

# STAR TREK: *Endeavour: "Medea"*

by Rigil Kent

**Genre:** Action/Adventure, Drama

**Rated:** PG-13 ... harsh language, action, and adult situations.

**Summary:** Sequel to *Endeavour: Grendel*. The search for the traitor in Starfleet Command leads Admiral Archer to a chilling discovery...

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

**Author's Note:** The Teaser very **consciously** emulates the style of the "teaser" to Dan Abnett's *Xenos* novel. I *highly* recommend the entire *Eisenhorn* trilogy to anyone who likes good, solid sci-fi.

I'd be remiss if I failed to thank **Kevin Thomas Riley** for giving me astounding assistance throughout the creative process.

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

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

## DRAMATIS PERSONAE – UES ENDEAVOUR (NC-06)

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

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

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

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

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

Operations Officer (OPS): *Marie Devereux*, Lieutenant (LT)

Ordinance Officer (ORDO): *Anthony ("Tony") Stiles* – also Roughneck 6 (OIC) – Ensign (ENS)

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

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

## STARFLEET COMMAND

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

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

# TEASER

BY ORDER OF HIS LORDSHIP  
THE PRAETOR OF THE EMPIRE

SEQUESTERED TAL'SHIAR DOSSIERS  
AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY

FILE 407:36:1M048

Please enter your access code: > XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

Validating...

Thank you, Director.

You may proceed.

## VERBAL TRANSCRIPT OF PICT-RECORDED DOCUMENT

LOCATION: TERRA  
DATE: 11 HIRFA'N 2607, 1937 LOCAL-STANDARD

### RECOVERED FROM RECORDING MODULE

[Pict-record white noise transitions to] Darkness. Confirmed ambient sounds. A flash of light [poss. weapon-fire?]. An explosion.

Pict-source shudders with explosion. Begins to move, tracking. Painting of human female, in close focus. Another flash, brighter, closer. Squeal of pain [source unknown, distinctively human]. An extremely bright flash [loss of picture].

[Image indistinct for 3 *siuren* 36 *ewa*. Some background noise.]

A human [subject (1)] in battle armor, calls out as he halts in front of the pict-source [speech unrecoverable]. Surroundings: civilian quarters. (1)'s identity unknown [face concealed by helmet]. (1) grips pulse rifle. (1) turns, speaks.

**VOICE (1):** *Move in! Alpha team, secure the upper level, Bravo team with me!*

Additional flashes of light, appear to be close plasma-weapon impacts. (1) returns fire against unseen targets. Flash from weapon-fire causes massive white out [pict-source lost].

[Image white out for 0 *siuren* 22 *ewa*; resolution slowly returns]. Three additional armored figures are now in pict-image. Pict-source pans, reveals bodies in doorway. No indication of lethal force used by armored figures.

**VOICE (1?):** *Charlie team! Move up!*

Four armored figures move out of pict-source. Flashes from additional weapons-fire obscure pict-image. [Pict-source lost].

[Image lost for 0 *siuren*, 17 *ewa*; resolution slowly returns]. Human male [subject (2)] strides past pict-source. (2) is not in battle armor, but is carrying hand pistol (phase variant, Earth standard). (2) is followed by two human females [subjects (3) and (4)], and one armored figure [subject (5)]. Poor resolution of pict-image makes identification difficult. Armored figure speaks.

**VOICE (5):** *Sir, get down!*

Four figures begin trading fire with unseen targets. Flashes from weapons-fire and energy impacts [phase-fire blinds pict-source optics].

[Various noise sources, indistinct voices, additional weapons-fire, some screaming.]

[Image returns.] All four subjects are down, writhing as if in pain. Pict-source focuses on subject (2) for 0.5 *ewa*. Subject (2) positively identified as *khre'Riov Jonathan Archer* (see attached file). Subject (3) tentatively identified as *khre'Arrain Hoshi Sato* (see attached file). Subject (4) tentatively identified as Gannet Brooks (see attached file).

**VOICE (female, unidentified):** *Is this the best you can do?*

[Pict-source begins to pan.] Indistinct shape enters focus. Humanoid, female [subject (6)]. Subject (6) positively identified as Operative Aehallh (see attached file – WARNING: Level 12 clearance required). Operative Aehallh walks toward (2). Is followed by male human [subject (7)]. Subject (7) positively identified as *Galae'Enriov Thomas Gardner* (see attached file).

**OPERATIVE AEHALLH:** *I expected more from you, Jonathan.*

Operative Aehallh approaches Archer, reaches to touch him. Pict-source makes partial capture as unidentified energy distortion emanates from Operative Aehallh. Archer convulses. Blood trickles from his nose, mouth, ears, and eyes. He screams.

**OPERATIVE AEHALLH:** *You have caused me a great deal of discomfort, Jonathan. And I am going to repay you in kind.*

Another distortion emanates from Operative Aehallh. Image lost. Sounds of screams.

[Image out. Recording ends.]

## ACT ONE

*Captain's starlog, December 23rd, 2157. Per Starfleet's instructions, we are extendin' our combat patrol of the Tau Ceti Corridor by another two weeks. It has been over two months since the last recorded sightin' of a Romulan ship in human space. Even though I know it's not the case, I can only hope that we've seen the last of 'em.*

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As the latest recording ending, Captain Charles Tucker felt a serious headache coming on.

He had been stuck in the command center for nearly six hours now, reviewing the data on the *Endeavour* strike group's most recent battle drill as he learned – the hard way – how to coordinate four ships at the same time. Under normal circumstances, this would be the job of a commodore, or an admiral, but the dearth of qualified (and competent) battlefield flag officers meant that the task instead fell to Trip. Before *Endeavour* had shipped out, Admiral Archer had jokingly referred to it as a lateral promotion to the nonsensical rank of fleet captain; there was no increase in pay to accompany the corresponding increase in duties.

Yes, this was *all* Jon's fault.

It was remarkably easy to blame the admiral for Trip's current situation. Following the unmitigated disaster that had been Acheron, the new vice chief of naval operations began reorganizing the entire fleet into faster, more maneuverable battle groups capable of surviving longer and fighting in packs. The destruction of the *Saratoga* by the Romulan bird of prey that nuked Earth had only further highlighted the vulnerability of the older *Iceland* and *Neptune*-class ships; without shield capability, the older hulls were simply unable to be effective against a dedicated warship like the birds of prey. All remaining hulls of those designs were redeployed to planetary defense and Starfleet Training, while the uglier and tougher *Daedalus*-class was moved to the forefront. Archer's decision to completely abandon the current fleet concept for smaller taskforces was met with some initial skepticism, but to Trip, it made total sense: right now, the only serious advantage Earth had against the Romulans was *speed*.

To that end, *Endeavour* had departed the Sol System nearly two months earlier with three *Daedalus*-class escorts. Trip barely knew the commanders of the *Odysseus* or the *Telemachus*, but had been inexplicably glad that *Hyperion* under Dan Hsiao was at his back. It still amazed him how quickly the *Hyperion* had been returned to service; instead of spending weeks repairing the damage to the primary hull, the drydocks simply replaced the entire spherical section, as if it were just one big spare part. A part of Trip envied the *Daedalus*-class for such interchangeability, even as a larger part of him was revolted at how it robbed the original ship of its soul.

"These numbers aren't good enough," he grumbled as he tossed his personal PADD onto the nearest flat surface. Standing ramrod straight, Lieutenant Commander Rick Eisler studied the master display with total focus and a frown on his face. He had become Trip's de facto second during these operations mostly due to his extensive knowledge of all things war-related; Rick had an instinct for tactics and strategy that Trip doubted he would ever match, and logic dictated that Tucker use the assets he had at his disposal.

His mood soured even further at that thought.

As the duties of group commander devoured more and more of his time, Trip had been forced to effectively turn over command of *Endeavour* to T'Pol. She kept him apprised of the important matters that he needed to know – he was *still* listed as the commanding officer of the NC-06, after all – but she was basically running the ship in his absence. That it reduced the time he actually saw her during the day even more was another level of annoyance that Trip didn't want to deal with.

"*Hyperion* is reacting faster than either *Odysseus* or *Telemachus*," Eisler commented, interrupting Tucker's mental rant. The tactical officer was nodding toward the data on the master display. The most recent simulation's results were far from encouraging; according to the tactical computer, fully sixty percent of the strike group's combat capability was lost during the imaginary engagement because the two ships Rick referred to hadn't responded fast enough to the instructions they received. "Which makes no sense," the tactical officer continued. "Hsiao doesn't have the command experience that either Smith or Wong have."

"But he knows how I think," Trip pointed out with a frustrated glare. "And that gives him the edge over 'em." He pressed his tongue against his cheek as he gave the problem additional thought. "Any ideas?" he asked when he realized he had no idea how to bring the two commanders up to the necessary level of skill.

"You could try yelling at them, sir," the tactical officer deadpanned, and Trip laughed out loud at the unexpected foray into humor. He didn't know how it had happened, but in the last couple of weeks, Rick had started making sarcastic comments that seemed totally out of character for him. "I'm not joking, Captain," Eisler said grimly. He gestured to the main display. "If they don't get their heads out of their asses, a lot of people are going to die."

His amusement at the lieutenant commander's comments vanished, and Trip glowered at the master display. Rick was right, he realized with an annoyed sigh, but that didn't make the coming confrontation any better. Through most of his Starfleet career, Trip had employed a more relaxed leadership style that generally eliminated the need to verbally chastise his juniors. It was primarily rooted in the work ethic that his parents had instilled in him, as well as the deep-rooted belief that good officers should lead by example.

"All right," he grouched, not looking forward to this in the slightest. "I want to see the Three Amigos within the hour," Tucker decided before hesitating. He gave Rick a sidelong glance as another way of displaying his anger occurred to him. "No, cancel that," he smiled. "I want *you* to brief them, Rick." The tactical officer offered a tight smile of approval at Trip's thinking; by sending an officer that was junior to the two captains of *Odysseus* and *Telemachus*, Tucker's displeasure would be quite obvious. It was a derivation of the Good Cop/Bad Cop routine, and Rick fell into the role of Bad Cop so easily and efficiently that it was sometimes frightening. "Use my name and rank liberally," Trip continued. "But light a fire under their collective asses."

"Aye, sir," Eisler responded. From the expression on his face, he was eager to rip into a pair of senior officers, and Tucker almost felt sorry for the two commanders. Trip nearly chuckled at the mental image that flashed across his mind's eye, and he wondered if Rick knew about the reputation that the tactical officer was starting to get. 'Tucker's Doberman' was how Commander Wong had once referred to Eisler, erroneously believing that she was out of T'Pol's hearing range; Smith had taken it a step further, calling him the 'Rabid Doberman.' Knowing Rick as he did, Trip suspected that the ex-MACO would get a kick out of hearing those nicknames.

"Let me know if there are any problems," Tucker ordered, and Eisler nodded sharply as he headed toward the door. Left alone in the command center, Trip spent another few minutes studying the data on the master display. His stomach growled slightly, reminding him that he hadn't eaten since yesterday, and he began powering down the console.

He took a detour to the Stellar Dynamics lab, knowing that T'Pol would be there since she was officially off duty. The lab had become her domain, so much so that Trip had briefly considered having Hess make a new sign for the door to reflect this fact. Doing so would probably be a misappropriation of resources, though, and Tucker didn't know if T'Pol would appreciate the joke, so he ultimately decided against it.

As expected, she was so completely focused on her latest experiment that she seemed to not notice his arrival. Trip glanced at the complex formulas that were on the wall monitor, and shook his head in quiet amusement. Micro-singularities. Again.

"All work and no play makes Polly a dull girl," Trip commented as he wrapped his arms around her from behind for an illicit hug. She stiffened almost instinctively, her eyes quickly darting to the now closed door that led to the rest of the ship.

"My name is *not* Polly," she reminded him sharply before carefully extricating herself from his hold. "This is not an appropriate place, Trip."

"I know," he shrugged. "Just haven't seen much of you in the last couple of days." T'Pol seemed to relax slightly in the face of his silly grin. She opened her mouth to respond, a teasing glint in her eye, but the voice crackling from the comm panel interrupted her.

"Bridge to Commander T'Pol," the voice of Lieutenant Devereux stated. Trip frowned slightly at how off-tenor the lieutenant sounded. His mate reached for the comm panel instantly.

"This is T'Pol," she said.

"We're receiving a distress signal from a Vulcan ship," Devereux declared. Trip exchanged a glance with T'Pol, knowing at once what she was thinking. The Romulans had used this trick before in the past, but never before with a Vulcan ship.

"This is Tucker," Trip said into the comm line, not caring how his presence in the stellar dynamics lab would be spun. "Inform the rest of the strike group, and set a course. Warp five." T'Pol quirked an eyebrow slightly, and Tucker nodded at the thought they shared. "Go to condition yellow." It was a new policy handed down by Starfleet Command that dictated the threat level of the ship; condition yellow was a general alert status, whereas condition red was battle stations.

"Aye, sir," the communications officer replied before the line went dead. T'Pol was already heading toward the door, pausing briefly at the threshold when Trip sighed. The question in her eyes made him shrug.

"So much for us having a merry Christmas," he muttered.



It was turning out to be anything *but* a merry Christmas.

As this latest briefing on the state of the war dragged on into its second hour, Rear Admiral Jonathan Archer realized that he could no longer feel his backside or upper legs. He grimaced slightly as he shifted his position, hoping to restore circulation without drawing too much attention to himself. Admiral Gardner gave him a discreet glance as he moved, however, but returned his attention back to the speaking officer.

"-confirmed that it was a false sighting," Captain Assad was saying as he finished up his latest strategic overview of the war. Nothing had been stated that Jon didn't already know. Against all common sense, the Romulans had not pressed their advantage and escalated the war. Aside from the one lone attack on Earth over two months earlier, there hadn't been a single engagement between the warring forces.

"Anything else?" Gardner asked, his expression tight. The captain shook his head in response. "Intelligence," the admiral said, shifting his focus on Commander Oquaye. A native of Ghana, the commander had a reputation for being as emotionless as any Vulcan; the Ice Queen nickname that she had been given was ironic, given her homeland.

"We still haven't been able to locate Commodore Casey," Oquaye stated grimly, and Jon found himself struggling to fight against frowning. In the wake of any concrete evidence linking the missing commodore, Archer found himself growing more and more convinced that Casey was the traitor responsible for leaking Starfleet IFF codes to the Romulans. Circumstantial evidence was overwhelming, and Casey's abrupt and unexplained disappearance only made him look that much more guilty.

Not for the first time, though, Jon felt overwhelmed. By training, he was a pilot who had some diplomatic skills and an unlikely talent for bringing people together. He was *not* an investigator, and as the days crept by with no new leads into who was actually responsible for so many deaths, he found himself desperately wishing that Malcolm Reed were still alive, or T'Pol was still under Archer's direct command. Both of them knew how to conduct a criminal investigation of this magnitude without attracting notice from the wrong people.

His faith in Harris' organization was minimal at best; the entire Klingon incident of '54 had made them look like absolute fools, and nothing that Harris had done so far had assuaged Jon of his doubts. If anything, the spymaster's inability to accomplish the relatively simple task of finding a single man only intensified Archer's suspicions of incompetence, and made him regret bringing the man into the traitor hunt. Jon shuddered at the thought of that organization under the control of someone who knew what they were doing.

"We're working on the assumption that he may have been abducted by Romulan agents," the commander of Starfleet Intelligence continued, her face reflecting none of the frustration that she must be feeling at the dead ends that kept popping up.

"Do you have anything to back that up?" Gardner asked, and Oquaye shook her head.

"Not at the present, sir." The dark-skinned commander grimaced slightly. "My office is coordinating with UEIB," she said, spelling out the acronym for the United Earth Intelligence Bureau as she spoke, "But there is a lot of data to sift through, especially in the aftermath of the last attack." As Oquaye began to discuss the various efforts being made to track down the missing commodore, Jon glanced

down at his personal PADD, once more wondering if he should reveal Daniels' warning about a traitor in Starfleet Command.

On the heels of that, however, quickly came worry over what could happen if he told the wrong person. Since telling Harris in a moment of exhausted weakness, he had spoken to no one else regarding Daniels' warning, not even Trip or T'Pol or Hoshi. The possibility that he might be overheard by someone who didn't need to know was simply too great to risk, and imagining the chaos that could ensue if word got out to the general populace about a traitor kept Archer up at night. Lieutenant Reynolds clearly suspected something though, if his leading comments were any indication, but Jon had hesitated each time an opening presented itself to bring the lieutenant into the fold.

The PADD was currently filled with biographical data of every member of Starfleet Command, no matter their rank, and Archer was slowly making his way through each entry, highlighting discrepancies as he encountered them. It was slow, tedious work, especially given his already overwhelming workload as the Vice Chief of Naval Operations, but it was absolutely necessary. So far, his careful examination had already revealed a steady string of security breaches by officers who knew better, and, once the traitor was found, Jon intended to read the riot act to the sloppy men and women responsible for those breaches. With the fate of humanity at risk, now was most assuredly *not* the time to ignore basic security protocols.

"All right," Gardner said grimly, his voice interrupting Oquaye's report. The commander stopped speaking in mid-sentence, her expression displaying no indication as to whether she was offended by the CNO's abrupt interruption. "Send me a full report," the admiral ordered, before glancing in Jon's direction. Gardner said nothing, and Archer frowned at the unexpected – and unnecessary – eye contact. "I have a meeting with the president in five hours," Gardner announced, and Jon's eyes narrowed fractionally in surprise. There was no such meeting that he was aware of, and as the V-CNO, he was supposed to kept abreast of such things. "So I want full reports on my system by noon." He rose, and the rest of the officers rose with him. "Dismissed."

Jon intercepted the admiral outside the older man's office, and Gardner gave him a sidelong glance. Once again, Archer felt a shiver run up his spine at the odd expression on the CNO's face. It was difficult to define, but seemed tired and terrified and angry, all at once.

"Something you need, Jon?" the CNO asked as he entered his office. Archer followed without a word.

"I wasn't aware of a meeting with the president," he admitted, and Gardner shrugged as he began filling his briefcase with clipboards and data PADDs.

"The president's office called this morning," the admiral stated. "Just before the briefing."

"Do you need me to come along, sir?" Jon asked.

"Not this time." Gardner smiled slightly, as if amused at something. The emotion never touched his eyes. "If it was up to me," he said, "I'd let you go in my place." With a click, the admiral's briefcase locked as he closed it. "I trust you can hold down the fort while I'm gone."

"Aye, sir," Archer replied. His stomach abruptly felt like it was filled with ice. "Is there something wrong, Tom?" he asked carefully, personalizing his question like he had never done before. The admiral shook his head.

"Everything's fine," he responded as he began walking toward the door. He paused suddenly, as if he wanted to say something, but shook his head slightly again and gave Archer a sad smile. "I'm just tired," Gardner admitted. "Tired and scared that I'm the wrong man for this job." He sighed heavily, seeming to age decades as he did. "I wish Max was still alive," he said, and Jon nodded in agreement. "Hold down the fort, Jonathan," Gardner said.

And then, he was gone.

For a long moment, Archer was rooted in place as his mind raced over the unusual conversation. A frown once more crossed his face, and he stared at Gardner's back as the CNO disappeared around a corner. Maxwell Forrest and Thomas Gardner had never gotten along, and Jon knew it. The two men loathed one another, especially once Archer was given *Enterprise* over Gardner. Without pausing to think, Jon turned and quickly strode toward his own office.

"Tyner," he said as he swept into the luxurious workspace, "I need Reynolds ASAP."

"Aye, sir," the yeoman responded, and turned to press several buttons on his desk.

Dropping into his chair, Jon activated his system and quickly scanned the data that appeared on his screen. He then brought up a real-time itinerary of all Starfleet flights leaving San Francisco between now and five hours from now. As he suspected, there were none heading toward Geneva. A second data search revealed that the president was scheduled to be meeting with the Alpha Centauri governor in four hours; the meeting was expected to last at least two hours and, if the past was any indication, could go as long as six.

*Why did he lie?* Jon wondered, as he leaned back in his chair. The idea that Thomas Gardner could be the traitor seemed inconceivable. No one still serving in Starfleet had sacrificed as much as the current Chief of Naval Operations, and Archer would be hard-pressed to find another man who was as patriotic as Gardner. And yet ...

And yet ...

