Scott wasn't sure if that was a good thing or not.

"Three in position," CPO Luckabaugh's voice whispered across the intrasquad frequency, advising Scott that Third Squad was in place on various rooftops. As the stealth specialists, Luck's squad was nearly always given sniper duties and this time was no different. "Two hostiles sighted," the chief petty officer continued from his place of concealment. "Both have religion." It was sniper slang for having someone lined up for a shot, and Reynolds glanced at Eisler. For a moment, the tactical officer was unmoving, his eyes continuing to study the target building. Finally, he nodded.

"Send them to their Maker," Karanja instructed Luckabaugh. A heartbeat passed in absolute silence as the snipers took their shots.

"Targets reduced," Luckabaugh relayed and Eisler began to rise from his crouch.

"Give the order, Lieutenant," the tactical officer said, hefting his rifle and glancing at the rest of Second Squad.

"This is Roughneck Six," Reynolds whispered into the comm. "Execute."

It was over nearly before it began.

Darting from their places of concealment, First and Second Squads advanced on the target building in a rapid bounding overwatch - a maneuver that allowed one squad to advance as the other covered them - even as Third Squad unleashed a sudden volley of grenades from their positions. The effect was immediate.

Smashing through the viewports that doubled as windows, the grenades exploded with either blinding flashes meant to dazzle and incapacitate or with great plumes of smoke that obscured vision and impaired breathing. Through the front entrance First Squad went, bunched up behind PO1 Mitchell who bore the transparent reflec shield; the modern descendant of the

shields used by twentieth and twenty-first century SWAT units when they breached a location, it gave him perfect field of vision and reflected nearly all energy beams. Second Squad did the same at the side entrance, with PO1 Quinn in the breaching position. Their faces concealed under protective bio-filter masks that would protect them from both the smoke and Orion pheromones, the Starfleet assault team seemed to appear out of nowhere, a faceless enemy that had no remorse. Suddenly realizing that they were under attack, the bar attendees reacted as quickly as they could.

It was nowhere quick enough.

Most of the barflies were little more than jumped-up pickpockets or con artists and fell in the opening moments of the assault, many to their own confused crossfire. All twelve of the ground-floor Orions were fairly skilled for pirates and smugglers, effective fighters against poorly armed crews of non-military transports, but they simply stood no chance against a well-trained, highly disciplined Starfleet assault team.

Especially one that was out for revenge.

Five of the twelve Orions had fallen before they were even aware that the Starfleet team had entered the building, another three went down in the chaos of their foolhardy counterattack, and three more fell during the retreat that turned into a rout. That left one.

And naturally, he was the most dangerous.

He faked an injury during the counterattack and waited until the two squads were moving to secure the upper levels before opening up. A perfectly placed shot dropped PO3 Creed - the disruptor beam burned right through his face plate and into the flesh below. Even as the big Texan was falling, the Orion was shifting fire, his disruptor spitting bolts that sent the two squads scrambling for cover. Petty Officer 2nd Class Dobell took a shot to the leg and fell; her sudden cry distracted Riley for the half heartbeat it took for the Orion to draw a bead on him. Before the petty officer hit the floor, the smuggler was looking for his fourth target.

In the sudden chaos, Reynolds could hear the pounding of footsteps on the upper floor and, out of the corner of his eye, saw Commander Eisler darting for the stairs, his modified pulse rifle at the ready. Swallowing a curse at idiot officers with no sense of personal safety, he sprinted after him, shouting for Karanja to take command of the team. Up the stairs he went, ignoring the voice in his head that was screaming at him, telling him just how bad an idea this was.

Eisler was crouched at the top of the stairwell waiting for him and, with rapid hand signals, gave him commands. Nodding his acknowledgment and thankful the man wasn't a complete idiot, Reynolds pulled a stun grenade free of his tac-vest and armed it, watching as the senior officer did the same. As one, they sent their grenades skittering down the hallway. Twin hollow thumps sounded through the building as they detonated, and Eisler moved forward almost immediately. Scott flanked him without a word.

Reeling from the effects of the stun grenades, two Orion males staggered into the hallway, disruptors in hand and, without even breaking stride, Eisler dropped them both with well-placed shots from his pulse rifle. He gestured sharply with his head - an unspoken command to cover the doorway - and Reynolds gave a sharp nod in return before taking a half-step forward, his rifle held at the ready.