Some of Gardner's decisions since the war started remained questionable at best. For example, assigning *Endeavour* to the Icarus Project had never made much sense, even if removing Trip and T'Pol from the front lines did. And then, suddenly putting the NC-06 back on combat duty after a second refit in her remarkably short career?

Anger flared up as Jon realized the extent of his own stupidity. By focusing so exclusively on the missing Commodore Casey, he had blinded himself to other possible threats. If Gardner was the traitor and Casey had discovered the truth...

"You wanted to see me, sir?" Reynolds asked as he entered. Jon nodded, gesturing for the lieutenant to shut the door. As Reynolds obeyed, Archer reached into his pocket and removed the anti-eavesdropping device that Malcolm had given him years ago.

"I need you to do something for me, Scott," Archer said calmly, hiding the unease that he was feeling with effort. With a flick of his thumb, Jon activated the jammer; to any surveillance devices, it would sound like he was asking the lieutenant to pick up his drycleaning. "I need you to watch Admiral

Gardner for me."

"Sir?" Reynolds was confused, and it showed. Gambling on the younger man's loyalty, Jon spoke quickly.

"Agent Daniels warned me that there was a traitor in Starfleet Command," he revealed. The lieutenant's eyes widened slightly, then suddenly narrowed as he realized the implications of Archer's previous request.

"Consider it done, sir," Reynolds announced.

"Do this through back channels," Jon ordered. "No Security involvement. This may all be a misunderstanding."

"Understood." The lieutenant suddenly smiled grimly. "I know just the person to help, Admiral."

"I'll tell Tyner that you're going home to visit your family," Archer decided. "Oklahoma, right?" At Reynolds' nod, Jon continued. "Keep me informed, but, Scott, don't do anything stupid."

"Don't worry, sir," Reynolds smiled. It was the smile of a predator. "I'll be discreet."



Their arrival was anything but discreet.

With flash of light, *Endeavour* slowed from warp, flanked by the three *Daedalus*-class cruisers. From her station, T'Pol frowned slightly at the data already appearing on her screen; Trip's unspoken request washed into her awareness, and she activated the main display in response. Instantly, it snapped to life, revealing an old Vulcan transport, battered and nearly broken by hostile fire.

"Detecting massive damage to the engineering section," T'Pol announced off of her readings. "Hull integrity is holding, however, and I am detecting numerous life signs." She raised an eyebrow in surprise as the transport's integrated identification finally appeared. "It's the *Vahklas*," she stated.

"Hail them," Trip ordered from the command chair. A wave of poorly suppressed fury radiated from him through the bond as his subconscious immediately linked the damaged ship to both of Tolaris' attacks on her, but, apart from a subtle tightening of his lips, there was no indication of the anger on his face. He gave T'Pol an apologetic look for his momentary loss of control, and she accepted without hesitation. It was one of the elements of their relationship that she still struggled to understand; where she gave Tolaris and that incident no further thought (or at least as little thought as possible), Trip remained furious about it, as if he were responsible for the mental trauma that she had experienced.

The image on the main viewer abruptly changed to a flickering shot of the *Vahklas*' bridge. Damage appeared to be everywhere, and the transmission froze and stuttered at random moments. The Vulcan that entered the shot seemed vaguely familiar to T'Pol, but she could not immediately place him.

"This is the Vulcan transport *Vahklas* to Starfleet vessel," the Vulcan male said, wincing as he spoke; dried blood covered most of his face. "We request immediate assistance."

"It's on its way," Trip replied without hesitation, before glancing toward the tactical station. "Deploy the STAB teams," he ordered, and Lieutenant Commander Eisler nodded. "How many casualties do you have?" Tucker asked the Vulcan.

"I don't know," came the pained reply. Behind the male, a team of Starfleet personnel shimmered into existence; each was armed and encased in the combat armor that was so distinctive of the STAB teams. The Vulcan reacted to their arrival with surprise stamped upon his face, but made no effort to slow or hinder them.

"Can we dock with them?" Trip asked, causing Commander Eisler to tense for reasons that were entirely understandable. The negative response from Lieutenant Mayweather seemed to ease the tactical officer's concerns. "Then we'll use the shuttlepods," Tucker decided. "Marie, I want engineering and medical teams from all three escort ships standing by," he stated before pressing the comm button on his chair. "Tucker to Phlox. Stand by to receive Vulcan casualties."

"Acknowledged, Captain," the Denobulan's voice crackled from the communication line. Trip rose from the chair, ignoring the slight frown that T'Pol directed toward him. He could not, however, ignore Commander Eisler.

"Sir," the tactical officer said without a trace of emotion in his voice. "Until my people have secured the area, I'm going to have to insist that you remain aboard *Endeavour*." Before Trip could reply, Commander Eisler added, "Standing order number seven, sir."

If she had been human, T'Pol would have laughed at the annoyed outrage that flashed across the captain's face. Shortly after Acheron, she had convinced him to revise the standing order that barred her from boarding or landing parties without his express consent; the new order gave the senior tactical officer the authority to prevent any and all officers or crewman from leaving the ship if security was an issue. The captain could overrule him, of course, but doing so would go directly against Trip's command style.

"As soon as the situation is secure," Eisler continued, a hint of morbid amusement in his voice as he headed toward the exit, "I'll let you know." He disappeared through the doorway, and T'Pol suppressed the urge to smile at the sour look her mate shot the departing lieutenant commander.

Nearly an hour passed before the tactical officer signalled that the situation was secure to his satisfaction, and another thirty minutes had elapsed before T'Pol entered the ruined engineering deck of the *Vahklas*. Trip was already deep in conversation with another Vulcan male; this time, however, T'Pol recognized him.

"-was not expecting Orion raiders," Kov was saying as T'Pol approached. The entire left side of his face was badly bruised, and he held himself gingerly, as if it was painful to put too much pressure on his left ankle. He had also lost considerable weight since the last time T'Pol had seen him. "*Vahklas* is not a warship," the Vulcan continued, his eyes narrowing slightly at T'Pol's presence.

"She put up a helluva fight, though," Trip commented as he glanced in the direction of the silent warp core. Five of *Endeavour's* engineers were circling it, scanners buzzing. "Have you seen the doctor?" he abruptly asked, crossing his arms and adopting the stern expression that T'Pol thought of as his 'captain's face.'

"Once my crew have been treated," Kov replied with the barest hint of a grimace, "I will do so."

"Captain?" Lieutenant Commander Hess addressed Trip from where she stood in front of the warp core, and Trip turned in that direction.

"Excuse me," he said to Kov as he strode toward *Endeavour's* chief engineer.

"It is agreeable to see you again, Commander," Kov stated, automatically slipping into their native tongue. "You appear to be in far better shape than the last time I saw you." T'Pol quirked an eyebrow at the comment.

"Is Tavin no longer *Vahklas'* commander?" she asked, opting to focus on the immediate circumstances, not the past. She had no desire to recall the moment they had last interacted; those memories were still too painful.

"No." Kov's expression darkened slightly, but he gave little other indication of emotion. "The apostate Tolaris murdered him when he made his escape from *Vahklas*." Surprise must have shown on her face, as Kov continued. "Tavin had him incarcerated after Captain Archer informed us of his assault on you. Unfortunately, we underestimated Tolaris. He very nearly caused a core breach to conceal his escape and murder of the commander." He was silent for a long moment. "I regret that your first encounter with the *Vahklas* led to such trauma."

"It is in the past," T'Pol pointed out. She suppressed all memories of their previous meeting under a layer of rigid control. "And Tolaris is dead."

"That is unfortunate," Kov stated, causing her to give him a sharp look. "I had hoped that he would be punished for his crimes."

"He was," she replied softly. The memory of Tolaris' screams as Soval melded with him was not something she wished to dwell upon.

Once more, Kov studied her with narrowed eyes, prompting T'Pol to shift fractionally under his gaze. There was something in the male's eyes that caused her mild discomfort, a wildness that only occurred at certain specific intervals.

"You are returning home?" T'Pol queried, and Kov looked away, exhaling sharply as he did.

"It has become ... necessary," he replied softly. "We have been charting the Delphic Expanse since the dissolution of the thermobaric clouds," he continued. At her look, he added, "Discovery of the *Kir'shara* allowed most of us to be reintegrated into society, and the Science Directorate offered us a commission." Once more, he glanced at her, frowning slightly as he did. "You are bonded," Kov said abruptly, half-stating, half-questioning. It was an entirely understandable question; if he was unable to make it home, Kov would be required to seek alternate means to slake the septennial urge that affected all males of their species. It was only logical for him to confirm that she was unavailable to assist if circumstances demanded it.

"I am," T'Pol said. Almost instinctively, her eyes sought out Trip, and he glanced in her direction as if she had called his name. Kov raised an eyebrow at the exchange.

"Fascinating," he commented wryly, "but not entirely unexpected. Trip was quite ... interested in Vulcan sexual practices when we first met." T'Pol could not help but to experience a flicker of surprise at the revelation; she had been unaware of any such discussion, and silently decided to speak of the matter with her mate when the opportunity presented itself.

"Hess thinks she can get your core operational again," Trip announced as he rejoined them. He was frowning and studying Kov was a hint of suspicion in his eyes. "She also told me that we're detecting a Starfleet power signature in one of your cargo bays."

"That would be the shuttlepod we discovered several months ago," Kov replied, once more in English. "I believe *Enterprise* lost it during your brief conflict with the Xindi," he continued.

"We didn't lose a 'pod in the Expanse," Trip said. He pursed his lips slightly, and T'Pol raised an eyebrow at the sudden memory of the shuttlepod that had crashed immediately following the Expanse mission. That had been on Earth, over two hundred years earlier. She had always wondered what happened to it once the timeline was restored.

"Indeed?" Kov seemed slightly surprised. "Although it is quite old, it is clearly marked as one of *Enterprise's* shuttlepods." T'Pol's breath caught as a thought occurred to her, and she swallowed the lump that closed up her throat.

"How old?" she interjected sharply before her mate could respond. She could feel the sudden flare of understanding within him as he comprehended what she was asking. *Enterprise* had not lost a shuttlepod during the Expanse mission...

But Lorian's *Enterprise* could have.

"Curious that you should mention that," the Vulcan commander responded. "My science officer was baffled at the readings we took. According to our scans, it is-"

"Over a hundred years old," Trip interrupted, his eyes locked on T'Pol's. She could feel the emotion thundering through him – through *them* – and nodded slightly at his unspoken question. Both of them turned their attention to a confused-looking Kov, and they spoke in unison.

"Show us."



"Show me."

The sudden and unexpected comment from his companion broke the silence that had descended upon the room, and caused Scott Reynolds to jump slightly with surprise. He shot her a quick glare before returning his attention to the archaic camera pointed toward the walled compound that was Admiral Gardner's home. With the sun down and the admiral retired for the evening, Scott had retreated to this vantage point for the night, hoping that he would be able to get some sleep himself. They were rented quarters in a mostly abandoned apartment building, and had cost more than Reynolds wanted to think

about to obtain, but the absolutely fantastic view of the admiral's home was well worth the cost. From here, the entire compound could be seen.

He had decided to use an ancient but still functional camera with a telephoto lens instead of modern surveillance equipment to limit detection. Using little more than a series of lenses, the camera did not rely on sensor waves or lasers, thus making it quite difficult to counter if one was not aware of its presence. Admittedly, he lost a great deal of the more advanced capabilities that modern equipment could provide, but the anonymity it provided was more than worth it.

"Are you even listening to me?" Amanda Cole asked from the couch where she was seated, and Scott fought the urge to sigh. He had hoped that this covert operation would allow him the opportunity to apologize to her for their last fight (a fight that he still didn't know what the cause had been), but so far, she had done little beyond complain. He remained hopeful, though, that it wasn't a lost cause; all he had needed to say was that he needed her help, and Amanda had dropped what she was doing. She hadn't even asked why they were doing this more than five times.

"I *am* listening to you," he replied as he moved the camera, quickly snapping digital images of the compound activity. There were twelve guards tonight, he noticed. Up from the seven the night previous. He wondered if that meant anything.

"Then show me the damned answer," Cole insisted. Scott glowered darkly for a moment, before smoothing away the irritation and turning toward his onetime lover. He still didn't understand why she had broken it off between them this time, and her insistence that he was too emotionally distant didn't fly with previous comments she had made about him. Before this latest spat, she had been complaining about how he was moving too quickly, and that he needed to stop taking their trysts so seriously.

The portable computer that was on the table before her hummed as Scott approached, and he frowned at the numerous PADDs she had strewn about. If he had learned anything about her habits while they were sleeping together, it was that she was one of the least organized persons he knew. Somehow, she always knew exactly where everything was, but if there was a method to her madness, he still hadn't discovered it.

"Here," Reynolds said as he pointed to the appropriate passage on the computer screen. Doing so required him to lean over her shoulder so their heads were only millimeters apart, and Scott inhaled the familiar scent of her hair. It smelled like berries. "Known as the Father of Earth's Post-Modern Reformism," Scott read, "Bell galvanized the people and government of the United State of America when he led an uprising in San Francisco's Sanctuary District A."

"Dammit," Amanda muttered as she made a note on a personal PADD. He tried not to smile at her continuing difficulty with history, although it baffled him. She could name every single bone in the human body, could go on in disgusting length about how the intestines worked, and could even explain the physiological differences between humans and Vulcans in a manner that he almost understood, yet had problems remembering who Khan Noonien Singh was, or what effect Henry Starling had on the computer revolution in the late twentieth century, or even what year the Eugenics Wars ended. "I hate this stupid class," she grumbled, causing Scott to chuckle. "What?" she demanded.

"Nothing," he smiled as he retraced his steps to the camera.

"I'm going to medical school," she complained. "What the hell do I need to know this crap for?"

"Same reason they expected me to take biology and chemistry, I suppose." Scott snapped several more pictures of the chief of naval operations' compound, once again wondering if Admiral Archer had overreacted. "Besides, a man named George Santayana said that those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it," Reynolds smirked.

"That's rhetorical nonsense," Amanda muttered. She made another note on her PADD before hesitating. "First Contact was on April 5th-"

"April 4th," Scott corrected absently as he resumed his operation of the camera, and Cole grunted in annoyance before tossing the PADD onto the table. Reynolds tried not to smile at the all too familiar action; whenever she was frustrated, Amanda would give up for a few minutes and vent at the impossibility of the work before her. Following that, however, she would start over and force herself to finish. Sometimes, the cycle repeated itself four or five times before she finished the assignment she was working on at the time.

"Why did you ask me to help you?" Amanda abruptly asked, and Reynolds tensed. He glanced over his shoulder, noting without surprise that she was watching him with that weighing look of hers.

"Because I needed someone to watch my back," he replied. "You're the only one I completely trust to do that." She smiled at the comment, and Scott realized the compliment he had unintentionally paid her. It was true, of course, but he really hoped that she didn't think he was saying that just to get into her pants again.

Not that he would complain if she seemed interested...

"And Archer asked you to do this?" Amanda continued. He nodded in reply.

"Off the record," Scott reminded her.

"It's a little weird," she commented as she stood up from the couch and approached the camera. "Spying on the head of Starfleet."

"The admiral has his reasons," Reynolds replied, and Amanda gave him a sidelong look of amusement.

"That are classified," she smirked. "Are you sure this isn't some elaborate ploy to get me in bed?" Scott smiled.

"Pretty sure," he said in response.

"But not positive," she murmured, a seductive tone in her voice, and Reynolds felt his brain shutting down. A part of him was angry that she could always do this to him, that all she had to do was smile or wink, and he was ready to throw his career out the window for her. It must have shown in his face because she suddenly glanced away. "I'm sorry," Cole said. "This is business, and I keep forgetting that the job always comes first with you."

"Amanda," Scott started, but she shook her head and gestured toward the fold-down bed.

"You should get some sleep," she declared, refusing to make eye contact. "I'll keep an eye on the

admiral's house for a while."

Reynolds hesitated. He wanted to talk to her, to convince her to give them another try, but she was right: the job *did* come first. And right now, nothing was more important than finding the traitor that Admiral Archer was searching for. Not even the woman he wanted more than life itself. Nodding in agreement with her, he turned toward the bed.

"Scott," she suddenly said, and he glanced back, frowning. He couldn't remember hearing her voice tremble like that before. Amanda was frozen in front of the camera, eyes wide as she half-turned to face him. "Gardner has a visitor," she continued, horror in her voice. "It's Rajjin."

## ACT TWO

Face set in a fierce scowl, Nathaniel Hayes stepped onto the hard soil of Voriolas.

It was a border world, one that the Klingons had seized decades earlier during one of their expansionist periods. Little of consequence was manufactured here; apart from raw materials gouged from the planet and shipped to more important colonies, there was little reason to even visit this rock. The air was thick with smoke from far distant fires, and the dirt that seemed to encase everything was an off-color gray. Each step required just a little bit more effort than human standard, and it was slightly warmer than Nate was accustomed to. Glowlamps were everywhere, bathing the entire landing pad with an eerie cerulean light that compensated for the darkness that seemed to shroud the entire planet.

Frowning, Hayes glanced up as he mentally reviewed what he had learned of Voriolas during the long trip. Every sidereal year, at the same approximate time, the planet's largest moon blotted out the distant star that fed the system, plunging Voriolas into a twenty-day (local) eclipse. During that time, the sky was dark red as the black orb that was the moon dominated the skyline, enveloped by a flickering scarlet corona. To Nate's eyes, it seemed as if there were a hole in the sky, leading to some hellish plane of existence for sinners.

But then, no one voluntarily came to Voriolas. It was to this border planet that those who had been disgraced were sent, to serve out their time in dishonor and squalor. And it was ideal for his needs.

When his control officer had initially briefed him on this mission, Hayes had been convinced that the older man was insane. Inserting an agent into Klingon territory would be difficult enough, but the idea that any single man, no matter his gifts, could manipulate a stellar nation the size of the Klingon Empire into conducting raids into Romulan territory was ludicrous. When Reed outlined his plan, however, Nate had realized that it could work, providing the right man was that operative.

And Hayes was undoubtedly the right man.

The recent plague that had stripped the Klingons of their forehead ridges was rooted in the same genetic manipulation that had been responsible for Hayes' birth, so with a little bit of cosmetic surgery, he was easily able to pass as one of them. A subdermal implant kept his melanin levels higher than normal, artificially darkening his skin to more closely approximate a Klingon appearance. His vocal cords had been surgically cut so he could not accidentally reveal his lack of nativity with the language, and a single, distracting scar covered his throat to explain this handicap. From everything that Nate had read of the Klingons, they would appreciate a warrior who had survived such a horrible wound.

He was unconcerned about the language itself. In his three week transit time, he had spent virtually the entire trip with a Vulcan learning program that imprinted the language directly upon his speech centers. Eventually, the imprint would fade, but Nate was sure that his total immersion in the culture would aid him in retaining what he needed. He had learned at an early age that he picked up new languages remarkably fast; it was, he supposed, an advantage to his genetically engineered brain.

There was only a single place to truly go from the dirt field that served as a landing pad, and Hayes strode slowly in that direction. A long, wide structure, it appeared to be a communal building of some sort, combining living quarters with the other necessities of life. A half dozen smaller structures that had the look of personal domiciles were scattered around the massive building, but most of them appeared dilapidated or abandoned.

A pair of burly Klingons stood outside the building. Both were nearly two meters in height, but their muscle was running to fat, and Nate doubted that either of them had been in an actual fight for years. The shorter of the two glanced in Hayes' direction, eyes narrowing slightly, and Nate recognized the look of a bully. He refused to be cowed, however, and continued forward at an easy, unhurried pace. His eyes met those of the short one, and the Klingon blinked first. The two stood aside.

Upon entry, Nate was surprised to discover himself in a massive hall that seemed straight out of the Dark Ages. Large tables dominated the chamber, and Klingon males were roaring with laughter as they drank themselves into oblivion. Light streamed in from decorative windows that, upon a second look, were revealed to be glowfloats. A fire raged in a massive center pit, over which a local quadruped was being roasted, and a filthy-looking barrel filled with some sort of liquid was next to it.

As he strode forward, Hayes realized that all eyes were on him. A hush fell upon the revelers as they studied him. Inwardly, he frowned; this would be the test that would decide if he could pull this off. Failure now would likely mean death.

To his surprise, however, the interest he had sparked faded almost at once. Laughter rang out once more as the revelers ignored him and returned to their feast. He blinked in slight surprise, before heaving a soft sigh of relief. Luck was apparently with him; he needed to gather intelligence first. He approached a mostly vacant table, hoping that he could maintain a low profile until he had a better grasp of the politics of this gathering.

"Damn you, whore!" a burly Klingon bellowed as he backhanded a young woman. Instinct spurred Nate into action, washing away common sense, and he took two rapid steps forward. Grabbing the upraised hand of the furious Klingon, he kicked out slightly, his blow knocking the feet from under the angry man. With a surprised squawk, the immense man fell to the floor, smacking his head against the table as he did.

The Klingon was on his feet almost instantly, nearly incandescent with fury as he lunged toward Nate, a wide blade in hand. It was almost too easy to redirect the man's clumsy attack into a judo throw that sent him sprawling into the middle of the hall. Hayes sprang up from the roll, already regretting his abject stupidity as he assumed a ready stance. *So much for keeping a low profile*, he reflected bitterly.

"Hold!" A voice rang out as the burly Klingon scrambled back to his feet. Limping forward, a lean Klingon of advancing age stepped into the open space, gesturing for Nate to approach as he did. The older man's hair was still dark, but was running to silver. Despite his age or perhaps because of it, he stood upright, holding himself straight and proud.

"I demand satisfaction!" the burly Klingon growled. "This ... *targ* struck me!"

"Then the challenge is issued," the old Klingon stated, eyeing Hayes as he spoke. "But this newcomer does not have a weapon," he stated.

"He can use my *mek'leth*," a fat, balding Klingon declared loudly. He tossed a weapon toward Nate leisurely; catching it, Hayes hefted it slightly, his inexperience with the weapon showing. The burly Klingon laughed as one of his friends brought him his own weapon.

"I'll turn your skull into a goblet, boy," he promised darkly as he began displaying his prowess with his

own weapon. With a howl, the Klingon lunged forward, *bat'leth* flashing...

And died on the point of Nate's blade.

A murmur of surprise rumbled through the hall as they took in the unexpected image of Hayes standing several meters from his fallen foe, hands empty. Instantly, Nate felt worry creep into his consciousness. Throwing the *mek'leth* had seemed like the quickest way to end this unnecessary battle, and an unfamiliar weapon in his hands would likely be more dangerous to him than his opponent. If the weapon had not stopped his foe, Hayes had been more than ready to use his bare hands. From the reaction to his unexpected tactic, however, he wondered if he had perhaps made an error.

The fat Klingon began to chuckle.

Soon, the entire hall was filled with laughter, as the assembled Klingons expressed their mirth at how their comrade died. It wasn't glorious, or worthy, but ridiculous and anti-climatic. Chortling, the obese Klingon waddled to the corpse and pulled his *mek'leth* from the dead man's skull. He raised the bladed weapon up high, instantly causing another wave of hilarity.

"Let us raise our cups to Kahless!" the immense Klingon bellowed, and there was a rumble as the males present pounded their mugs on their tables. The obese figure glanced at Nate, frowning as he took in Hayes' emptyhandedness. Snatching a mug from a table, he stomped toward Hayes and pushed the cup into his hands. "Drink to Kahless!" he declared.

Nate hesitated.

He had no idea who this Kahless person was as his flash training hadn't gone into that. Was it some sort of spiritual invocation? Or was the man that Hayes had just killed named Kahless? At his hesitation, the hall almost instantly quieted, and the fat Klingon speared him with a look.

"Will you not drink to him?" the man asked. Realizing that boldness was his best weapon, Nate shook his head.

He did not imagine the gasp of surprise.

"Why not?" The question was soft and dangerous, despite the thickness of the jowls from whence it emerged. It was an elucidating response: clearly, this Kahless was a spiritual figure of some sort. Expression tight, Nate lifted his left arm and, with his right hand, peeled back the cloth that concealed the voice synthesizer strapped to his arm. He ignored the rumble of surprise as he quickly input a command.

"Because I am unworthy," the device pronounced. The tension in the hall transformed into something else, and Hayes could see every Klingon present adopt a dour expression, as if they had just realized something about themselves that they did not like.

"We are all unworthy wretches here," the fat Klingon declared. "How are you named?" he asked, and Nate input a new command.

"Khellius," the device pronounced his name.

"A strange name for a strange warrior," the rotund Klingon declared before hefting his mug. "To Khellius!" he roared, and it was echoed by dozens of voices. "The only honest one among us!"

"This belongs to you," the old Klingon said a moment later, offering the dead man's *bat'leth*. Nate accepted it, unsure if he could refuse it without causing another incident. *You've already dodged one bullet today*, he told himself.

"And the slave as well," the hefty Klingon said, gesturing to the female who had unwittingly been responsible for this entire fiasco. She was kneeling where she had fallen, her face shrouded by her hair. Mentally, Hayes groaned. A *slave*? He didn't realize that the Klingons were that barbaric. "She can take you to your lodgings." At Nate's look, he chuckled. "We follow the Old Code here. You keep what you kill. Korak owned her, and now you own her." Abruptly, he offered his hand. "I am Goron, and you may call me friend." Hayes clasped the man's arm in the warrior's grip, smiling tightly at the grimace that his new ... friend made as they tested their strength.

The slave led Nate to a large living area deep within the great building. She did not speak during the entire trip, and kept her head downcast. Anger began simmering within Hayes as he realized how horribly she must have been abused. The moral code that his father had taught him, bent nearly out of shape by Harris' deceptions but not broken, recoiled at the idea of treating her like a slave.

Once inside the living area, his anger resurfaced at the human-sized cage in the far corner of the room. *Death was too good for that sonuvabitch*, Hayes reflected darkly when he realized the purpose of the device.

"What is your name?" he asked her through voice synthesizer. She gave him a wide-eyed look, but never met his eyes.

"I have no name, Master," she replied, and his stomach seized with anger. The urge to march back to the great hall and begin killing the monsters that would allow this happen nearly overwhelmed him. He swallowed his fury, pushed it down, and stepped closer to her. He put his hand to her chin and lifted her face so their eyes would meet. Shock washed through him when he saw her ears.

She was Vulcan.

Or at least part Vulcan. The idea that a member of that noble race would be reduced to this made him sick to his stomach. Twice, she attempted to look away, but each time he made her look at him. When he was satisfied that she would not look away, he began typing.

"I am Khellius," he informed her. "Not Master. I was a slave once, and I will *not* own another person." It wasn't entirely true, but was close enough. His research into the programs that Lieutenant Commander Eisler mentioned in their very last conversation had opened his eyes to the lie that his life had been based upon. He frowned at the sheer panic that crossed her features. "I will provide for you as best I can, but you are *not* a slave." To prove his words, he crossed to the cage and began ripping it free of the wall. It was poorly constructed, he realized, and was probably more for psychological effect than actual imprisonment. He hoped its destruction would have an equal effect on her.

"Now," he typed once he was done, "what is your name?" She swallowed, glancing at the shattered remnants of the cage.

"I have never had a name," she revealed softly, and Nate felt his heart go out to her. He tapped her chin, once more bringing her eyes up to meet his.

"Can I call you Briseis?" he asked. She blinked in surprise before offering a tentative nod.



He nodded in response to the question that had been posed to him, but Trip Tucker had no idea what he had been asked.

As he stared at the closed door of the turbolift that was taking them to *Vahklas'* cargo bay, Trip could feel Kov's questioning eyes on him. Silently, Tucker gave thanks for the innate Vulcan reticence and sense of privacy; a human friend would have asked him if he was all right when he was anything but.

A sharp pain began building at the back of his head, and Trip breathed in cautiously as he focused on controlling his emotions. Through the bond, he could feel T'Pol doing the same. It was completely necessary; as they had discovered several times in the years since they acknowledged the bond, when both of them experienced extremely intense emotions, it was like an ever-escalating feedback loop. During sex, it was a fantastic sensation, but the shared distress that was now bouncing between them was rapidly becoming physically painful.

The lift door slid open, and Kov preceded them through it, evidently recognizing that neither Trip nor T'Pol were particularly interested in conversation. Grimacing at the lance of fire that seemed to be burning through his skull, Tucker followed. He kept his eyes locked on Kov's back, knowing that if he looked at T'Pol, he would see his worry reflected in her eyes.

"We found the shuttlepod adrift," Kov announced in Vulcan. He was limping as he walked toward the door leading to the cargo bay, and Trip felt a sudden flicker of guilt that they had pressured the *Vahklas'* commander to act while he was still wounded. "There were three bodies inside the craft," he continued, and his words caused Trip's breath to catch. "We have them in stasis."

"Human bodies?" T'Pol asked. Only someone intimately familiar with her would recognize the effort it was taking for her to remain stoic.

"Mostly," came the cryptic response. Kov quirked an eyebrow at their simultaneous intake of breath. "My chief medical officer determined that one of them appears to be one-quarter Denobulan." At this, Trip felt a wave of relief wash over him, but it was instantly swept aside by an almost crippling sense of self-disgust.

With a loud rumble, the cargo bay door opened. The lights in the bay began to systematically activate in response to the opened door, and Trip felt his pulse rate begin to accelerate. It took every gram of his control to keep from reaching for T'Pol's hand to steady himself, and he could feel her discomfort as well. The confusion that flashed across Kov's face at their momentary hesitation reminded Tucker that Lorian and the entire incident with the second *Enterprise* was still classified; swallowing, he stepped through the doorway and into the cargo bay.

He had thought that he was prepared for sight of the 'pod, but Trip still felt his stomach lurch as he approached it. It was exactly as Kov had stated: battered and scarred, the 'pod was easily recognizable

as one of Starfleet's by its shape, but several major modifications immediately drew Tucker's notice. The impulse manifold had been completely replaced with a larger one that almost seemed cobbled together out of spare parts. Armored plates covered the outer hull of the small craft, and the bubble viewport at the front had been replaced with a slab of metal.

"Structure seems intact," Trip muttered as he made a slow circuit around the 'pod. The whir of T'Pol's scanner was loud in the cramped space of the cargo bay. "These look like superchargers," he commented as he studied the jury-rigged impulse drive.

"They are," T'Pol declared off of her scans. "I am unfamiliar with much of the components used."

"These are Xindi," Tucker identified as he leaned closer to examine the modifications. "And Illyrian too, I think." He placed his hand on the cool metal, allowing himself – if only for a moment – to imagine the hardships this craft had witnessed. Sensing eyes upon him, he glanced up to find both of the Vulcans studying him. T'Pol's expression spoke of empathy and shared pain, whereas Kov had poorly concealed confusion in his eyes.

Without another word, Trip keyed his personal access code into the shuttlepod's access pad, hoping that it would fail. Instead, however, the 'pod hatch cycled open with a loud hiss. Internal lights began activating, and, out of the corner of his eye, Tucker saw Kov purse his lips before glancing at T'Pol. She returned the look without a hint of visible emotion, and the *Vahklas'* new commander looked away.

Unlike the exterior, there were very few changes to the inside of the 'pod, and Trip grit his teeth at the familiarity of it. The pilot's seat was new, he instantly noticed, and all of the other seats appeared very well-worn. He lowered himself into the chair before the flight instruments and let his eyes travel over them. A scratch above the engine coolant gauge drew his immediate attention; it was jagged, almost shaped like a lightning bolt symbol, and was nearly worn away by time. He let his fingers trace the scar before glancing again at T'Pol.

The *Enterprise* shuttlepod that had crashed on New Elysium bore the exact same scratch.

His communicator chirped, and Trip had never been more thankful. Reaching for it as he stood, he flipped the device open with a practiced gesture.

"This is Tucker," he said, clambering out of the 'pod as he spoke.

"Captain, this is Commander Hess." Trip frowned fractionally at her form of address. By identifying herself in the way she did, Anna was relating her concern over a possible security problem. It had been one of the procedures put into place by the ever-paranoid Rick Eisler. "I'm in engineering," Hess continued. "Could you come down here? There's something I'd like to run by you."

"On my way," Tucker responded. He glanced in T'Pol's direction, and she nodded slightly to his unspoken question. Being apart for a few minutes might help them get over the shock of learning that the second *Enterprise* had evidently survived, and, as science officer, she clearly wanted to study the 'pod a little longer. Burying herself in work was how she coped with shocks like this; it had taken him a long time to figure that out about her.

"If you don't mind, Captain," she said, mostly for the benefit of Kov, "I would like to examine this craft in more detail and perhaps study the *Vahklas'* logs."

"Do it." Trip paused, before adding, "and arrange to have it transferred to *Endeavour*." He frowned slightly at Kov. "You still need to visit sickbay," he remarked before heading for the door.

Once in the turbolift, Trip let himself sag back against the metal door. Shock was rapidly wearing off, with anger and self-loathing replacing it. They had been so sure that Lorian's *Enterprise* had been invalidated from the timestream! His stomach rolled and twisted with disgust at the thought of having abandoned the crew of that ship. If he closed his eyes, he could still see Lorian's face...

Straightening, Tucker drew in a steadying breath and spent a long moment struggling with his unruly emotions. There was a job to be done, after all, and there wasn't any time to waste crying over spilt milk. Worry about what is, his father had always told him, not what might have been. It was good advice, and Trip pushed down the urge to howl. There would be time for that later.

He paused only briefly on the way back to engineering to comm Eisler about T'Pol's whereabouts; the tactical officer grumbled darkly under his breath about security risks and foolishly brave senior officers, before dispatching one of the Roughnecks to join her. It left the security team stretched thinner than Tucker liked, what with most of the Roughnecks already tasked to escorting the injured Vulcans to their destinations throughout the taskforce, but knowing that someone was keeping an eye on T'Pol made Trip feel better, especially given her atrocious record at getting injured.

Thoughts of his timelost son and concerns over the security problems vanished as he approached Hess. She was standing before the silent warp core, a fierce scowl on her face as she stared at a PADD. Trip felt his stomach clench, and he tried to brace himself for whatever she was going to drop on him.

"We've got a problem," Hess announced instantly. Her voice was low, keyed only for Trip's ears, and he took the hint. When he spoke, it was also in a hushed whisper.

"Explain," he ordered while reaching for the PADD. It was the results of her earlier work, and Tucker began scanning over it.

"The damage to the warp core was *not* battle damage, Trip," she revealed, unconsciously slipping back into her old address of him. At his look, her expression darkened even further. "It was sabotage," Hess said grimly.

"Are you sure?"

"Positive, sir." Anna pointed to the PADD. "It's all there ... someone *wanted* this ship to be disabled."

"And now," Trip added darkly, "whoever was responsible is out there, on one of our ships."

Silence answered him.



The silence was deafening.

Horror warred with anger as he stared at the photographic evidence before him, and Jonathan Archer

fought the urge to be suddenly and violently sick. It was almost too much to take in, and Jon knew that a large part of him had thought – had *hoped!* – that Reynolds wouldn't turn up anything on Gardner. Archer had desperately wanted this to be a wild goose chase that was good for a few laughs in five or ten years. In the event that the lieutenant did find damning evidence, though, Jon thought that he had prepared himself for this, thought he was ready to learn that Thomas Gardner was, after all, a traitor to humanity.

Clearly, he wasn't.

Reynolds and Sergeant Cole were sitting together on the small office couch, stunned and frightened expressions on their too young faces; they had barely moved since arriving at his office and collapsing in the couch as if their legs could no longer keep them upright. The part of Jon that wasn't reeling in horrified shock couldn't help but to notice that they were holding hands tightly, clinging to one another for desperately needed support. In Archer's opinion, Cole looked a little better than Reynolds did, but she even looked like she was on the verge of losing her dinner.

*You've got a job to do*, a voice that sounded suspiciously like his father reminded him, and Archer drew in a steadying breath as he tried to rally himself. Guilt churned in his stomach but he pushed it down; there would be a reckoning later for his mistake, for his error in letting Rajiin go free during the Xindi campaign. Right now, though, there was work to do.

Without a word, Jon reached his vidphone and activated it. His fingers danced over the keypad, inputting his home number. It chirped twice, and the recorded message answered, calmly informing him in his own voice that he wasn't home right now but would gladly return the call as soon as possible. When the beep sounded, he quickly hit four buttons in rapid succession – 1-4-3-1 – before disconnecting. Harris would know to contact him, but Archer had no idea how long it would take. Previous contacts had taken between twenty and forty hours.

Jon didn't plan to wait that long.

"Mister Reynolds," he said softly. The lieutenant looked up, once more wearing the mask of professionalism that Archer had come to associate with him. It was a good sign. "I need you to assemble a strike team of people you trust completely." Jon's mind was racing as he spoke; he couldn't involve Security with this. Inevitably, someone would talk to the media and if the general populace learned that the highest ranking member of Starfleet Command had been suborned by a telepathic alien, the resulting panic could be catastrophic. Daniels' comment about Jon's future self concealing the identity of the traitor suddenly made complete sense.

"Give me forty minutes, sir," Reynolds replied, standing as he did. Cole rose with him, her face a mirror of the lieutenant's resolve. They hadn't yet released one another's hands, Archer noted; at any other time, he might have even found that amusing.

But not tonight.

"Count me in, sir," she said. Scott's expression tightened fractionally, but he nodded nonetheless.

"Me too." The voice nearly caused Jon to jump and he shot Tyner a dark frown. He hated that the petty officer could be so silent that Archer would completely forget about his presence. The yeoman was standing in the doorway, eyes wide and frightened.

“You’re not combat trained,” Lieutenant Reynolds said sharply. “I can’t use you.” The words were cold, and caused the younger man to give the lieutenant an injured look; somehow, Archer doubted he meant it to come out quite as abrasive as it did.

“But I can,” he interjected. “I have to be with that team, but I need someone to run interference for me here.” Jon took in Tyner’s dejected expression and recognized it for what it was: a mistaken belief that his job wasn’t as important as other occupational specialties. All too often since even before the war began, Archer had encountered this sort of thing from officers and enlisted men and women who had chosen (or been selected) to serve in Admin or other, less glamorous duties that were no less essential. Ex-MACOs (and pilots, Jon had to grudgingly admit) were especially bad about speaking of the “inkmonkeys” with snide and utterly unwarranted contempt.

“I know it’s not what you want to do, Tyner,” Archer pointed out, “But if I disappear, people are going to start asking questions.”

“Yes, sir.” Tyner straightened his back and drew in a deep breath. “You can count on me, Admiral.”

“I know I can,” Jon smiled. He started to turn his attention back to Reynolds when the yeoman spoke again.

“What about your interview, sir?” Tyner asked. “The one with Gannett Brooks?”

“Dammit,” Archer hissed. He’d forgotten about that and not just because seeing the reporter would remind him of Travis. Twice, he’d managed to avoid this interview, citing duty both times, but this time, Brooks had gone over his head and somehow managed to involve the president herself. The orders had come down from the Iron Lady herself that the “Hero of the Xindi Mission” would sit down and answer questions; unfortunately, that was a directive that Jon couldn’t just ignore no matter how much he wanted to.

Abruptly, an idea occurred to him. Brooks was still Starfleet Security! Unofficially, of course; it wouldn’t go over well with the civilians in government and the media if that fact was revealed, but Jon saw an opportunity. They would need an outside record of proof that Rajiin was present, and, as far as Archer knew, Brooks had some field training.

“Use her private number,” he said quickly. “Get her in this office ASAP.”

“Aye, sir.”

“And tell her to bring her field gear,” Jon added as the petty officer retreated from the office.

Reynolds and Cole were busy at his desk, scribbling names on a notepad and comparing them with the personnel files he had available on his system. Jon let them work and began pacing to vent the nervous frustration that built with every second. He was still in shock, he realized, that Rajiin had reappeared and in such a fashion. When she escaped from *Enterprise*, he had thought she was an ally or at least a potential one. Never in his wildest dreams did he expect for her to show up again. His circuit of the office carried him by the desk and he grabbed one of the photographs to study.

After a moment, Jon realized that something about her looked different. He briefly considered the idea

that this wasn't Rajiin at all, but rather another of her species. Just as quickly, though, he discarded the notion; unless all females from Oran'taku looked exactly the same, it was undeniably her. She was wearing human clothes now, and her hair was dyed dark brown, but otherwise she was the same. There was something ... unusual at her temples, though, something that almost looked like decorative metal studs. Archer ground his teeth in annoyance as he glared at the photo; even if it was proven that Gardner was influenced by Rajiin, this would utterly destroy the man. *Your fault*, the image seemed to be saying with a mocking laugh. *Your fault...*

"Dammit," Reynolds growled, and Jon looked up from the now crumpled photo. The lieutenant was frowning at something on the terminal screen. "Sergeant Suresh is a no-go."

"He's the best com-tech I know," Cole muttered. "We need him if we're gonna pull this off."