He'd barely covered a meter when something exploded through the wall, hammering into him like a truck and sending him careening into the opposite wall. He bounced once, struck the floor with bone-rattling force, and spent an impossibly long moment trying to draw oxygen back into his lungs. For an equally long moment, he struggled to rise but his limbs weren't responding. His vision swam and he blinked several times in an attempt to clear the dancing spots away. Six - no, four - men were in the tiny corridor and two of them looked to be Vulcans with the same hand wrapped in gauze. The four men coalesced into two and Scott started in surprise.

His rifle no longer in hand and his bio-mask knocked free, Commander Eisler had drawn a pair of long knives and was circling the one-handed Vulcan, a soft stream of what had to be German obscenities coming from his mouth. The Vulcan already had a number of cuts - most self-inflicted from smashing through the wall to hit Scott - and his left arm was secured in an immobilizing strap that was wrapped around his chest. Eyes wild, the Vulcan made no attempt to conceal the fury on his face as he glared at Eisler, his murderous intent clear. Warily, they circled, eyes unblinking.

Incredibly fast, Commander Eisler lunged forward, his left hand knife plunging deep into the Vulcan's stomach. With a roar of mingled pain and rage, the Vulcan reacted instantly, backhanding the TAC officer with a mighty blow that sent him tumbling back into the far wall some three meters away. From where he lay, Scott could feel the impact travel through the wall as Eisler struck it. With barely a sound, the senior tactical officer crumpled into an unmoving heap.

Gasping with pain, the Vulcan pulled the knife from his stomach, wincing at the sudden gush of blood that poured forth. Cradling the gut wound for a moment, he gave Eisler's still form a dark and terrible look before taking a step forward, the knife held firmly in his uninjured fist. *He's going to kill the commander*, Scott realized and cast around for a weapon, finally forcing his unwilling arms to respond. His hand closed around the grip of a rifle and he drew it to him, immediately realizing that it wasn't his. The weight was wrong - it was too damned heavy - and the grip felt odd for some reason. A quick glance down identified it as Eisler's, and Scott mentally shrugged; he'd wanted to shoot it anyway.

"Hey," he said with a grimace. The Vulcan's head snapped around, eyes narrowing at the sight of Reynolds propped up against the wall pointing an unwavering rifle at him. A dozen emotions flickered across the Vulcan's face, none of them pleasant, and Scott smiled through the grimace. "Drop the knife," he ordered in flawless Vulcan. The bar below had grown silent and Reynolds knew it was only a matter of time before reinforcements arrived. Another flash

of emotion crossed the Vulcan's face and he gave the knife a brief but telling glance. "Drop the knife," Scott repeated, rotating the rifle's selector switch to full auto with his thumb. The click echoed loudly in corridor. "Or I drop you." The Vulcan smiled then, a cold and bleak expression that held no trace of cooperation, and tensed to move.

Scott squeezed the trigger.

At this range, even the stun bolts could be lethal and, like the rubber bullets used in centuries past, the pulses of phased particles struck with bruising force. As the wounded Vulcan was bringing the knife up to throw it, Eisler's modified EM-41 was spitting out a stream of excited plasma bolts that tore into the Vulcan and sent him reeling backwards. Three pulses slammed into his abdomen, one dangerously close to the knife wound that already seeped blood, as the fourth and fifth shots struck him in the upper chest. Spinning around under the force of the shots, the Vulcan slammed into the wall and collapsed, the knife falling from his limp fingers. The weapon still trained on the unmoving Vulcan, Scott waited, halfway expecting him to get up again.

He didn't.

"Seven, Six," Reynolds spoke into his intra-squad comm; the gunny's official designation was Roughneck Seven. "Report." Karanja's voice came back instantly and not over the comm.

"Area secure, sir," she replied as she appeared at the top of stairs. "We lost Creed." She frowned at that. "Dobell, Riley and Gray were hit but nothing too serious." Glancing at Eisler's still form, she spoke again, this time shouting over her shoulder for the team medic. "Doc! Get your ass up here!" Scott lowered the rifle, confident that she could cover the Vulcan, and adjusted his throat mike.