"Weren't you listening?" the lieutenant asked almost angrily. "He's a no-go. Suffering from radiation poisoning and is on medical leave."

"What about Ansip?"

"Deployed." Reynolds glowered at the system. "I can't think of any other com-techs who can do this job."

"I can," Jon said grimly.



The doctor was grim as he spoke.

"They are who they appear to be," he said, a frown on his face, and T'Pol felt her stomach tighten in disgust. With effort, she swallowed the distress that swelled up in response to Phlox's statement; the realization she may have abandoned a child of her blood overwhelmed the amazing sense of déjà vu accompanying the doctor's comment. In Vulcan society, there was nothing more contemptuous than the abandonment of family.

The three bodies were stretched out on biobeds in *Endeavour's* medical ward, having been transported here nearly an hour earlier. T'Pol had recognized one of them immediately: Greer, the tactical officer on Lorian's *Enterprise*. She had not interacted a great deal with the man, but had seen him several times nonetheless. Guilt washed through her then as she recalled that she hadn't interacted much with *any* member of that crew, so intent had she been on hiding from a future she both desired and feared.

"All three of them appear to have died of wounds sustained from hand-held plasma-based weapon systems," Phlox continued. The results of his findings were currently displayed on the central monitor, but the doctor barely looked at it as he spoke. His eyes, T'Pol noted, were fixed on the smallest of the corpses. "I cannot say with any certainty how much time has elapsed since they succumbed to their wounds although I *can* say that it took place at least a week before they were placed into stasis." Almost in mid-sentence, the Denobulan seemed to falter and lose his focus. "I would have liked to have known this child," he mused sadly as he continued to stare at the smallest body. Only a quarter or an eighth Denobulan, the boy would have been the doctor's grandson or possibly his great-grandson in the alternate timeline, and T'Pol felt another stab of anger and sadness wash through her. It was a

reminder that she and Trip weren't the only ones who had lost someone.

"I don't understand," Kov declared from where he stood. The Vulcan engineer-turned-captain had insisted on overseeing the transport of the bodies, and T'Pol had finally relented, knowing that it would put him in Phlox's proximity for much needed medical care. Already, Kov looked better than he had earlier; the large bruise that had dominated his face was rapidly fading and he no longer had any difficulty walking. Unfortunately, he was now more aware of his surroundings since he no longer had to dedicate a significant portion of his mind to divorcing himself from pain, and that was already leading to difficult questions. "Did you know these people?" Kov asked.

"No," T'Pol replied instantly.

"Yes," Phlox said at the same time. He immediately shot T'Pol an apologetic look as Kov raised a questioning eyebrow. "That is to say, we didn't really *know* them per se," the doctor started to dissemble, and T'Pol interrupted to prevent him from disclosing more information than Kov needed; Phlox was, after all, an exceedingly poor liar.

"That information is classified," she stated coolly. Again, Kov quirked an eyebrow, but made no further query. From the calculating light in his eyes, however, T'Pol knew that he would interrogate Trip later on this matter and knowing her mate's gregarious nature, would learn what he wanted to know. "I will need to examine your sensor logs," she told him in hopes that it would distract him from seeking further information. "Specifically," T'Pol continued, "those relating to your discovery of the shuttlepod."

"You think you can retrace its flight path?" Phlox asked almost eagerly. It was to be expected, of course. Many of the crew of Lorian's *Enterprise* had been descended from the Denobulan and he had lost as much if not more than she and Trip.

"I do not know," T'Pol replied noncommittally. The doctor gave her a knowing nod, perhaps sensing her doubt as well as her poorly concealed anguish. Once again, she became aware of Kov's appraising eye upon her. With another subtle frown, she turned toward the door. She had barely gotten five steps beyond sickbay when Kov's voice followed her.

"Commander," he called out, and T'Pol slowed her rapid pace. "A word, if you don't mind." At her slight nod, Kov hesitated and glanced around, drawing her attention to the busier than normal corridors. Tentatively, she stretched out through her bond with Trip in an attempt to discern the reason for the activity, but her mate was deeply involved in something at the moment and she decided against interrupting him.

"Follow me," T'Pol ordered and resumed walking; this time, she angled toward one of the nearby unmanned auxiliary power stations. Kov followed without a word, but she could almost feel the curiosity and discomfort rolling off of him. Once inside the small station, she gave him a cool glance.

"Who is Lorian?" he asked without preamble, and, unable to contain her surprise, T'Pol drew in a startled breath.

"Where did you hear that name?" she demanded, anger leaking into her voice. It should have bothered her that her control had slipped, but the emotions thundering through her were too intense to completely suppress.

“In the Delphic Expanse,” Kov replied. “Or rather,” he corrected himself, “the area that was once the Expanse.” He narrowed his eyes slightly and studied her. “He was a Vulcan evidently linked to Starfleet in some fashion.”

“In a manner of speaking,” T’Pol dissembled. She paused, wondering how to address this new twist, but Kov pressed on.

“We detected traces of Vulcan genetic material within the shuttlepod,” he stated calmly. “Hair and skin cells primarily, but also traces of blood.” T’Pol felt her stomach clench once more and struggled to keep it from showing on her face. “Curiously,” Kov continued, his eyes locked on her, “the scans seemed to indicate that this Vulcan was also half-human.”

“Fascinating,” T’Pol responded. Even to her ears, her voice sounded dull.

“During our time in the Expanse,” Kov said after a moment, “we interacted with numerous species that referenced a ‘Captain Lorian’ of the starship *Enterprise*.” He tilted his head slightly as he continued, eyes narrowed. “As you were the only Vulcan serving aboard *Enterprise*,” he continued, “logic dictates you would know the identity of this individual.”

A long moment passed as T’Pol struggled to find the appropriate response. Had Trip not been so busy in that moment – and what *was* he doing that required so much of his concentration? – she would have allowed herself to sink deeper into the mindlink with him to gain his insight into Kov. Inhaling slowly, she realized her tongue was pressing against the inside of her cheek in one of Trip’s bad habits. Forcing herself to desist, she decided to gamble on her mate’s instincts about people.

So she told Kov the story about Lorian. Not the entire story, of course – he had no need to know about her insane addiction to trellium or the confused state she’d been in after having mated with Trip under the influence of the drug – but enough for him to gain some understanding about her timelost son. Kov accepted the recitation surprisingly well; he did not interrupt but his reaction to the revelation of time travel being involved could be measured by the rapid climb of his eyebrow.

“Fascinating,” he murmured when she ended her tale. “I will inform my officers to expedite your search, Commander,” Kov said after the briefest of delays. “You will have unlimited access to whatever data we obtained during our mapping expedition.”

“Thank you,” T’Pol said. “The incident with Lorian’s *Enterprise* is classified,” she informed him but, again, he surprised her.

“I will say nothing of it,” he promised before turning to exit. At the door, he hesitated and glanced over his shoulder at her. “Fascinating,” he repeated softly before triggering the door release and striding from the auxiliary power station.

It was several minutes before T’Pol felt sufficiently in control of her emotions to venture forth once more.

When she did, she immediately noticed a heightened sense of alert among certain members of the crew. Lieutenant Commander Eisler’s security personnel were everywhere, prowling the corridors in teams of two or three, and all of them were more heavily armed than they had any reason to be. As one of the

wounded crewmembers from the *Vahklas* limped around the corner, obviously heading for sickbay, T'Pol noticed the wary manner in which the Vulcan's security escort eyed him. Frowning at the incongruity, she walked quickly toward them. Chief Petty Officer Mitchell straightened fractionally at her approach, but continued to discreetly watch the wounded Vulcan he was several steps behind.

"Ma'am," the chief petty officer said by way of greeting.

"What is your assignment?" T'Pol asked without preamble.

"Escort," Mitchell answered instantly. He answered her next question before she could ask it. "Threatcon bravo sierra," he said and T'Pol raised an eyebrow at the coded declaration. While 'bravo' was an indication of heightened threat, it was the inclusion of the word 'sierra' that warned her that security was concerned about potential danger from their guests. It could mean only one thing: Commander Eisler feared they had a saboteur aboard.

Without further addressing Mitchell, T'Pol turned and strode toward the nearest turbolift. Her place was on the bridge and she needed to find out the nature of this threat as soon as possible. From her sense of Trip, he was aboard *Endeavour* once again and she extended a tentative mindtouch toward him. He reciprocated instantly, but she could almost taste his distraction and withdrew.

The lift deposited her on D Deck and T'Pol had taken only a few steps when a subtle but out of place sound drew her to pause. Her breath caught as she realized the noise was of a pitch too low for humans to detect naturally and, without hesitation, she darted toward its origin some twenty meters distant.

In her haste, T'Pol slammed her hand against the door annunciator harder than absolutely necessary and didn't allow the hatch to fully open before lunging through the entranceway. At her unannounced and rapid entrance, a crewman wearing the red of engineering jumped in surprise from where he knelt in front of the main computer console; T'Pol recognized him instantly as the duty crewman responsible for monitoring the core.

The pitch of the sound altered substantially; where before it was emitting a low-pitched and steady thrum like a heartbeat, now the tempo increased rapidly. T'Pol glanced around the massive room quickly before abandoning any hopes of locating the source of the sound before it reached its zenith. She grabbed the crewman and half-threw, half-pushed the man toward the exit. He stumbled into the corridor, T'Pol a step behind him. Less than a second later, the pulse of the sound reached its pinnacle.

And fire and lightning engulfed the room.

## ACT THREE

His ears would not stop ringing.

Wincing slightly, Trip Tucker looked up from the situation table and speared T'Pol with a questioning look that she casually ignored. Phlox had released her from sickbay earlier despite the tinnitus that had temporarily deafened her with the obviously misplaced expectation she would retire to her quarters while recovering. If he didn't need her expertise so badly, Trip would have ordered her there anyway, abusing both his authority as captain and his rights as her mate if necessary, but instead found himself not only allowing her to continue working but actually encouraging it. That she had worked out a way to use the bond in order to utilize *his* hearing as her own was nothing short of amazing.

But then, she'd always amazed him, even when she was driving him up the wall.

A chirp from the situation table drew his attention back to it and Trip frowned. Status reports continued to crawl across the display as the security teams checked in at regular intervals to relay their findings. Twenty minutes had passed since the explosion in the computer core, and he couldn't help but to experience a frightening sense of déjà vu at the entire situation. Internal sensors, damaged by the carefully placed explosive, were currently offline, forcing Lieutenant Commander Eisler's teams to sweep the ship manually for additional hints of sabotage, much like the tactical officer had wanted to do at Thor's Cradle all those months ago.

Almost the moment that the explosion occurred, Tucker had issued orders to the rest of strike group to place all of the Vulcans capable of being moved out of sickbay into confinement. So far, five of them remained unaccounted for, with three of those potential threats aboard *Endeavour* herself. Movement through the NC-06 was strictly limited, and Commander Eisler had already instructed division chiefs to arm their personnel just in case their saboteur made a suicidal end-run. Engineering was sealed off entirely, and other mission critical locations – the bridge (both of them), sickbay, the Armoury – were locked down so tight that it was becoming difficult to coordinate with other parts of the ship.

Which was probably Eisler's intention in the first place.

"I hate this," Trip muttered as he stared at the display before him. He was a hands-on leader, someone who liked to inspire by actions and deeds, and this sitting around while others went into harm's way bothered him no matter how much he knew it was in everyone's best interests. T'Pol cocked an eyebrow as she looked up and met his eyes.

"Commander Eisler is a more than competent officer," she said. Without the benefit of being able to hear herself, her voice was strangely off-key and high-pitched, as if she had inhaled a breath of helium and it was wearing off. An expression of annoyance washed across her features for less than a heartbeat as she took in what she sounded like through his ears, and she clenched her teeth together so tightly that the muscles in her jaw were visible.

"You sound fine," he told her. If anything, she grimaced even harder.

"Say again, *Telemachus*," Lieutenant Devereux ordered, her own voice drifting across the relatively quiet bridge. "Acknowledged. I will relay to *Endeavour* Actual." Trip frowned deeply and glanced in his communication officer's direction as he suddenly recognized the similarities between how she and T'Pol sounded. Ever since she returned to active duty following her injury at the battle of Acheron,

Marie's voice had seemed different somehow, though he hadn't really given it as much thought as he should have. Now, in retrospect, Tucker realized *why* she sounded different.

There was something wrong with her hearing.

He exchanged a glance with T'Pol, noting instantly the way her own eyes seemed to have turned inward as she reflected upon her own admittedly brief interactions with Lieutenant Devereux over the last few weeks. Self-recrimination flickered across her face but was gone almost before he saw it; as the first officer, the safety and well-being of the crew was her first priority, yet Trip knew she blamed herself for not recognizing the lieutenant's symptoms sooner.

"Captain," Devereux called out, "*Telemachus* is reporting they have the remaining two Vulcans accounted for and are moving them to the brig."

"Good," Trip replied. He glanced at T'Pol and she nodded in agreement with his unspoken plan. "A word in my office, Lieutenant Devereux," he said as turned toward the door leading to the converted systems analysis room. T'Pol was a silent shadow, less than a half step behind him. "Miss Ricker," he said, pausing to glance at the senior lieutenant manning the science station, "you have the bridge."

Once inside the office, Trip drew in a steadying breath and dropped into the chair behind his desk. He leaned forward slightly, interlocking his fingers together as if he were praying though his dark frown was clear indication he wasn't. T'Pol drew abreast of him without comment, her hands clasped together at the small of her back, and adopted her most forbidding expression, the one that reminded anyone looking at her that she was *not* human. This would be the first thing Devereux saw when she entered and it would send an immediate signal that this was no joking matter.

Marie's eyes widened fractionally at their calculated stances but recovered quickly and assumed a position of attention directly in front of the desk.

"Reporting as ordered, sir," she said and Trip's expression darkened slightly. Now that he knew what to listen for, it was impossible not to tell that something was wrong.

"What's wrong with your hearing, Marie?" Tucker asked without preamble. The lieutenant froze and her eyes darted away, as if she were considering deceit, before visibly deflating.

"I don't know, sir," Devereux replied. "It's been bothering me off and on since Acheron."

"And Starfleet Medical released you?" Trip demanded, anger bubbling up from his belly.

"Not exactly, sir," the lieutenant said sheepishly. "I sort of checked myself out so I could return to *Endeavour*."

"That was not logical," T'Pol pointed out. "You may have worsened your condition by not completing the medical treatments."

"My family is here, ma'am," Marie said. "I don't have anyone left and I wanted to be here where I could help." Trip winced in understanding. He wished he could say he was surprised, but Command had passed on dozens of similar such incidents throughout the fleet as wounded veterans did whatever they could to return to their duty stations and stand alongside their brothers and sisters in arms; the

bond forged in battle was a powerful one, and he had to silently admit that he had done the same thing when he was younger, especially during the Xindi mission. How many times had he skipped out of an appointment with Phlox so he could focus on keeping *Enterprise* from imploding and not let down his fellow officers and crewmen? Hell, hadn't he been back down in engineering barely a week after having *brain* surgery? Despite his silent admiration of her dedication to duty, though, Trip Tucker wasn't the one in charge.

*Captain* Tucker was.

"While I admire your loyalty to *Endeavour*," he said slowly, "Commander T'Pol is correct. We need you at one hundred percent and if you can't do that..."

"Doctor Phlox is aware of your condition?" T'Pol asked abruptly. When Devereux hesitantly nodded, Trip felt a flare of fury that he quickly suppressed. Memory of how infuriated he had been when he discovered the Denobulan concealed T'Pol's addiction pushed at his self-control, and Tucker lowered his hands to the table.

"He hasn't kept it from you, sir," Marie rushed to explain, evidently seeing the anger in Trip's eyes. "I just saw him about it this morning. He hadn't finished with my diagnosis when we went to battle stations." Tucker relaxed slightly before glancing at T'Pol.

"Who's on bridge duty?" he asked, grateful that he didn't have to explain that he was talking about the security teams.

"Senior Chief Petty Officer Mitchell," she replied instantly. Trip nodded and glanced down at the integrated comm. panel embedded within the desk. With his right finger, he tapped the small screen, bringing up the crew roster. Another tap narrowed the list of names, and he scrolled through them to find STAB team leader. Double clicking on the man's name opened a direct communications line to the security noncomm's helmet set.

"STAB Six," came Mitchell's almost immediate response.

"This is Tucker," Trip said. "In about five minutes, Lieutenant Devereux is going to be heading to sickbay. I want you to make sure she gets there without any problems."

"Wilco, sir," the senior chief petty officer replied. "I'll see to it personally."

"Thank you. Tucker out." Trip pressed the END button and glanced back up at Marie. "I want a full report from Phlox as soon as he's done," he ordered. "If anybody can whip up a miracle cure for you, it's him."

"And if there isn't one?" Devereux asked in a heart-breaking tone of voice.

"Don't borrow trouble," Trip answered. He gave her a smile. "Phlox can do some amazin' things, Lieutenant."

"He should know," T'Pol interjected. "The captain was more often than not Doctor Phlox's primary patient while aboard *Enterprise*."

“With you holding onto the number two spot,” he retorted quickly. “So if he can keep the two of *us* alive,” Trip said, directing his comments to Marie, “fixing your ears will be a piece of cake.”

“Yes, sir.” Devereux squared her shoulders. “Will that be all, sir?” she asked. Trip nodded.

“It will,” he replied. “Dismissed.” The moment she vanished through the door, Tucker was activating the comm.-line again. The answer was instantaneous.

“This is Phlox.”

“I’m sending Lieutenant Devereux down to see you, Doc,” Trip said as T’Pol walked to the front of his desk and lowered herself into the seat there.

“Ah,” the Denobulan replied. “She did speak to you then? I warned her that I would have to tell you the moment I found out, but she insisted on waiting until we had something more definite.”

“What *do* you have, Phlox?” Tucker asked.

“Nothing good, I’m afraid,” the doctor said. “From my preliminary examination,” he reported, “it appears that the vestibulocochlear nerve has been damaged and she is suffering from sensorineural hearing loss.”

“Can you fix it?”

“Possibly, but I won’t know until I’ve been able to complete my examination.” Trip was surprised at the sudden anger in the Denobulan’s voice. “Starfleet Medical should have detected this injury,” he growled, “and I intend to have words with the fools who let her leave.”

“You and me both, Doc.” Trip exchanged a grim look with his mate. “Keep me informed, Phlox. Tucker out.”

“What will you do if the doctor cannot repair this damage?” T’Pol asked softly. Tucker closed his eyes.

“What I have to,” he replied.



She really wished she didn’t have to do this.

With a groan, Hoshi Sato-Reed leaned back in the acceleration seat and rubbed her eyes in a vain attempt to wake up. Admiral Archer’s emergency communiqué had roused her from a deep sleep, and only the desperate, almost frantic urgency in his voice had kept her from pointing out the time difference between San Francisco and London, or the fact that tomorrow was her son’s first Christmas Eve. Finding transport to Starfleet Command at zero three in the morning hadn’t been as difficult as she’d feared – there was *always* someone awake at the space port – but the half hour in a shuttlepod was approximately thirty-five minutes too long.

Yawning widely, she watched silently as the pilot began their rapid descent. He had followed an unusual flight path almost from takeoff, one that she now suspected was intended to get her to San Francisco as quickly as possible and with very few people aware of her presence. Even more ominous was that his comm. system was shut down; they were still squawking the proper IFF codes, but were otherwise going out of their way to avoid detection.

Frustrated at her inability to wake up, Hoshi fumbled through her travel bag until she found the package of caffeine pills normally reserved for the ridiculously long briefings Command liked her to attend. Tossing two in her mouth, she chased them with a swig of water while discreetly retrieving the small caliber handgun she'd begun carrying in the duffel. A gift from her father-in-law, the pistol was new and constructed of materials intended to defeat most scanners from detecting it, especially since most modern weapons were energy-based. Quickly verifying that the safety was on, Hoshi slid the weapon into her coat pocket, covering the sleight of hand with another drink from her water bottle.

"We're on final approach now, ma'am," the pilot announced. He was an ordinary-looking man, with average-sized arms and legs, and absolutely no distinguishing features to speak of. If she was pressed, Hoshi realized that she probably couldn't identify a single thing about him that was particularly memorable or appealing.

In short, he was a perfect spy.

Her sense of self-preservation chose that moment to rouse from its quiescent slumber, and Hoshi felt the last of her fatigue melt away as adrenaline began coursing through her veins, mixing with the caffeine she'd already swallowed and re-igniting the sense of worried anticipation she'd learned to loathe while serving aboard *Enterprise*. For the first time since she'd stumbled from Maddie's apartment where she'd left little Mal, she realized the potential danger she could be in. Jonathan Archer's voice could easily be faked – she'd done it at least twice while on *Enterprise* during her prank wars with Travis – and she had no way of knowing if they were actually heading toward Starfleet Command. For all she knew, they could be about to land in the Urals or in the middle of Australia.

"This is Sierra Foxtrot Niner Niner Two," the pilot said into the comm.-line, "to Starfleet Command. Requesting landing authorization."

"Authorization granted, Niner Niner Two," came the almost instant response. "We're lighting up platform five for you now."

A moment later, Hoshi could make out the pulsing flashes she recognized from her previous visits to Command headquarters. Distinctive beacon lights flickered and pulsed in a steady, hypnotic pattern, and the pilot banked the 'pod softly toward them. He activated the landing cycle almost before they were fully down, and half-turned in his seat to address her.

"A word of advice, Commander?" he asked with a dangerous glint in his eyes. "In the future, take the stim-pills before you leave your apartment." He pressed the button on his console that opened the main hatch. "And get a larger caliber weapon," he added. "That pea shooter you're carrying wouldn't stop someone who was really intent on hurting you."

"Understood," Hoshi replied as she stood. She gave him a tight smile. "What if I had AP rounds in it?" she asked as she started toward the hatch, her hand never releasing the pistol.

“Better,” the spy-pilot said, “but you still need something with more stopping power.” He turned his attention back to the flight station as Hoshi ducked out of the ‘pod, shaking her head at the eccentricities of intelligence agents.

The warm San Franciscan night air greeted her, and she breathed in deeply. If there was one thing she disliked living in England, it was the weather, especially after she’d grown accustomed to more tropical climes during her years as a teacher in South America. London – *especially* in December – was just too damned cold.

No one was there to meet her and once more, the hairs on the back of her neck stood at attention. Hefting the duffel and slinging it over her left shoulder, Hoshi descended down the ramp connecting the landing platform to the building proper, her eyes narrowed and her hand gripping the handgun tightly. Behind her, the whine of the shuttlepod’s engines grew louder and, a moment later, the craft climbed back into the sky, vanishing into the night sky within seconds.

Once inside Starfleet Command, her concern only grew. Normally a bustling scene of organized chaos, it seemed frighteningly desolate for the headquarters of the organization currently waging an interstellar war. Hoshi glanced at a wall clock – twenty-two fifteen – and frowned. Even this late in the evening, there should be *someone* here!

A whisper of movement caused her head to snap around and she froze at the sight of two heavily armed figures stepping through an open doorway. One of them she recognized instantly – Sergeant (now Petty Officer Second Class) Susan Money had been one of Hoshi’s favorite MACOs to play cards with during the Xindi mission – but the other person seemed only vaguely familiar.

“Commander Sato,” Money said, gesturing toward the door. “Admiral Archer is waiting for you.” Nodding, Hoshi gestured for the two security troopers to precede her; Money gave her a grim smirk, obviously recognizing her discomfort, before backtracking a half step ahead of the other trooper. Still unsettled, Hoshi followed them.

She stepped through the doorway and into a large conference room. Dominating the chamber was an immense, rectangular table nearly two meters in length. It had a glassed-over surface, and Hoshi could make out what appeared to be digital images underneath. Clustered around the holo-table were faces she knew well – Admiral Archer, Lieutenant Reynolds, Gannet Brooks, Amanda Cole, Derek Kelly (now sporting petty officer first class rank) – and all of them were wearing combat gear. Even the normally telegenic Brooks appeared battle-hardened and grim as she watched them make their plans.

Hoshi suddenly had a very bad feeling about this.

“No,” Reynolds was saying as she entered, “that won’t work, sir.” He began pointing to various spots on the table. “If we come in through there, we’ll be sitting ducks for any snipers on the upper levels.”

“Not to mention,” Cole added, “the lack of cover from the two ground floor kill pockets.” She was re-packing what looked to be a trauma care bag.

“Then what do you suggest?” Archer asked. His back was to Hoshi as he leaned over the holo-table.

“Full breaching assault,” Reynolds said instantly. Every single one of the ex-MACOs – all *Enterprise* veterans, Hoshi realized – nodded in agreement. “We go in hard and fast. If it moves, we shoot it. If it

doesn't move, we shoot it anyway.”

“And if it's down,” Kelly added with a grin, “we shoot it again, just to be sure.”

“On stun, of course,” Cole said. “Your comtech is here, Admiral.” Archer jerked his head around to look at her, and Hoshi drew in a sharp breath at the new lines on his face. He tried to smile in greeting, but it looked more like a grimace.

“Glad you could make it, Hoshi,” he said, as if she'd ever had a choice otherwise. He gestured toward the table. “We need your expertise here,” he added. She stepped closer, nodding politely to Kelly as the petty officer shifted out of the way for her. Hoshi frowned.

“We need a way to jam both incoming and outgoing comm. signals at the compound,” Lieutenant Reynolds said. “If they know we're coming, this could get real ugly, real fast.”

“Why exactly are we doing this?” Hoshi asked. “This is where Admiral Gardner lives,” she pointed out. Instantly, the tension in the briefing room skyrocketed.

“He's been suborned,” Archer said softly. He nodded to Cole who promptly passed him a stack of photos. “By Rajiin,” the admiral continued as he offered the images.

Hoshi's blood ran cold.

She stared at the photos for a long moment, barely able to fathom what she was seeing. Suddenly, Archer's visible discomfort made sense, as did the fact they were recruiting MACOs who had served under him in the Expanse. They had a bond, all of them, and a couple of the soldiers had even been injured when Rajiin was taken – or was that a staged escape? – from the ship. She looked up, met the admiral's eyes, and nodded in understanding.

“The compound is using Mark Twelve comm. arrays,” Kelly said as he watched her. “We're trying to figure out a way to jam them remotely without tipping our hand.”

“You can't,” Hoshi said. She shouldered him out of the way – ever since he'd pulled her off that Xindi weapon (and she woke up while he was carrying her to sickbay), they'd developed a friendly camaraderie that she'd never quite been able to explain. At least Malcolm and Kelly's wife had seemed to accept it without perceiving jealousy where none was warranted. “Mark Twelves use an oscillating bandwidth,” she explained, “so you need the frequencies being used and invert them.” She pointed to a spot on the floor plans. “Put me there,” she said, “and I can knock them out for you.”

“Are you sure?” Archer asked. “Can't you show someone how to do it? I'm pretty handy with electronics.”

“Can you show someone how to fly like you do, sir?” Hoshi shrugged. “It's more art than science really. I need to be there, on the ground, with the rest of you if we have a chance at this.” She forced a smile on her face. “Besides,” she said, “Derek needs somebody to make sure he gets home in time for his little girl's dance recital.”

“The wife would shoot me in the head if I missed it, sir,” Kelly added with a grin of his own.

“He’s not kidding,” Money interjected. “That woman scares the crap out of me.” The laughter sounded real enough, but Hoshi had been around enough MACOs to recognize when they were hiding their fear behind bluster.

“Then we do this,” Reynolds said. “Kelly, get her some gear.”

Hoshi winced. She wondered if this day could get any worse.



His day had gone from bad to worse.

Lip curled with frustration, Rick Eisler knelt before the corpse stretched out on the deck in front of him. At first glance, there didn’t appear to be any of the telltale signs of a struggle – there were no burns from a phase pistol or disruptor beam, the exposed skin was free of any ligature marks thus ruling out strangulation, and even the body’s posture seemed far too natural for it to have been staged.

And yet, despite all the evidence in front of him, Rick knew something was wrong.

He rocked back on his heels, frowning deeply as he studied the corpse they had discovered only moments earlier. Slumped down inside one of the mostly automated engineering monitoring stations on E Deck, the corpse was still relatively warm despite the obvious lack of life signs, and one could almost be fooled into thinking the Vulcan was asleep or in one of those healing trances Rick had read so much about but only seen once (and then, it was his *human* captain who had been in it!) Careful examination and a quick sensor scan revealed otherwise, however.

Arrayed behind and around him, the three-man security team he’d handpicked to accompany him remained silent, their weapons at the ready as they guarded his back and awaited instructions. All three were young – the oldest was barely twenty-five – but showed none of the rank immaturity Rick had come to expect from Starfleet crewmen their age.

“Hensen,” he called out. The computer and sensor operator responded to the implied question instantly, lowering his hand-held scanner as he spoke.

“No signs of explosives or other foreign objects detected, sir, so I don’t think it’s booby trapped.” Eisler nodded before carefully rolling the corpse over, relaxing fractionally when no concealed canister of nerve gas or flesh-eating bacteria popped into view. As with the front, there were no signs of trauma. He frowned before triggering his helmet comlink.

“ENG-Six, TAC-Six,” he spoke. Anna’s voice responded a moment later.

“This is Hess,” she said, a smile in her voice. “What d’ya got for me, Rick?”

“Are you receiving my signal?” he asked, ignoring her complete breach of communication protocol. From past experience, he knew she would only get more informal if he called attention to it.

“Yup.” Rick could hear the steady click of her fingers upon a keyboard and knew she was accessing the miniature camera installed on his helmet. “Pan around,” Hess ordered. “Let me get a visual of

your location.” He obeyed without comment, grimacing at the need for such low-tech methods. “E Deck,” she murmured. “You’re just outside Hydroponics Two. The only thing worth sabotaging in that area is the-”

“Secondary impulse thruster on the starboard side,” Rick finished for her. “We checked it out the moment we found the body.” He straightened from his crouch and gave the corridor another once-over, hoping against hope that *something* would stand out and draw his attention. “There are no signs of tampering with the plasma coolant tank in this section either.”

“Well ... damn.” Hess was silent for a moment. “I can’t think of any other high value targets in that area, Rick,” she said. “Maybe he just wanted to look at the pretty plants in Hydroponics and keeled over in shock when he saw them?” Eisler didn’t bother replying to nonsensical question.

“How long until internals are back online?” he asked.

“A minimum of an hour,” she replied, “plus or minus *your* usual level of efficiency times two.” Rick was suddenly glad for the concealing nature of his helmet as it hid his smirk at the coded message she’d buried within her reply. For all of his complaints about her apparent lack of professionalism, Anna knew when to play the jokester and when to set it aside. *Twenty minutes*, he translated as he glanced in the direction of the nearby cargo bays. He mentally ran through anything the manifest before admitting there was nothing there explosive or even potentially lethal.

“Sooner would be better than later,” he said. Anna’s answering bark of laughter rang in his ears.

“*Jawohl, mein Stabskapitänleutnant!*” she retorted, using an obsolete German naval rank roughly equivalent to the one he currently held. Her pronunciation was surprisingly good, but Rick wasn’t surprised, not with her last name being Hess. “I’ll let the DC crews know that the Rabid Doberman is on the warpath!” Anna said with an accompanying snicker at her use of her new favorite nickname for him. With a loud click, she killed the comm. connection.

“Wakulich, Victrim,” Rick called out. The two petty officers shuffled closer to where he stood, but kept their eyes on their respective corridors like their training taught them. “Get this body to Phlox,” Eisler instructed calmly. “I need a cause of death ASAP.” As the two bent to obey, he frowned. “And for God’s sake,” he said, “stay alert.”

“Aye, sir,” Victrim responded as he hefted the body over his shoulder. The pair darted away, Wakulich on point to cover his partner.

“TAC-Six, COB.” The sudden hail caused Rick to frown.

“Six, go.”

“E-Deck, Port Side,” Master Chief Mackenzie said without further preamble. Rick started forward at a quick half-jog, half-walk, PO2 Hensen directly behind him. “Unusual sounds detected in upper access corridors,” the COB continued, referencing the section of space between D and E decks containing the work tubes and plasma conduits that powered the ship like arteries and veins. “ORDO investigating,” Mackenzie finished, using Ensign Stiles’ position as ordinance officer instead of his rank. The comm.-line easily carried across the COB’s annoyance and frustration at the young officer’s eagerness to prove himself, and Eisler tried not to sigh in agreement.

“Copy,” Rick replied. He quickened his pace, hoping the foolish idiot wouldn’t do something to stupid. *God save us all from single-pippers seeking medals*, he reflected morbidly.

He had barely taken three steps when the comm.-line exploded with the sounds of a firefight.

Startled screams jolted him into a headlong dash, Petty Officer Hensen directly behind him. The distinct whine of pulse rifles echoed across the communications line, followed instantly by the lower, more guttural sound of a Vulcan disruptor being fired. Rick’s lungs began to burn as he forced himself to move faster, to cover the eighty plus meters as quickly as humanly possible. Behind him, Hensen fell back, unable to maintain the grueling pace Eisler set as he sprinted forward, and in the back of his mind, Rick made a mental note to start demanding even higher standards of physical fitness for his security people.

He cut through Launch Bay One, slowing only long enough for the doors to begin curling open before hurling himself forward once more. As he covered the last ten or fifteen meters, Rick could hear the wail of weapons fire echoing through the corridors and winced at their proximity. He skidded to a halt before he reached a T-junction. Phased plasma packets exploded along the wall directly before him and he dropped into a crouch before rounding the corner, his rifle at the ready.

Chaos reigned. Two armored figures were down – Ensign Stiles and Petty Officer Hoffman by the IFF codes that popped up upon the visor of Rick’s helmet; their life signs were weak but still present – with the remaining two hugging poor cover as they sent steady streams of fire down the accessway leading to the primary port impulse drives. Eisler bit back a curse as he waited for the target they were shooting at to appear.

“Sitrep!” he demanded as Hensen rejoined him, breath coming in ragged gasps. One of the armored figures – MCPO Mackenzie – gave him a quick glance before reorienting his full attention down the causeway.

“Two hostiles,” the COB reported. “They caught the ensign and Hoffman by surprise before retreating toward the nacelle access compartment!”

“And you’re *shooting* at them?” Rick asked incredulously. During his initial shipboard training, he’d learned what could happen if the warp coolant were ignited and the thought horrified him. Mackenzie gave him a sidelong look, though Eisler couldn’t make out his expression.

“I already killed all power to the access doors,” Anna’s voice announced over the comm.-line. “Unless they’ve got torches in there, they’re not going to get to the nacelle.”

“They can still do lot of bloody damage in there,” Mackenzie growled, “especially if they can get to the fusion reactors for the impulse drives.” Rick nodded.

“Anna,” he said, slipping into his native language and hoping she remembered enough of it to understand what he was saying, “*licht aus. Eine minute.*”

“*Fertig*,” Hess replied. When Mackenzie glanced back in his direction, Rick gave him a discreet hand signal comprising of two fingers tapping against the stock of his rifle. The COB nodded in understanding before reaching for one of the stun grenades secured to his gear. Eisler nearly told him

not to bother – flashbangs were only of moderate use against Vulcans thanks to the inner eyelid that protected them from their planet’s searing light – before deciding to follow suit. One hundred and seventy decibels of sound was bad enough for humans, but it could be positively crippling for a Vulcan with their greatly enhanced sense of hearing.

Exactly one minute after he issued his orders, the lights around them flickered and died. Rick instantly armed and hurled his stun grenade toward the target zone, and could hear Hensen, Mackenzie and PO1 Riley do the same. With a loud *crack* and flashes of brilliant light, the flashbangs exploded, and Eisler leaped forward, the light enhancement technology in his helmet activating automatically. His rifle leading the way, he raced down the accessway.

With a bestial roar, a Vulcan male surged out of the darkness and charged toward them, madness and fury stamped on his face. Emerald blood was pouring out of his ears and his eyes were as wide as physically possible in a vain attempt to make out their forms. Rick shifted his aim slightly, knelt and squeezed the trigger. Pulses of phased particles slammed into the male with bruising force, spinning him around and causing him to slam into the bulkhead. The Vulcan screamed once again – a terrible, raspy sound that sounded like glass being crushed – and leaped forward once more, absorbing another salvo of fire from all four of the shooters. He plowed into Riley like a linebacker – though it looked more accidental than intentional – and sent the petty officer tumbling to the deck. Rick cursed as he fired again, this time aiming his shots at the Vulcan’s exposed head. Staggered, the male stumbled, took another step and toppled to his knees.

Pulling another flashbang from his belt, Eisler sent it sliding down the access corridor and into the monitoring room. It erupted instantly and he sprang forward, Mackenzie at his side. The COB’s breath caught at the sight waiting for them: the warp plasma conduit that dominated the center of the room had been cracked open.

Evidently, the saboteurs had torches after all.

Movement to his left caused Rick to snap his rifle around just in time to see a female Vulcan lurking just beyond the open hatch leading to the plasma accelerator. Before he could react, she manipulated something on her wrist and vanished in a flare of dazzling light and sparkles.

“*Scheisse!*” he snarled. “We have a hostile loose! I need those internals back online *now!*” Anna’s voice broke across the comm.-line a heartbeat later.

“Transporter activated!” Hess exclaimed. “Security teams to D Deck!”

“All available sweeper teams,” Rick ordered, “converge on transporter!” He noticed Mackenzie kneeling before the exposed plasma conduit. “Riley, stay here with the COB. Hensen, with me.” Without another word, Eisler sprinted from the monitoring room, pausing only long enough to shoot the unconscious Vulcan one more time. Just in case.

It always paid to be cautious.



They were about to throw caution to the wind.

With Petty Officers Third Class Brown and Hamboyan on point, the assault team spread quickly through the sealed off section of Starfleet Command and into the main headquarters building, their weapons lowered but already charged and ready for use. Including the admiral, Lieutenant Commander Sato, and the Brooks spook, they numbered an unlucky – or perhaps *really* lucky depending upon one's point of view – thirteen. With their combat loadout and the grim set of their features, it was impossible to conceal that they were a strike team on their way to a mission.

So they didn't bother trying.

Instead, nearly every member of the assault group had donned concealing helmets on Scott's orders that, along with the darkened combat armor they were already wearing, lent them a sinister, intimidating presence that prevented even the bravest or most curious of souls from getting in their way. Only the admiral wasn't wearing the protective head gear – a fact that continued to cause Reynolds' stomach to twist and snarl in worry. Archer's logic behind his exposure was perfect: no one would dare stop the Vice Chief of Naval Operations, especially if he were surrounded by heavily armed guards. If, however, all they saw was a team of faceless, helmeted soldiers racing through the corridors of Command, panic might set in.

Under normal circumstances, such blatant activity would still have caused some sort of reaction in the Starfleet officers and noncomms scattered throughout the Command building. Thanks to Brooks, however, the sight of Archer being hurriedly escorted to safety was something no one questioned. Calling in markers with her associates in Intelligence, Brooks had arranged for rumors about credible threats against the admiral's life to be leaked. The grapevine – ever the lifeblood of the military – took over from there, and, based on the reaction of the people Scott could see, the news had already spread.

As they neared the junction that would carry them to the landing pads, Scott triggered his communication headset and spoke softly into the throat mike.

“Archangel seeks vertigo,” he said into the coded frequency previously arranged by the spooks that Brooks worked for. “Talon breathes silence.” The response was almost instantaneous.

“Vertigo arises.” Concealed by his helmet, Reynolds allowed himself a brief smile of satisfaction; his plan hinged on reliable, *discreet* pilots who could be trusted implicitly and luck had been with him when he caught sight of this particular man's identity on the duty roster. Still, Scott hadn't expected for things to fall into place as quickly as they did.

He just hoped the rest of his plan came together as easily.

A pair of security personnel on nightly rounds sprang out of the way as the team rounded the corner and continued past the duo without pausing. The door leading to the landing pad slid open, revealing a pair of Mark Three shuttlepods already settling down on the tarmac. Slightly larger than the 'pods Scott had become accustomed to while serving aboard *Enterprise*, the Threes could hold eight people apiece instead of the usual six that a Mark Two carried. Words weren't necessary as the team quickly split into two groups, and Reynolds preceded the admiral into their 'pod.

Seated at its controls, Paul Mayweather glanced back for a moment before quickly returning his attention to the displays blinking at him. Admiral Archer's step faltered briefly as he recognized the commanding officer of the UES *Horizon*, and he shot a surprised look at Reynolds. Scott shrugged.

“Secure,” PO2 Richards announced from the hatch, and Mayweather responded instantly. With a muted growl, the engines of the ‘pod flared and the small craft lifted off the tarmac.

“Make for the Halifax orbital platform,” Scott said as he leaned closer to where the commander sat. “Silent running.”