"Roughneck Six to *Endeavour*," he spoke into it and the response was almost instantaneous.

"*Endeavour*," came Lieutenant Devereux's voice.

"Tango secure. Requires immediate medical attention." He paused for the briefest of moments. "TAC-Six down, one KIA, three-" A sharp twinge in his chest warned him of probable fractured ribs. "Four wounded."

"Stand by, Roughneck Six," Devereux responded. Scott let out a deep breath and waited.



Waiting was not his strong suit.

His impatience concealed behind a practiced mask of calm, Soval schooled himself to stillness as he silently observed T'Pol gradually regain consciousness. He had roused himself from

meditation the moment his sharp hearing detected the change in Captain Tucker's breathing patterns, recognizing at once that the human sensed his bonded mate about to wake. Rising to his feet, Soval took several steps away from T'Pol's biobed, coming to a halt beside the now alert Commodore Archer; knowing that the commander would be at least momentarily disoriented, Soval did not wish a Vulcan male to be the first face she saw.

He wasn't.

T'Pol opened her eyes slowly, still groggy from the sedative that Phlox had given her earlier, and almost immediately looked to the captain. Tucker let out a relieved breath as he leaned forward to within centimeters of his mate's face.

"You had me worried," the captain said softly in oddly accented Vulcan. He offered his left hand, fingers extended, and T'Pol reciprocated without thought or hesitation. As they touched, Soval thought that he could see the barest hint of a smile on her face.

"That was not my intention," she replied before pausing and continuing in English, "darlin'." The endearment was spoken in clear imitation of the captain and Tucker's sudden grin lit up his face. Glancing away from the intimate moment, Soval found himself fighting an inappropriate smile.

"You know," Commodore Archer whispered as he slid off of his bed, "if you would have told me they'd end up like this based on their first meeting, I'd have said you were crazy."

"They were antagonistic?" Soval asked, already suspecting the answer. He recalled T'Pol's first report on the command staff of the NX-01: she had singled Tucker out as an example of nearly everything wrong with humanity, citing only his sense of loyalty as a positive feature. Soval realized that he should have suspected her interest in the human even then.

"Oh yeah," Archer replied, chuckling at the memory. "Trip offered her his hand and she turned her back on him." The commodore gave another shake of his head. "For a while," he confessed to Soval, "I wasn't exactly sure what they really thought about each other." Doctor Phlox chuckled softly from where he stood as Archer continued with a smile. "Meeting their son kind of cleared it up for me."

"I would imagine so," Soval remarked dryly. He had analyzed nearly all of the classified reports from *Enterprise's* time in the Expanse, and their encounter with the future NX-01 had been fascinating to read. Though he still found the concept of time travel difficult to fathom, the evidence was far too conclusive to dismiss. A stray thought occurred to him: he would very much have liked to have met the half-Vulcan, half-human captain.

"Do you remember T'Pol's expression when you told us that Trip was Lorian's father?" Archer asked Phlox with a smile; the Denobulan returned it with one of his own.

"Indeed I do," the doctor replied. "She appeared..."

"Freaked out?" Archer suggested. He and the doctor chuckled.

"That is hardly an accurate assessment, Commodore," T'Pol commented abruptly as she sat up on the biobed. "I was merely ... unprepared for the revelation." Soval inclined his head slightly to her in greeting, noting that she and the captain once more appeared as nothing more than fellow officers.

"You had us worried there, Commander," Archer said, unknowingly repeating the captain's earlier words. She exchanged a brief amused glance with Tucker before replying.

"That was not my intention, Commodore," T'Pol responded as her mate smirked. Once more, she looked into Tucker's eyes and Soval could feel the force of their bond.

"Trip's got people hunting for Tolaris," Commodore Archer said quietly, his tone mirroring the guilt in his eyes.

"I know," she replied simply. For a moment, the commodore looked confused, going so far as to open his mouth to question exactly when Tucker had filled her in, but understanding flickered suddenly in his eyes. Phlox, who had unobtrusively approached the bed to monitor its readouts, cleared his throat.

"I will release you to quarters," the doctor said with a slight smile, "providing you agree to rest." The Denobulan's eyes shifted to Tucker for a heartbeat. "*Just* rest," he insisted. As the captain flushed with embarrassment, Commodore Archer snickered and Soval glanced away to hide his own amusement. Tucker opened his mouth, no doubt to defend himself, when the intraship comm suddenly sounded.

"COB to Sickbay; prepare for incoming wounded."

And just like that, the atmosphere of levity was broken.

Within minutes, a squad of soldiers entered, bearing three stretchers. Soval recognized Lieutenant Commander Eisler upon one of the litters and the Vulcan Tolaris on a second, but the third defied identification. Phlox gave the unidentified human less than a cursory look, easily recognizing a lost cause, before quickly directing the soldiers to place Eisler and Tolaris on separate biobeds. He exchanged rapid words with one of the soldiers - a medic, Soval presumed - before turning his attention to the two patients.

Glancing briefly at T'Pol, the ambassador was momentarily startled to see that she had taken Captain Tucker's hand and clung to it as if it were a lifeline. Though her face betrayed no hint to her emotional state, her eyes were riveted on the face of Tolaris and Soval felt emotion stirring deep within him. With an effort, he let the anger flow over and through him, let his inner balance reassert itself.

It proved to be considerably more difficult than he anticipated.

The human medic dropped his gear and, pausing only long enough to run his hands through the sterilizing field, slid into the role of nurse with an ease that impressed Soval. Minutes passed in near silence, broken only by the occasional grunt or sigh from the Denobulan as he worked.

Finally, Phlox stepped back from the unconscious Vulcan, a frown on his expressive face. He gave the medic a nod of dismissal as Commodore Archer spoke.

"Well?" the commodore asked, and the doctor sighed.

"He's dying," the Denobulan said simply, and Tucker gave him a look of frustration.

"You're a miracle worker, Phlox," Captain Tucker replied sharply. "Can't you do anything?" The doctor's face was grim.

"None of his injuries are life threatening," Phlox explained as he brought up different readouts on the overhead display. "Painful, yes, but not terminal." Pointing to a new display of characters, he continued. "However, he received an injection of pain suppressors approximately six hours ago and this ... eh ... pain relief was contaminated with an aggressive strain of the Mu'barin plague."

"So," Archer said with surprise, "whoever treated him wanted him to die?"

"It would appear so, Commodore," the doctor said glumly.

"We need to know if he was working for the Romulans," Tucker pointed out. "Can you wake him up?" Phlox shook his head.

"Captain," he said with another frown, "his entire body is systematically shutting down. I couldn't wake him up if I tried."

From where he stood, Soval could see the effect of the doctor's words upon the three Starfleet officers. Archer and Tucker both shot nearly identical glares at the still form of the apostate, their eyes betraying the raw hatred they held for the man, even as T'Pol visibly relaxed. She had yet to release her mate's hand, though, and that was telling to a fellow Vulcan. Anger pulsed within Soval but he pushed it down.

"Captain," Soval said softly, his voice carrying across the room, "there is another way." Tucker glanced at him, understanding flickering quickly across his face.

"You sure?" he asked and Soval gave him a flat look. Had the situation been any less dire, the ambassador was sure that the captain would have smiled. Instead, he nodded and gave a discreet hand gesture to Commodore Archer, an unspoken "suggestion" to move out of the

way, as Phlox drew the privacy curtain forward.

Without a word, Soval approached the unconscious Vulcan and placed his fingertips to the appropriate contact points. He took a steadying breath before whispering the ritualistic words that would allow him to access the wounded Vulcan's inner thoughts.

"My mind to your mind," Soval whispered, and felt the expected sensation of motion without movement. "My thoughts to your thoughts." It was as if he were falling from an impossible height, or flying through an endless void at an inconceivably vast speed. "Our thoughts are joining." Faster, his fall accelerated and he could sense the younger Vulcan's *katra* nearing. "Our thoughts are one," Soval finished and opened his mind's eye.

To his surprise, Soval faced the Fire Plains ... or rather, a memory of them. He breathed in the smell of home, felt the agreeable heat of the sun upon his skin, heard the distant sounds of life. Blinking away the moment, he returned his focus to the purpose of the meld.

"You are Tolaris." He identified the ghostly half-image of the younger Vulcan as it took shape in his mind's eye.