“Silent running, aye,” Mayweather retorted wryly. “ETA six minutes.”

“Do I even want to know how you got involved in this, Paul?” Admiral Archer asked. Mayweather gave him a quick smile.

“Lieutenant Reynolds said you needed two ‘pods no question asked,” he said before shrugging. “So, here I am ... no questions asked. Figured it was the least I could do for you after how you’ve come through for us Boomers.”

“I didn’t do it for you,” Archer replied softly. “I did it for Travis.”

“Why do you think *I’m* doing this?” Mayweather asked with a pained smile. He refocused his attention on his flight controls, and the admiral pulled back, obviously recognizing that the conversation was over. He gave Scott another look.

“Halifax?” he asked.

“Not here, sir,” Reynolds replied sharply. Archer frowned and then quickly nodded.

“We’re being hailed,” Commander Mayweather said minutes later. He toggled a button on his controls, and a crisp, no-nonsense feminine voice emerged from the speakers.

“Repeat, unidentified shuttles on approach vector, you are entering restricted airspace. Transmit your clearance codes or we will fire upon you.”

“They’re locking weapons on us,” Mayweather announced before the warning could be finished. Scott leaned forward and depressed the transmit button.

“Halifax platform,” he said, “we are at case orange. Authentication: black omega. Code: November, X-Ray, Zero, One, Alpha. Please confirm.” The comm.-line was silent for a long, tense moment.

“Black omega confirmed,” the woman declared a moment later. Surprise and worry made her speak more quickly than entirely appropriate. “You are cleared for docking.” Reynolds blew out a soft breath of relief. He could feel the admiral’s curious eyes on him, but didn’t bother explaining. Jonathan Archer wasn’t a MACO, so he didn’t need to know MACO secrets.

The ‘pod slid into the cramped landing bay with barely a bump, and Mayweather began cycling down the engines almost at once. Seconds later, the second shuttlepod slid into position alongside them.

“We have a green light,” Richards announced from where he stood by the hatch, and Scott gave his team a thumbs up to begin exiting the ‘pod. Before he could join them, Mayweather grabbed his arm.

“I don’t know what’s going on,” the commander said, “but if you need someone to pull you and your team out of a hotspot, I’ll be here.” Reynolds shook his head.

“Thanks, sir,” he replied, “but this is an all or nothing op.” He hesitated before pressing on. “And the less you know about this, the safer you are, Commander.”

Archer was waiting outside the ‘pod, conversing softly with Lieutenant Commander Sato-Reed and Miss Brooks, when Scott stepped down from shuttlecraft. Most of the team were nowhere in sight, though Reynolds knew that was because they were already gathering the equipment they’d come here to acquire. The admiral gave him a quick look and Reynolds grimaced underneath his helmet. *Might as well get this over with now*, he told himself.

“Admiral,” he called out, “we need to talk.” Archer’s eyes narrowed, but Scott pressed on. “About your place on this op.”

“I’m going with you,” the admiral stated firmly, his tone implacable and his stance resolute.

“Then you’re gonna have to do *exactly* what I tell you, sir,” Reynolds countered. “This is a mission that requires careful teamwork, and I can’t have you running off to be a big damned hero.” Commander Sato smirked before quickly hiding the expression behind one hand. The admiral was less amused.

“I will do,” he said, “what I have to do.”

“No, sir,” Scott replied flatly. “You’ll do what I tell you or I’ll have you stunned and locked in a closet until we’re done.”

Archer blinked in surprise. His eyes narrowed.

“You’re bluffing,” he said.

“Sergeant Cole,” Reynolds said in response. “Shoot the admiral, please.” Amanda drew her sidearm, rotated the selector switch to stun, and drew a bead on Archer.

“Wait!” Archer snapped. His head darted between Amanda and Scott. “I need to see this through!” he pointed out. Reynolds crossed his arm.

“And *I* need you to survive, sir, not go running off like you usually do.” At the admiral’s glower, Scott stepped closer. “This is an infantry mission, sir, and you are a forty-five year old man still recovering from open heart surgery who leads a relatively sedentary life style.” Archer recoiled at the matter-of-fact recitation, but Reynolds pushed on. “If you can’t follow orders on an operation like this,” he said, “then you have no place on the ground with us.” He directed his next comments to Brooks and Sato. “That goes for the two of you as well.” The admiral frowned, and then nodded.

“You have my word,” he said, and Scott relaxed slightly.

“Why Halifax?” Brooks asked a moment later. “This platform is obsolete.”

“It was a MACO training facility,” Reynolds replied. As he spoke, PO1 Kelly’s team reappeared,

badly encumbered by the gear they had disappeared to get. “It has everything we’re going to need: rebreathers, a transporter...”

“Transporter?” Sato repeated with a frown. “The compound has pattern scramblers. We can’t beam in from here.” Scott grinned.

“I know.”

“Then I take it you have a plan,” Admiral Archer guessed. His attention was focused on the equipment Kelly was laying out and Reynolds could see a flare of recognition in the older man’s eyes.

“Ever heard of a Darwin Drop?” Scott asked. Archer’s head snapped around, his eyes widening with comprehension. “I take that as a yes.”

“Cool,” PO3 Brown murmured. He had joined them unobtrusively and was carrying rebreather attachments for their armor. “I’ve always wanted to try one of those.”

“I know I’m going to regret this,” Sato said with a sigh, “but what exactly *is* a Darwin Drop?”

“You’ll love it, Hoshi,” Kelly answered, grinning like a madman. “We beam in *over* the target and then HALO drop the rest of the way.”

“Helluva rush,” Money said. “Almost as much fun as an orbital insertion.”

“You’ve pulled a Casey Maneuver?” Hamboyan asked. He was helping Woods strap on his harness. “That must have been a wild ride.”

“Just don’t break anything if you can help it,” Amanda interjected. “I wasn’t able to get any of the *good* painkillers for my medkit.”

“HALO?” Sato repeated. She looked like she was about to be sick. “As in parachuting?”

“Yup.” Kelly hefted a chute for her to see. “Don’t worry,” he said at her aghast expression. “You and I will be tandem jumping. I’ve done this before, so you’ll be okay.” The lieutenant commander swallowed before shaking her head in stunned disbelief.

“You’re all crazy,” she muttered. Kelly laughed.

“We’re not crazy,” he retorted. “We’re MACOs!”

“Hoo-rah!” the rest of the team – including Scott, to his mild chagrin – automatically shouted.

“More like marines,” Hoshi said sullenly. Hamboyan’s eyes lit up.

“Starfleet Marines!” he declared with a loud laugh. “Semper fi, bitches!” Reynolds shook his head at their antics, wishing he could shed the officer persona he’d had to cultivate since his battlefield commission if just for a moment so he could join them in their pre-battle, tension relieving jokes. *Focus on the mission*, he reminded himself. *Bring them all back alive and then you can fool around as much as you like.*

Unconsciously, his eyes drifted to Amanda at that thought.

“Admiral,” he began, but Archer waved it off.

“I know how to use a chute, Lieutenant,” he said. “Test pilot, remember?” Archer flashed a sudden grin that robbed him of decades. “The last time I had to use one though,” he revealed, “was right after ditching a particularly expensive prototype. Admiral Forrest was *very* grumpy.”

“I bet he was,” Scott replied. He gave Brooks a quick glance, noting at once how expertly she was handling her gear. She must have sensed his observation as she looked up and smiled before continuing to secure the harness to her battle rig. Reynolds shook his head – the reporter was turning out to be a regular Jane Bond – and turned away from her.

Just in time to find Amanda staring at him with muted anger, despair and jealousy in her eyes. Despite his better instincts, Scott shot her a smirk and a wink. She glanced away, but he could see the relieved smile starting to form.

“All right, people,” he said loudly, “you know the drill: shoot straight, don’t miss, stick with your buddy, and don’t get dead.” He pinned the admiral with a look. “Sergeant Cole,” he called out, keeping his eyes on Archer as he spoke, “you’re in charge of Charlie team. That means the admiral is yours to baby sit.”

“And I *will* shoot you if you try to be a hero, sir,” Amanda declared to a ripple of laughter. Archer chuckled.

“So noted,” he replied. Inhaling deeply, he straightened slightly and Scott was amazed to notice how the entire team instinctively reacted by giving him their undivided attention. “None of us want to do what we’re about to do,” Archer said grimly, “but the Expanse taught all of us that sometimes, we have to make hard decisions for the greater good.” He looked in each soldier’s eyes as he continued. “We don’t know what Rajiin has done to Admiral Gardner,” he reminded them, “or what she’s done to the admiral’s guards, so be prepared for anything, but remember: they aren’t the enemy. *She’s* the enemy. And we need to stop her, whatever the cost.” Archer dropped his hand upon his holstered sidearm in what appeared to be an unconscious gesture. “Humanity is depending upon us to do this right.”

“Semper fi,” Hamboyan murmured, and a moment later, the rest of the team repeated it, as if it were a mantra or a holy invocation. Scott stepped forward to flank the admiral and gave the team leaders – Sergeant Cole, Petty Officer First Class Kelly, and Petty Officer Second Class Money – careful nods. When he spoke, he infused his words with all of the calm authority he could muster.

“Let’s roll.”

## ACT FOUR

It was going to be a bumpy ride.

His face creased in a tight scowl, Soval fought the urge to fidget as he slowly paced around the vehicle that would carry him to his final destination. In its current configuration, it appeared as nothing more than a large cylinder three meters in length and diameter. The exterior hull appeared at first glance to be seamless, though a closer inspection proved this to be false.

As he finished his third circuit around the vehicle, Soval fought the urge to sigh. When he first approached these particular humans about smuggling him onto Vulcan, he had done so knowing well their reputation for accepting missions that normal, *sane* individuals would automatically refuse. Even their fellow humans gave the crew of the ECS *Torchwood* a wide berth, as if concerned that the propensity for risk-taking by the ship's captain was an infectious disease. Vulcan Intelligence had utilized this crew in the past for particularly dangerous operations requiring plausible deniability – discreetly, of course – in much the same way that Starfleet's Special Operations Branch used them.

But this ... this was so far beyond what Soval had expected that he did not know how to react, especially since he had anticipated them simply using a transporter to put him in place.

“Do you like it?” the *Torchwood's* captain asked. Gregor Molyneux was slightly taller than Soval, with dark hair and a mischievous glint in his eyes. He carried himself with an easy grace, denoting a high degree of confidence in his natural skills, but there remained a furtive, almost paranoid air about him, as if he were always watching the shadows for assassins to appear. Despite his flamboyant reputation within intelligence circles, he was dressed rather conservatively, though the thick longcoat he favored seemed decades out of style.

“It is ... not what I expected,” Soval answered honestly. He clasped his hands together at the small of his back and frowned. “I am concerned.”

“No need to be,” Molyneux replied. He stepped closer to the vehicle and rested his gloved right hand atop it. “We've used this trick a dozen times now,” he added with a tight smile. “Works every time.”

“You have never attempted it on Vulcan,” Soval pointed out. “This technique may have allowed you to obtain a Tellarite freighter,” he said, noting the sudden tightening of the captain's shoulders at Soval's seemingly casual reference to a mission he should not know about, “but it may prove unsuccessful against Vulcan sensor nets. They are quite superior to those you have previously encountered in your ... exploits.” Molyneux suddenly smirked.

“Three things,” he said as he held up his left fist with the thumb extended. “One, we *have* used it against Vulcan sensors before.” Soval's eyebrow shot up at this revelation and the human before him grinned broadly. “Two,” Molyneux continued, unwrapping his pointing finger from the fist, “*you* came to *me* for help.”

“And I paid a rather significant sum of money for your assistance,” Soval intoned. The captain nodded.

“For which me and my crew thank you heartily,” Molyneux said. He added a third finger to the previous two. “And three,” he said, “we're already past the point of no return. We hit Vulcan atmo in ten minutes.”

Soval glanced away, grimacing tightly at the realization that his options were exhausted. Following his conversation with his old associate, Tavaris, on Coridan, he had realized that he could not proceed without first determining if T’Pau was a Rihannsu plant. To that end, he decided the logical course of action was to confront her at a time when she was alone and unguarded. If she was actively cooperating with their lost cousins, Soval would kill her.

If he had to. If he could.

“Then my discomfort with this ... vehicle is not relevant,” he declared as he turned back toward the craft in question. Molyneux’s amusement dwindled and was quickly replaced by an expression of professionalism. He input a command into the device he wore on his wrist and instantly, a concealed hatch atop the cylinder began opening. Another moment later, a crewman pushed a wheeled ladder into place and Soval grimly began climbing it.

“You’ll have full control once released,” Captain Molyneux said as he followed Soval up the ladder. “The flight computer will alert you when to eject from the housing.”

“These controls are in Vulcan,” Soval stated as he lowered himself into the cramped cockpit. The displays before him were rudimentary at best, but had all of the necessities for flight: altimeter, air speed, radar.

“My crew chief thought you’d appreciate it,” the captain said. He was silent as he watched Soval strap in before finally giving into his visible curiosity. “I would love to know,” he said with narrowed eyes, “why a Vulcan ambassador has to *sneak* onto his homeworld.” Soval gave him a flat look and raised an eyebrow.

“And I would be equally interested to learn how the son of the Earth president became a common smuggler,” he replied calmly. Molyneux gave him a grin.

“There’s nothing *common* about me, Ambassador,” he retorted before shaking his head. “Long story,” he said. “Another time perhaps.”

“Another time,” Soval agreed. He glanced up and met Molyneux’s eyes. “Peace and long life, Captain,” he said calmly.

“*Dif-tor heh smusma,*” the human replied in perfect, unaccented Vulcan. He disappeared from sight as he clambered down the ladder, and Soval secured the canopy. A rumble vibrated through the vehicle as it was lowered into place, and Soval focused on his breathing as he grasped the flight stick.

And waited.

The ten minutes to Vulcan atmosphere crawled by with agonizing slowness and gave him far too much time to think. A thousand different things could go wrong before he was cut loose and he considered each one of them. The *Torchwood* could be identified as the freelance covert intelligence craft it was, even if it had been the *David Webb* when they departed Coridan or the *Jack Bristow* when Vulcan intelligence last utilized their special talents. If they deviated too far from the designated flight path, planetary starship controllers might notice and scramble interceptors. T’Pau might have been warned. Molyneux might be selling him out.

“One minute to drop,” a feminine voice announced through the intraship comm. system. A high-pitched whine presaged a muted rumble that could only be the cargo bay doors opening. Instantly, Soval could feel wind begin shaking the craft. With his left hand, the ambassador flipped a switch that activated his own communications systems; it was capable of only passive reception and could not transmit, but would allow him to eavesdrop as necessary.

“Thirty seconds,” the human female announced a moment later. She reminded Soval of Lieutenant Commander Sato for some inexplicable reason and he decided it must have been due to her speech patterns. “Fifteen seconds. Fourteen. Thirteen. Twelve.”

Soval tuned the countdown out as exhaled deeply, purging all traces of emotion from his body. He would need total control in the coming seconds and any slip could be fatal. For a moment, he found himself idly wishing that he believed in some sort of supernatural entity or god as so many of the humans did.

He could certainly use the help.

“Two. One. Drop.”

Wind howled around the cylinder as the clamps holding it in place released, and Soval’s breath caught as he felt the sudden negative g-force send his stomach into his feet. A digital heads-up display snapped into existence in front of him instantly, and he ground his teeth in mild worry at how quickly he was falling. Already, the massive canyon he would use to conceal his ejection of the external housing was looming large in the viewscreen, and he silently congratulated Captain Molyneux on a perfect placement. To sensors, it would appear as if nothing untoward had occurred beyond perhaps a large chunk of ice falling from the *Torchwood* as it entered Vulcan atmosphere; such things often happened with older human ships, which was the reason why their assigned flight paths so often took them over the uninhabited regions of the planet.

A soft chime echoed through the cockpit and Soval gratefully depressed a flashing green button. Instantly, the craft shuddered as the stealth housing exploded away from the core vehicle, tumbling away and filling any sensors directed in this region with dozens of distracting signatures that would appear as if the slab of ice was breaking apart during re-entry. It would – hopefully – provide just enough cover to prevent detection of the relatively tiny ultralight craft vanishing into the canyon. Wings slid into place, deploying with an ease that denoted careful maintenance, and Soval pulled back on the flight stick. The craft responded quickly, banking softly toward a gap in the canyon wall, and the ambassador glanced at the airspeed indicator as he raced through the air. A second turn beckoned and he maneuvered through it just as easily, marveling at the grace of the unwieldy-looking vehicle.

It was ... exhilarating.

Air resistance gradually slowed the ultralight, but he successfully maintained his low profile as he neared his destination. By the time he had landed, the sun had vanished from the sky, and Soval knew that he was running out of time. He estimated that an hour remained before T’Pau reached the Syrannite shrine she visited on this, the eve of Surak’s death for her annual ablutions. As First Minister, she would be accompanied by the ritual pair of bodyguards who would stand watch while she sought guidance for the coming year from the Father of Logic. It was an old tradition only recently reinstated by her government, but one that had been quite well received by the general populace.

The wings of the ultralight retracted without a sound once he had landed, and Soval quickly gathered his gear. As instructed by Molyneux, he depressed a second button on the flight panel before abandoning it. Fully expecting it to explode or dissolve in a puddle of plastics, he was actually startled when it flickered and vanished in the swirling motes common to transporter beams. His surprise faded, though, and was replaced by a flash of annoyance he was unable to completely suppress. If they had access to a transporter, why did they bother with such low tech means as this?

*Humans*, Soval scoffed mentally as he began picking his way through the rocky debris leading to the Syrrannite shrine.

It was slow going, with stone detritus from eroded canyon walls blocking his path, and Soval felt the muscles in his body begin to burn at the strain he put them through. He was certainly in better shape than he had been months earlier – a life constantly on the run had seen to that – but improved physical fitness could never mitigate the fact that he was already entering the twilight of his life. These sorts of antics were best left to the young, to children like T’Pol or T’Pau herself who had more than a handful of decades remaining.

The tertiary entrance to the shrine was exactly where it was supposed to be, concealed from casual view by a large overhang of rock. He technically was not supposed to be aware of this passageway as it had been a closely guarded secret amongst the Syrrannite leadership, but T’Les had passed on her knowledge of it to him in a carefully worded missive dated several days prior to her death. Not for the first time, he felt a wave of grief threaten him and harshly suppressed it. She had been such a lovely person, beautiful in mind and in katra, and he often found his thoughts turning to her. They had never been particularly close, despite Soval’s friendship with her late husband, but he had always been impressed with her and occasionally lamented that he had never sought to deepen his relationship with her after their respective mates had passed.

As expected, the tunnel was difficult to navigate due to the limited space and the decided lack of illumination. With each second that passed, Soval could sense his opportunity to reach T’Pau undetected slipping away, but he forced himself to maintain his sedate pace. Haste could lead to errors, and there was no room for mistakes, not with the entire future of the quadrant potentially at stake.

Voices drifted through the cavern, and he froze in place, quickly hugging what limited cover he had. There were two, he determined, and both were male. From the timbre of their words, Soval estimated that both were significantly younger than he, perhaps even younger than T’Pau, but of sufficient maturity to merit concern. His muscles protesting, he crept closer and peered around a particularly obtrusive stalagmite to see into the central chamber.

The two males were wearing the distinctive uniforms of Vulcan security officers, causing Soval to immediately assume they were part of T’Pau’s protective detail, but the unfamiliar language and the fact that they were planting micro-charges at key points within the meditation circle identified them as either Rihannsu or allies of those who marched beneath the raptor’s wings. Soval’s fingers itched as he carefully drew his disruptor and took aim. He hesitated at the last minute and slowly lowered the weapon; shooting these traitors, no matter how tempting, would eliminate any chance of interacting with T’Pau.

So he waited.

The two traitors completed their tasks long minutes later, conversed softly, and quickly took their leave.

Soval watched them depart with a frown and quickly calculated how much time remained before the first minister arrived. At the same time, he re-examined the evidence before him: if the Rihannsu were planning to assassinate her and pin the blame on someone else (likely the Andorians or the humans, Soval theorized), then it was logical to presume she was not an agent or operative of theirs. And that meant he had to save her life.

Without allowing himself to reconsider, he sprang forward, thumbing the disruptor's beam coherence into its most intense setting. Locating the first of the charges – it looked to be of Andorian manufacture, he noted – Soval braced himself behind another outcropping of stone, took careful aim, and squeezed the trigger of his weapon. A streak of emerald energy lanced out, striking the explosive and causing it to instantly vaporize without detonating.

And Soval exhaled in relief.

He disabled all but one of the charges in that fashion – it would be needed as evidence – and then retraced his steps to his earlier concealing position to wait. The urge to smile was intense, but he suppressed it, silently promising himself to dedicate more time to meditation once this latest crisis had abated. The clatter of boots upon rock caused him to tense, and he gripped the disruptor tightly.

Preceded by the two traitors, T'Pau stepped into the central chamber. Her nose twitched and she cast about the hollowed out room for the source of the smell even as the two 'guards' glanced directly at the smoking holes that had stored their charges. Soval could see the surprise flash across their faces and they instinctively went for their holstered weapons.

Soval struck first.

He fired only twice, but did so from a position of concealment and with total surprise. Without even the opportunity to howl in pain, the two traitors vanished as the disruptor beam excited the atoms within their bodies and shattered the electromagnetic field that held them together. Both men blinked out of existence.

To her credit, T'Pau displayed no visible sign of concern as Soval stepped into view, though he knew she had to be close to panic. Her eyes narrowed in recognition, then widened when he holstered his weapon.

"Greetings, First Minister," he said calmly. "We have much to talk about." In response, T'Pau carefully adjusted her hands in a gesture obviously intended to placate him and raised an eyebrow.

Soval hoped this had not been a mistake.



This had been a terrible, terrible mistake.

Shuffling awkwardly in place, Hoshi Sato-Reed grimaced as the tether connecting her to Petty Officer First Class Kelly kept her anchored in place against his chest. She was more nervous than she wanted to admit about the coming deployment and their current inability to do anything but *wait* was slowly driving her mad. The ex-MACOs seemed unaffected by it – most were sprawled out on the surface of the large cargo transporter with their eyes closed – but then, their old organization had a phrase for this sort of

inaction: *hurry up and wait*.

The reason for their delay had more to do with timing than anything else. Following contact from an injured Nate Kemper who had evidently been recruited to monitor Admiral Gardner's compound from a hotel room, Lieutenant Reynolds had postponed their planned assault for a minimum of thirty minutes while a thunderstorm rolled in over the San Francisco area. Hoshi found herself torn between wholeheartedly agreeing with the delay (a storm would help conceal them from initial detection by the Mark Twelves, which would give her extra time to hack into the system) and dreading the very notion of materializing in the middle of cumulonimbus clouds.

"Relax," Kelly murmured softly. "We'll be fine." Hoshi shivered, more out of nerves than anything else. If this had been anyone but Derek, she might have actually considered their positions almost intimate, despite the layers of armor, clothing, and equipment between them.

"Says the person actually *trained* for this sort of thing," she retorted, shifting in place once more. It was impossible to actually get comfortable with Kelly effectively strapped to her back, and she wished they had the opportunity to detach the harness connecting her to him for just a few minutes. She needed to go to the bathroom. "I'm a linguist," Hoshi continued, "not a MACO." Kelly's chuckle rumbled through her.

"After this," he said with a grin she could actually hear, "I think you'll become an honorary member."

"Wonderful." Hoshi didn't bother trying to keep the sarcasm out of her voice, but it only made Derek laugh again.

"Gear up, people!" Reynolds snapped. "Two minutes to deployment." He frowned as the team began climbing to their feet. "And somebody wake up Woods."

The next one hundred and twenty seconds flashed by and Hoshi found herself on the verge of hyperventilating as the team took up their positions on the transporter. With their helmets on and the faceplates down, it was impossible to tell who was who except by their body language. In the very center of the pad, Admiral Archer stood straight, no visible evidence of worry, but Hoshi could see how he kept opening and closing his hands in an unconscious gesture. Like her and Gannet, he was wearing a combat softsuit that closely resembled the undergarment of the EV suit they had worn on several occasions in the past. At his side, Lieutenant Reynolds was discreetly checking out every member of the team, as if evaluating their states of mind and calculating odds of survival. A feminine figure equipped with a field medical kit shifted fractionally closer to the lieutenant and, for the span of a single heartbeat, their fingers touched in a way that conveyed deep affection, concern and an overriding need for reassurance from both of them.

Hoshi looked away.

A loud chime echoed through the transporter bay and the hard-faced petty officer manning the controls – she had been on the station when they arrived and never once questioned what they were doing or why – looked directly at Lieutenant Reynolds. He gave her a thumbs up and she nodded.

"Good hunting, sir," she said before manipulating the control board.

The world tilted out of view as her molecules were disassembled and sent racing toward Earth. Cold so

intense it threatened to freeze her blood slammed into her, as if she had dove nude into Arctic waters. Her breath caught at the uncomfortable sensation of being stretched, like she was in two places at the same time. Lightning crawled across her field of vision, transposed over her last view of Halifax station.

And suddenly, she was falling, hurtling toward the ground through a thick layer of clouds that blocked out all vision. Hoshi knew she was screaming, tried to stop herself, but the raw terror thundering through her veins made it impossible to shut up. Across the comm. line, she could make out other voices – Money laughing like she was actually enjoying this insanity, Brooks murmuring a prayer, and Archer’s heavy breathing. Only Derek’s reassuring grip on her arms kept Hoshi from complete panic.

They broke through the clouds an eternity later, and to Hoshi’s surprise, a quartet of bodies shot by her at incredible speed. Unlike her and Kelly’s almost spread-eagled stance, these four were oriented toward the ground face-first in an obvious attempt to gain additional acceleration. Through the fear still gripping her, she suddenly recalled that this was part of the plan: Lieutenant Reynolds and Alpha team – Money, Hamboyan and Woods – would touch down first outside the walled estate and create a perimeter for the rest of the unit.

“You’re doing fine, Hoshi!” Kelly whispered across the comm. line

“I hate you!” she shrieked in response. “I hate you all!”

The compound came into sight several long heartbeats later and Hoshi could feel Kelly begin tensing his body in preparation for the coming landing. Deploying the chutes too soon would make it easy to detect by the Mark Twelves, so they were holding off until the very last moment. From the body language of the entire ex-MACO team, Hoshi knew that the landing was going to be painful.

And it was. Kelly deployed the chute barely two hundred meters from the landing zone and the resulting rapid deceleration was worse than any car accident Hoshi had been involved in, including when her older sister completely totaled the family sedan on her sixteenth birthday. Even before she’d recovered from the chute’s release, they were hitting the ground with more force than she’d expected. Sharp, agonizing pain stabbed up through her legs and spine, but Kelly was already tucking them into a roll that distributed the shock of impact through the rest of her body.

“Move!” Kelly snapped. He released the harness that connected them with quick, practiced motions before pulling his rifle off of the battle rig attached to his armor. Hoshi pushed herself to her feet, her head still swimming and a dull ache yet pounding through her body. She gave the immediate area a quick glance, grimacing at the torrential sheets of rain plunging from the darkened sky, before darting toward the cover of a well-tended shrub. Pulling out her specialized gear, she powered the small computer up and input several rapid commands.

“Six, Charlie Actual.” Amanda Cole’s voice echoed across the comm. but Hoshi focused on the data crawling across the digital screen in front of her. The sensor frequencies of the Mark Twelves beckoned to her and her fingers danced across the tiny keyboard.

“Six, go.”

“Charlie Three is down.” Hoshi’s breath caught – Three was Petty Officer Azar. “Broken leg. Doping him and moving on.”

“Copy.” Reynolds’ frustration was clear in his voice. “Alpha, Bravo, stand by to move up.”

“Got it!” Hoshi declared. She jammed her finger on the <ENTER> button and, instantly, the graphics on her computer’s screen changed from red to green. “Sensors neutralized,” she said into the comm.

“Copy,” Lieutenant Reynolds said. “Alpha, Bravo, execute. Charlie, stand by.”

Cloaked by the driving rain, seven dark, armored figures darted forward, vanishing from view as they clambered over the wall and dropped onto the compound grounds. Flanked by four bodies – the admiral, Gannet, Sergeant Cole, and PO3 Brown – Hoshi reattached her comm. gear to the utility harness on her softsuit before drawing her sidearm. Her breath was coming in ragged gasps and she nearly jumped when Admiral Archer dropped a reassuring hand on her shoulder.

“Charlie team, move up,” Reynolds’ voice ordered.

The flight from their landing zone to the wall was a nightmare of adrenaline and fear for Hoshi. Rain obscured her vision so badly that even the light enhancement technology built into the helmet barely helped, and the jagged lightning strikes that lit up the night sky only made things worse. Beside her, Archer stumbled, clearly having as much trouble as she was with their frantic dash in the dark in the unfamiliar combat gear. The other three seemed not to notice, or if they did, they ignored it.

Several steps ahead of the rest of the team, Petty Officer Brown reached the wall first and instantly flattened his back against it. Slinging his rifle, he interlaced his fingers a bare second before Cole reached him. Without hesitation, the medic leaped, her right foot landing in his grip. He heaved her up, adding speed and momentum to her jump. She topped the wall and then vanished over it. Even before she was completely out of sight, Brooks was replicating the move as Archer slammed into the wall to create the hand stirrup himself.

“Hoshi!” he hissed, and she shook her head before darting forward. The admiral grunted with exertion as he sent her flying, and, a moment later, Hoshi hit the muddy dirt on the other side of the wall. She was abruptly grateful for the helmet as it concealed the flush of excitement spreading across her face. Brooks and Cole were crouched in a covering position, their rifles at the ready, and Hoshi fell into place without having to be told, her sidearm trembling only slightly.

Archer was next over the wall and he staggered slightly on the landing, but quickly recovered and took his position just beside Cole. Long seconds later, Brown dropped over the side with no indication of *how* he’d gotten to the top. The moment he took his flanking position beside Hoshi, Sergeant Cole was speaking.

“Charlie in position.”

“Alpha, flanking screen,” Reynolds instructed. “Bravo, move in.”

In response, the dark figures of Alpha and Bravo detached themselves from the shadows like wraiths, moving quickly toward the immense mansion that was Admiral Gardner’s home. Thunder cracked the sky, and a brilliant spear of lightning momentarily illuminated the entire compound’s grounds. Hoshi blinked in minor surprise at the unmoving bodies laid out on the lawn – she hadn’t heard a thing!

“Alpha in position,” Kelly whispered across the communications line.

“Copy,” Reynolds replied. “Charlie, move up. Alpha, Bravo ... execute.”

As Hoshi threw herself forward into a sprint to keep up with Sergeant Cole and PO3 Brown, the sound of weapons fire suddenly filled the air. Explosions from stun grenades rattled the ground, though with the booming thunder rolling out of the night sky, it was hardly noticeable. Shouts and screams quickly joined the clamor, and a spotlight located atop the mansion lit up. Before anyone else could react, Admiral Archer brought his phase pistol up and snapped off a shot. The light vanished with an explosion of sparks and a muted shout of surprise.

“Good shot, sir,” Brown murmured. He took aim with his rifle and began taking pot shots at the figures running around on the roof.

“Move in!” Lieutenant Reynolds shouted across the comm. line. “Alpha team, secure the upper level, Bravo team with me!”

“Get ready,” Cole whispered, directing her comments to the admiral and Hoshi. Seconds later, the lieutenant’s voice sounded once more.

“Charlie team! Move up!”

Hoshi rushed forward instantly, a bare two steps behind Cole. They reached the main doorway of the manor seconds later, with PO3 Brown leading the way. At Amanda’s sharp hand gesture, Brown rushed through the double doors already blasted open by breaching grenades. Discarding his helmet as he followed (but not his earpiece), Admiral Archer drew in a series of rapid breaths before pursuing the petty officer. Hoshi did the same, tossing the uncomfortable head gear to one side, and noted Gannet followed suit. Unsurprisingly, Cole did not.

The door opened up into a massive foyer already filled with unconscious bodies, none of which appeared to be wearing any protective gear. A life-sized portrait of an older woman in her late fifties to mid-sixties instantly drew one’s attention upon entering, and Hoshi recognized it as a painting of Admiral Gardner’s late wife, now dead for nearly two years. The portrait seemed intentionally placed here, and Hoshi wondered if the admiral wanted a daily visual reminder to keep him from ever forgetting his partner of over thirty years.

“Sir, get down!” Cole’s voice snapped Hoshi out her momentary distraction, and she wheeled around in place to orient her pistol in the direction Amanda was already firing. Reflex kicked in at the sight of the Oran’taku female surrounded by the unmoving forms of Lieutenant Reynolds’ team, and Hoshi began pulling the trigger. Pockets of pulsed plasma exploded around her as a group of Admiral Gardner’s bodyguards rounded a corner and opened fire, but all Hoshi could see was Rajiin standing there, one hand held up toward them and a semi-translucent distortion protecting her from the lethal fire being directed toward her. Something ... *pressed* against Hoshi’s mind and she could almost feel the sudden shift in atmospheric pressure.

Rajiin gestured.

And the world exploded.



The warp plasma conduit was rigged to explode.

That was the first thing Master Chief Petty Officer Colin Mackenzie noted as he drew closer to it. Removing his helmet, he inched closer to the exposed conduit, lowering his rifle as he did. After a few moments of examination, he revised his suspicion and frowned: from what he could tell, it was made to *look* like it was going to explode, but he didn't see any hint of actual sabotage that could potentially lead to a real malfunction.

An icy tendril of fear crawled up his spine.

Behind him, Petty Officer Riley was moving around in the narrow access corridor, carefully checking on the unconscious forms of Ensign Stiles and PO3 Hoffman. He had already bound the equally insensate Vulcan they had stunned earlier with a pair of mag-cuffs – both hands and feet, just to be safe – and was obviously keeping their prisoner in his field of vision as he provided what little first aid he could to his fallen comrades.

Mac was only peripherally aware of Riley as he continued to study the warp plasma conduit, a deep frown on his face. He crept closer to it, lowering his rifle to the deck to free up his hands, and dropped to all fours so he could get a glimpse underneath the quartet of coolant lines that ran parallel to the actual conduit. Once again, there was no sign that they had been tampered with. Mac grunted.

“Something wrong, sir?” Riley asked as he entered the monitoring room and drew alongside Mackenzie.

“Don't call me sir,” Mac said reflexively. “I work for a living.” He pressed his nose up to the coolant lines and peered into the tiny gap that existed between them, halfway expecting to smell the barely perceptible stench of micro-explosives or adhesive. “There's nothing wrong with the bloody conduit,” he added a moment later. Nodding in the direction of a wall-mounted cabinet containing tools, he continued. “Grab me a wrench.”

Riley turned to obey without question, lowering his rifle as he did. The cabinet door slid open without a sound, and the petty officer extracted one of the larger, bulkier tools that Mac barely used these days.

Without a sound, a female Vulcan – the same one Mac thought he had seen use the damned transporter only seconds earlier – darted through the open hatch that led to the maintenance crawlspace that served the coolant system and into the monitoring room itself. Riley reacted fluidly, dropping the wrench to the deck and swinging his rifle around, but she pounced on him before he could fire. Batting his weapon aside with one hand, she struck with the other, punching him squarely in chest. The ceramic plates of his armor crumpled under the force of the blow and he flew backwards into one of the secondary monitoring stations, smashing into it and tearing it from the wall with an explosion of sparks. He collapsed to the deck, unconscious or worse, and the Vulcan half-turned toward Mac.

In the moment that she attacked Riley, Mackenzie's fight or flight instincts kicked in and he dove toward the weapon closest to him and the one he felt most comfortable with: the wrench. It was a heavy compound leverage spanner easily fifteen kilograms in weight, but with the adrenaline washing away his common sense, Mac barely noticed.

He attacked without hesitation, bouncing up from the deck and swinging the heavy wrench with every gram of his strength. It smashed into the Vulcan's face with a meaty thunk and the unmistakable sound of crushing bone. She reeled back, her face contorted in a rictus of pain as she shrieked, and Mac stumbled forward, suddenly off-balance by the spanner's mass. He fought to get the wrench up and into position for another attack, but this time, she was too fast for him. Despite her visible agony, her hand lashed out and caught his wrist in a crushing grip. She squeezed – *hard* – and this time, he was the one screaming as he felt bones fracture and splinter under her implacable hold. The wrench slipped from nerveless fingers and clattered to the deck, an impossible distance away. Fury and pain stamped on her features, the Vulcan balled up her other fist and punched him in the face. His nose seemed to explode – blood was suddenly everywhere – and Mac staggered back, anchored in place by her grip on his arm.

“You will die for that,” she snarled through lips that barely seemed to work. Her eyes were narrowed slits of barely contained rage.

The world tilted around him and he suddenly found himself airborne before he realized she had hurled him. He struck the bulkhead wall with bone-crushing force. Another scream was ripped from his lungs as he felt ribs break, and he fell to the deck with a jarring thud. His vision swam out of focus.

“An engineer,” the Vulcan said. She was standing over him, emerald blood pouring from the wide gash on her face. He could see exposed bone and knew she had to be in agonizing pain. Before Mac could act, she kicked him in the stomach. The thoracic plate of his armor buckled under the force of the blow a millisecond before he was sent airborne once more. Stars danced before his eyes as the Vulcan grabbed the ceramic cuirass and lifted him bodily from the deck. He tried to blink them away but only succeeded in making himself even dizzier. “I will have need of your knowledge of this vessel,” she declared and Mac reacted the only way he could.

He spat in her face.

The Vulcan smiled then, a malicious expression that only highlighted the cruelty dancing in her eyes. With the jagged scar yet gushing blood marring the entire left side of her face, it turned her positively demonic.

“Cooperation is not necessary,” she said as her free hand came up to his face. Something flared within her eyes...

And suddenly, Mac was falling through a formless abyss. A blizzard of ice burned through his mind, and pain unlike anything he'd ever imagined caused him to scream. He was suffocating but could breathe. His veins were coursing with acid that bubbled and burned and solidified. Living fire froze the neurons in his brain and he could almost sense a malevolent presence at the very edge of consciousness. The pain ... the pain was beyond belief.

Images and half-remembered memories flashed across his mind's eye – the smell of his father's cologne, the sound of Ali's laughter, his first kiss, the sharp and bitter taste of regret and despair as he watched an empty coffin being lowered into the ground, Lieutenant Hayes' cautious eyes as he spoke of spoke of a special division of Starfleet Intelligence that was interested in Mac's services – but were gone before he fully registered them. It took him an eternity of a second to realize the Vulcan was flipping through his memories as if watching an old movie, and he desperately tried to rally his force of will to stop her, to prevent her from finding what she was after, but she ripped through his meager defenses as if they weren't even there. For the span of a heartbeat, he could see her as she liked to envision herself – a

warrior, with the wings of a raptor stretching out from her back and glorious victories ahead of her. Long talons dotted the tips of her fingers and were dripping with blood – green *and* red – and ichor. Her eyes glinted, not with madness but rather a terrible, focused intelligence that bored through subterfuge like a mining laser.

Without warning, it ended. She dropped him to the deck, stepping back as he collapsed like a puppet with its strings cut. Mac's head slammed into the unyielding metal floor even as bile burned its way up his throat. He vomited noisily while agony pulsed within his head, like burning nails and freezing spikes. His muscles trembled as he tried to move but they would not obey.

The Vulcan ignored him as she strode directly to the master systems monitoring station and began inputting rapid commands with the ease of long practice. A distinct vibration rumbled through the deckplates and Mac instantly recognized that she had cut the flow of plasma to the nearby shielded accelerator. He grimaced as he struggled with a body suddenly unwilling to cooperate, and the Vulcan gave him a sidelong glance before smiling darkly.

“Do not worry, human,” she said flatly. “I will kill you before I kill your ship.” Returning her attention to the monitoring station, she typed in another command and Mac's blood ran cold when his brain finally registered what she was doing.

She was using *his* access code.

The hum of a magnetic containment field disengaging caused the Vulcan to shoot a quick look in the direction of the plasma accelerator. Apparently satisfied, she turned away from the control station and took several rapid steps to an unnoticed bag concealed in a corner. She knelt and rifled through it before extracting a small block of what could only be explosives sheathed in what appeared to be a hardened container. There was no hesitation in her motions as she straightened and made for the now opened maintenance hatch of the deactivated plasma accelerator.

Understanding came at once. With the explosive planted inside the accelerator, she would re-initiate the warp plasma flow before detonating the charge. An explosion in the middle of the actual plasma stream wouldn't just be catastrophic, it would rip the entire ship apart before anyone had the chance to evacuate.