"And you are Soval," the apostate replied. "I know what you seek." And, for a fraction of a second, Tolaris' image twisted into something hideous, a bleak reflection of the corruption that tainted his *katra*.

"Will you surrender the information willingly?" Soval asked grimly, already aware of the answer. He was not disappointed.

"I will not!" Tolaris snarled and Soval almost - *almost* - smiled. The primal Vulcan in him exulted in that moment: a measure of justice and revenge would be meted out this day.

"Then you leave me no choice," Soval declared and, for the first time in his adult life, willingly let his control slip.

His fury at this Vulcan swelled within him, a raging torrent of winter that tried to sweep away logic, and Soval unleashed it all. It smashed into Tolaris' mental shields like a blizzard of ice, slicing through them as if they were little more than wet tissue paper. As his wrath swelled, Soval felt the dying Vulcan convulse on the biobed, heard Phlox's startled exclamation at the precipitous dive the wounded Vulcan's vitals abruptly took, but remained intent on his goal.

And yet, despite his pain, despite knowing that he was already dead, Tolaris rallied himself and erected telepathic defenses. Focusing his talents, the younger Vulcan became a sizzling inferno hotter than a sun's core and hurled his formidable strength at Soval in a last ditch attempt to keep his secrets. Fire met ice and was swept aside.

Soval demanded.

And Tolaris obeyed.

In seconds, Soval had found what he sought and, with great difficulty, forced his anger down. It was still there - a sphere of absolute zero that churned deep within his stomach - but his ruthless iron will contained it, keeping it suppressed. For less than a heartbeat, he flashed through Tolaris' memories, witnessing violations both mental and physical. T'Pol had not been the first. The fury pushed at his control, and urged to be let loose upon this ... creature, but Soval held it in check, maintaining his control. A cherished image swam up from Tolaris' mind then, an image from years past of a female struggling against a forced meld.

T'Pol.

Soval's control faltered. Wrath exploded from him, and, in the moment before he could reassert control, raw emotion dictated his actions. The blizzard of ice slashed through everything that made Tolaris what he was, searing away identity and personality and *katra*.

Tolaris screamed.

He was still screaming when Soval pulled his fingers from the contact points, a wordless shriek of absolute agony and horror that echoed through the sickbay. His face creased in an angry frown, the ambassador glared at the dying Vulcan for a long moment, unaware of the ominous aspect he presented. Phlox moved into his line of sight, a hand-held scanner already buzzing. The Denobulan looked up, meeting Soval's eyes.

"Sedate him if you wish," the ambassador stated, his mask of Vulcan indifference firmly back in place. "He will not regain coherence before death." The momentary loss of control was gone, and Soval realized that he was unconcerned at his lapse. He looked up, locking gazes with Tucker.

"Did you get it?" the captain asked softly, his fingers yet interlaced with Commander T'Pol's. Tucker did not even give the screaming Tolaris a second look.

"I did." Soval drew a deep, cleansing breath as Phlox administered a hypospray to the dying Vulcan; at once, the screaming ceased. "He was, as you suspected, working for the Romulans." Tucker exchanged a grim look with Commodore Archer as Soval continued. "And there is more. They are coming."

"When?" Archer asked and already, Soval could see the three Starfleet officers planning strategies. As the ambassador opened his mouth to reply, the lights in sickbay abruptly flickered and an alarm began to sound.

"Tactical alert!" the intraship comm blared. "Senior officers to the bridge!"

"Guess that answers that," Tucker muttered as he extracted his hand from T'Pol's grasp. He narrowed his eyes at her. "Don't even think about it," he ordered and, in response, she raised

an eyebrow but said nothing. Without another word to her or Soval, Tucker turned toward the door, Commodore Archer falling into step beside him. "Professor," the captain said to one of the soldiers as he passed through the door, "you're with me."

"Is it always like this among humans?" Soval asked softly, noting the flash of amusement in T'Pol's eyes as the three officers vanished through the doorway.

"Usually," she replied. The ambassador didn't move, but one eyebrow raised in consternation as he commented.

"Fascinating."

The End of **STAR TREK: *Endeavour*: "Vigrid"**
The story will be concluded in **STAR TREK: *Endeavour*: "Ragnarök."**