Terror gave Mac strength he didn't know he had, and he lurched to his feet, his right arm hanging limp and useless. So focused on her mission to plant the charge, the Vulcan didn't notice as she leaned into the now dormant accelerator. She was in an awkward position – half-in, half-out – and barely had time to cry out in surprise when Mackenzie rammed into her, knocking her fully into the accelerator chamber. He backpedaled away as she tried to scramble back to her feet, and slammed his good hand onto the emergency override on the wall beside him. The magnetic containment field snapped back into place instantly, trapping her inside.

“Let's see how you like *that*, bitch,” Mac slurred as he watched her eyes narrow with fury at her current condition. He found himself hoping that Commander Eisler let him sit in on the interrogation. Or better yet, he decided, they could set the first officer loose on her. T'Pol would be merciless, pitiless, and completely without remorse as she tore apart this traitor to her species.

To his surprise, the Vulcan saboteur blinked away her anger before peeling back a sleeve to reveal the wrist device that she'd used to seemingly trigger the transporter. She gave Mac a vicious smile, one that was most certainly not the expression of a defeated woman, and began manipulating the controls on it.

Mackenzie started to frown when he suddenly realized what she had with her inside the accelerator chamber.

The explosive.

He half ran, half stumbled back to the master systems monitoring station and keyed in an immediate command. The agony in his head continued to pound away, intensifying with each second that passed, and his fingers suddenly felt fat, clumsy, uncoordinated. There would only be one chance to get this right.

“Suck on this,” he growled as he stabbed the final button, releasing the safeties and overriding command protocol.

Instantly, superheated warp plasma surged back into the accelerator. Every piece of her body ignited, vanishing in a fiery burst of incandescent light that burned like a miniature supernova for all of a half-second. She didn’t even have time to scream.

Mac started to laugh, though he didn’t know why, and the throbbing in his head grew worse. The sound of screaming – the unconscious Vulcan that Riley had secured earlier – suddenly echoed through the corridor, and Mac could hear the pounding of feet drawing closer. A moment later, Commander Eisler and his team entered, their weapons instantly orienting on the humming accelerator.

“You’re too late,” Mac declared. Even to him, his voice sounded odd. “I fried her.” All three of the Eislers standing before him glanced in his direction, pushing up the visors on their helmets in a wonderfully synchronized movement. Mac could see their lips moving, knew they were speaking, but couldn’t hear them over the roaring in his ears or the liquid fire scorching away consciousness.

So he closed his eyes and let the pain carry him away.



The pain was unbearable.

His every cell screamed in distress as the nerve endings that conducted feeling through his body seemed to explode. The air around him was ablaze – or so it felt – and his ears popped from sudden, intense pressure, as if he was flying and suffered a significant altitude change. Something ... alien brushed up against his thoughts, squeezing them with an implacable grip. His brain felt like it was in a vice.

“Is this the best you can do?” Rajjin’s voice demanded, a picosecond after he heard her phrase the question in his mind. It echoed and cut into his thoughts, stimulating nerve clusters that sent excruciating shards of sensation through his extremities like tiny slivers of mental glass that sliced through his veins. He convulsed as his muscles – *all* of them – twitched and revolted against the pain.

Jonathan Archer wanted to die.

He was vaguely aware of his companions on the ground in the same state as he was, trying to scream but unable to force breath out of their lungs. Even Gardner’s guards who had joined the firefight to defend against the sudden breach were on the ground, their bodies writhing silently. Jon should have recognized

that it indicated a lack of control on Rajiin's part, but the crimson fire that swept through his mind robbed him of his faculties.

The soft click of her shoes upon the hardwood floor heralded her approach, and Archer clung to the sound as he tried to claw himself back to coherence. He could just make out the form of Thomas Gardner behind the Oran'taku female, trailing behind her like a well-trained dog with awe and devotion stamped upon his face. Fury and hate gave Jon a moment of strength as Rajiin loomed over him.

"I expected more from you, Jonathan," she said, the uncanny psychic echo reverberating through his skull. She shook her head and knelt, one of her hands reaching out to caress his face. The invisible pressure already bearing down upon him trebled, instantly reminding him of the one time he'd gone on a space-walk in a malfunctioning EV suit. *Decompression sickness*, a part of his brain observed distantly a heartbeat before ... something erupted from Rajiin.

It wasn't something he could really see, but slammed into him with the force of a runaway ground car nonetheless, like thunder without sound. His muscles clenched tightly and he convulsed. He could feel blood leaking from his eyes, his ears, his nose, his mouth. An invisible hand seemed to grasp his internal organs and *squeeze*.

Archer screamed.

"You have caused me a great deal of discomfort, Jonathan," Rajiin said, "and I am going to repay you in kind." Another explosion of unseen force flared out from her, and through the roaring in his ears, Archer could hear the sound of glass shattering. An invisible spike bored its way through his skull, white-hot and unrelenting.

The familiar sensation of a mind not his own suddenly whispered across his consciousness like a dry, warm wind. Jon fumbled toward it, recognizing the wisp of Surak's presence that had been with him since he bore the long-dead Vulcan's katra all those years ago. It was an oasis in a desert, a hint of sanctuary before the psychic onslaught that was systematically burning across his neurons.

"Pain is a sensation like any other," the ghost murmured, though they really weren't words and Jon didn't really *hear* them. "Like hunger or fatigue, it can, with the proper application of discipline, be ignored for a time." Through the crippling agony coursing through his mind and body, Archer could feel the fragment of a Vulcan soul point the way. "Use this gift well, Jonathan Archer."

And just like that, the pain was gone.

Jon opened his eyes to meet Rajiin's, and she backpedalled sharply to put some distance between them, a startled expression flashing across her face. Fear and uncertainty warred within her eyes, though Archer knew she really didn't have anything to fear from in. He couldn't *feel* the pain but was still aware of it. Muscles still spasmed, and he doubted he could stand if his life depended on it.

Which, a part of him silently acknowledged, it pretty much did.

"Remarkable," Rajiin declared. She knelt to get a better look at him, as if he were a lab specimen, and Jon found his gaze instantly drawn to the metallic studs implanted in her temple. There were four of them – two for either side – and they sparkled in a way that could not be mere reflection from lights in the house. This close, he could see that they weren't metal at all, but rather some sort of crystalline

compound, and a lattice of ... something pulsed underneath her skin from the studs. "You have amazing willpower for a human," the Oran'taku announced as she stroked his face, "but I can sense ... something else within you, something ... different." She smiled. "I shall enjoy taking you apart to find out what it is."

"Why?" Jon rasped. His throat was on fire. "Why are you doing this? We tried to help you."

"Help me?" she repeated, fury glinting in her eyes. "You abandoned me to die!" She glared at him, and Archer could feel her rage pulse into him like a physical thing. His body twitched – it should have been horribly painful – but he felt nothing. His every sense was dulled, muted, as if his veins were filled with morphine, though his mind remained sharp. "They saved me!" Rajiin continued to rant, gesticulating wildly as she spoke. Subtle energy distortions surrounded her hands as she gestured, and the lights in the room flickered wildly. "They saved me and gave me even greater power than I had before!" Her eyes narrowed and she leaned closer to him. "And now," she whispered maniacally, the stench of her breath foul and alien, "I can revenge myself upon you."

Archer stared at her, dismay and horror churning in his stomach as he saw no sign of the woman who had been pulled from *Enterprise* by the Xindi, no hint that she was still the same person who had expressed remorse over being used as a spy by her old masters. Memory of T'Pol's description about the Fullara instantly sprang to mind and Jon wondered if the Xindi had done something similar to Rajiin to rewrite her mind and personality. He did not know this woman – though truthfully, he hadn't known her well then, either – and from the hatred boiling in her eyes, Archer doubted there was anything he could say that would convince her to back down, especially when she held all of the cards.

As he struggled to find the words that would convince her of his innocence, that he hadn't betrayed her as she clearly believed, he caught sight of movement out of the corner of his eye. It was Hoshi, already rousing from Rajiin's mental onslaught, and Jon felt hope stir once more. *Draw her fire*, he told himself, *so Hoshi can act*.

"Yes, I left you," he said with a feigned snarl. Rajiin's eyes widened. "You were too weak to be of any use to me or my mission."

Rajiin shrieked. A fist of pure force slammed into Archer's belly harder than he'd ever been struck before and sent him skidding across the floor before he bounced off the wall. He felt something give under the impact and vomited blood. His muscles, still uncooperative, trembled as he tried to force himself to his feet, but Rajiin was already there.

"I will kill you!" she snarled, gesturing with one hand. The studs embedded in her temple flared a half second before Jon felt invisible hands grip his limbs and lift him up before her. He tried to move, tried to break free, but could barely force his fingers into a fist.

"They lied to you," Archer said, grimacing at the feel of his arms being slowly torn from their sockets. "Earth isn't a threat to the Xindi!"

"The Xindi?" Rajiin replied. She smiled coldly. "I no longer serve the Xindi." Her eyes narrowed fractionally and she studied him for a moment. "You are stalling," she abruptly realized. Jon felt his heart skip a beat and he clung to his self-control. He could *not* look at Hoshi, not now. "Why?"

"You didn't think I came here with just this team, did you?" Archer asked. He forced a grin on his face.

“A nice air strike should do the trick, don’t you think?” Rajiin frowned and white-hot flame pushed against Jon’s thoughts. He could feel her trying to determine the truth but the sense of otherness, the hint of Vulcan self-control shielded him for the briefest of seconds. Her assault faltered and she glanced away, momentary confusion on her face. Archer tried to comprehend why – the wisp of Surak wasn’t *that* strong – but she turned her flashing eyes upon him once more.

“No matter,” Rajiin remarked as she raised her other hand. Another distortion pulsed off of her, throwing him into the wall with bruising force. He tried to move, to get up but his muscles suddenly seemed to have turned to water. “I can kill you long before that,” she said as those unseen hands wrapped around his body and lifted him upright once more. Out of the corner of his eye, he caught sight of movement and gave Rajiin a bloody smile.

“There’s just one thing you’ve forgotten,” he rasped. “I didn’t come alone.” Her eyes widened in comprehension and she half-turned away.

And in that moment, Hoshi Sato-Reed pulled the trigger on her phase pistol.

Rajiin didn’t make a sound as she looked down at the smoking hole in her chest. Her eyes widened in shock or pain – Jon couldn’t tell which one – and her mouth worked, as if she was trying to say something but couldn’t find the breath. The invisible grip that had pinned him place abruptly vanished, and Archer fell to the floor, face first. He glanced up at the sound of a second phase pistol shot – it was Hoshi again – and blinked as Rajiin slowly toppled, her eyes already glazing over as her body shut down.

From where she was sprawled out, Hoshi gave a relieved gasp and let her trembling arms fall. Sweat dripped from her face and Jon suddenly realized that her muscles were still twitching. Somehow, she had fought through the telepathic assault, had found the willpower to make her body obey. She tried to give him a smile but even that seemed to take too much effort.

“She’s gone,” a voice whispered, and Archer dragged his attention away from the barely conscious form of his old communications officer. Thomas Gardner stood over the body of the Oran’taku female, his eyes wide and horror on his face. “I can’t hear her,” he murmured with growing excitement. He pinned Jon with a look. “She’s gone,” he repeated.

“Tom...” Archer started before grimacing suddenly as a wave of intense agony coursed through his body. Surak’s pain suppression trick was fading ... along with consciousness.

“She’s gone!” Gardner exulted. He took two rapid steps to where Hoshi was still stirring and pulled the phase pistol from her grip. “I’m free!” the admiral said. His eyes met Jon’s and Archer’s breath caught at the emotion swimming in them. “I’m sorry, Jon,” Gardner said as he slowly raised the pistol. “I’m so sorry...”

And before Archer could react, Thomas Gardner, the Chief of Naval Operations for Starfleet and an unwilling traitor, shot himself in the head.

## ACT FIVE

He could not remember ever being this nervous.

Standing quietly before the viewport in his private quarters, Thy'lek Hravishran th'Zoarhi stared into the glittering expanse of deep space, wondering silently if Uzaveh the Infinite had a sense of humor. That he, a lowly soldier roundly mocked for his friendship with the pinkskin Archer, could find himself in a place and time such as this seemed too unlikely to be possible. *The future unravels according to the Great Tapestry*, he reminded himself with words he wouldn't dare to vocalize, *so do not seek to understand it before your Time*. It was already bad enough that he willingly traveled in the circle of Aenar and humans, he reflected; if his juniors discovered he knew the Invoked Mysteries by heart, he'd never hear the end of it.

*Is that how you truly feel?* Jhamel's mindvoice caressed his thoughts like the earliest winds of First Thaw, and Shran smiled as she softly padded across the floor to join him by the viewport. He could taste her amusement at the direction of his musings and quickly offered her a sheepish smile.

"You know it isn't," he replied before sighing and returning his eyes to the view before him. Fifteen heavy cruisers were arrayed around his flagship, each the equal of the *Kolari* and all bearing fleet captains who had answered his discreet call to arms. He knew most of them by reputation alone, though some, like Commander Tholos and his second, Keval, had actually served under him aboard the *Kumari*. "Am I doing the right thing?" he wondered aloud. Jhamel placed her hand upon his.

"Only you know the answer to that," she said in response. Shran grunted.

"Sixteen ships," he said after a moment. "That is a good sign, I think." Her silent laughter rippled through his mind.

"You are the one who knows the Invoked Mysteries," she pointed out with a smile on her face. Shran grimaced.

"I need you there," he said. He could feel the tingle of her surprise and crossed his arms. "My reasoning is twofold: it will unsettle these warriors who have come to listen to me and remind them that the Aenar are part of us."

"And you wish me to use my mindgifts to seek out deception," Jhamel stated softly. There was no recrimination in her voice or thoughts, but Shran felt a sudden stab of self-loathing. He glanced away and closed his eyes.

"Yes," he replied with disgust. By the Infinite, he hated that he could use her thus, hated that it was necessary in the first place. "The Council fears me," Shran explained carefully. "They know that I am going to move against them and use of assassins is not *that* uncommon."

"I will not do violence, Shran." Jhamel's voice was firm and hard. "Nor will I allow you to harm a fellow Andorian who thinks you wrong." Shaking his head, he looked into her eyes, though he knew she could not see.

"We are planning for war," Shran said flatly. "In war, sentients die. If I must kill one to save a thousand, I will not hesitate."

“But where does it end?” she asked. “One for a thousand? One for a hundred? For ten?” Jhamel shook her head. “That is not our Way and I will not stand for it.” Shran snorted. For as long as they had been together, she had never stopped trying to convert him to the pacifist ethos her people accused her of abandoning. In his darker moments, Shran had often wondered if the Aenar truly understood that they could not follow their Path of Fallen Snow without the more aggressive Andorians there to wage war against those who destroy them. Emulating a snowflake as a model for life – not using force or resisting its fall to the surface – was fine in theory, but in practice? The Klingons would eat them alive, perhaps even literally.

“I promise,” Shran finally said after a long moment of contemplation, “that I will not abuse your gift.” He placed both of his hands upon her shoulders and was gratified that she instantly reciprocated. “Grant me what insight you think appropriate.”

“It shall be,” Jhamel intoned softly, quoting from the Invoked Mysteries. Shran smiled.

“It shall be,” he repeated. They stood there for a long moment, foreheads almost touching and hands resting comfortably upon the other’s shoulders. Shran could have stayed like that for an eternity, but duty summoned, and he straightened. She gave him a slight smirk before doing the same.

No one addressed them as they walked through the corridors to the cargo bay set aside for this ... conference but Shran could not help but to notice the sidelong glances Jhamel was receiving from his crew. At first, he felt anger stir at what he perceived to be little more than xenophobic prejudice, but to his surprise, he began to realize that they were not staring at her like she was a Vulcan. Awe and hope were stamped upon the faces of the more junior crewmembers, and cautious optimism radiated from the officers. Jhamel’s discomfort grew with each look she received, and Shran gave her a sidelong look.

*They look upon me as if I were a holy seer,* she related through their mindlink.

“Perhaps you are,” Shran replied aloud, smiling at the way her antenna curled in embarrassment.

There were exactly thirty officers within the cargo bay – the captains and their seconds – and Shran exhaled softly in relief at the lucky number once he included himself and his mate in that number. All eyes and antennae turned toward him as he entered, and even without Jhamel’s mental gifts, he could feel the wariness that enveloped the empty storage space as she joined him. Shran spent a heartbeat glancing over their faces and judging them by their body language; to his slight astonishment, he realized he could divide them all into one of four groups. The largest of the group was comprised of those who had already decided they would follow him whatever his path; fully half of the captains and their seconds fell into this category. Nearly a third were neutral, willing to hear him out, but not yet ready to make a decision without having all the facts. Of the remaining ten, six were seething with anger, though Shran knew their stories well enough to recognize that their ire was directed almost entirely upon the Council. They were dangerous, rabid ice bores who only wanted to lash out at those they felt wronged them, and Shran suspected they would wage war against the Council no matter what was decided here. That left the quartet who, while not hostile toward him, clearly distrusted him.

Still, Shran had to admit that the sacred number of four turning up was a hopeful sign.

“You called us here,” one of those four announced coldly. A male *chan*, he was studying Shran as if

observing bacteria through a microscope. “Speak your words.”

“We already know what needs to be done,” a hard-faced female *zhen* growled. “The Council has lost its way!”

“And you would have us revolt?” One of the neutrals, a *thaan* like Shran himself, queried. He shook his head. “It is not the role of the Guard to make policy.”

“Our mandate,” Shran said softly, his voice carrying easily across the suddenly still cargo bay, “is to defend Andor against all enemies, both alien and native.” The supporters nodded eagerly, while those who remained unsure frowned or shifted in discomfort. “The Council of Eight has become that enemy,” Shran continued. “Your oath is to the Imperial Guard and to the people back home, not to any particular government.”

“You are boring that ice rather thin, Thy’lek,” Tholos remarked. Shran gave him a tight frown – of all the officers in this cargo bay, he would have thought this one would have supported him without question.

“Am I?” he asked. “How much blood must be shed in these senseless engagements with the Oh’reons?” At that, even the four opposed to him looked down. “Why does the Council hold back from aiding our pinkskin allies in their war with these Romulans?”

“Because we must remain wary of the Vulcans,” another of the neutral captains replied. She was tall and bore a striking resemblance to Talas.

“The Vulcans?” Shran laughed. “You have read the same reports I have. This ... religious upheaval of theirs has gutted their military. They are no threat to us, not now.”

“But moving against the Council?” Tholos exclaimed. “That’s madness!”

“The universe is already mad,” Shran replied. “The Vulcans are paralyzed by this religious awakening of theirs, the humans are losing a war they did not start and what are we doing?” His anger grew with each word until he was nearly shouting. “We are sending ships and brave warriors into a region of space we know nothing about!” Shran’s antennae quivered in fury as he gestured wildly and raged on. “We are pursuing pirates into nebulas and stellar anomalies that haven’t even been mapped before!” Tholos recoiled from his open anger, but Shran barely noticed. “*That* is madness! *That* is why we must act!”

“And who rules once the Council is displaced?” The question came from one of the hostiles, a delicate-looking *zhen* whose eyes burned with a keen intelligence. “You?”

*Shran, Jhamel’s voice whispered across his consciousness, be wary. Captain Taras fears retaliation against her bondgroup should she stand with you.*

“No,” Shran replied instantly. “I am a soldier, not a diplomat.” He stalked across the cargo bay to plant himself in front of Taras, frowning darkly at how much taller than he she was. “Once we dissolve this Council,” he continued, “the people elect a new one, one that is not mired in selfishness or fear.”

“You are an idealist,” the *zhen* scoffed. “There are no such creatures alive. All who exist do so with

self-interest at heart.” She shook her head. “No,” she said, “I think you will lead us to our doom or seize power yourself.”

“Then you are a fool,” Jhamel abruptly declared. All eyes turned toward her and Shran could see how the officers tried to determine the reason for her presence; he wondered if he should be distressed or happy that so few appeared to have made the most obvious deduction. “I have seen into Shran’s living spirit,” the Aenar announced, her words causing a stir, “and he has no designs for power.”

“Then he will be an even more frightening tyrant than we can possibly imagine,” Taras said. “It is the well-intentioned leader, the one who does what he does for the people because *he* thinks it is best for them that should be feared the most.” She shook her head. “No, Shran,” she said, “I do not think I can support you in this, not now that I know you do not seek power. Those who not seek it are the quickest seduced by its lure.” Her antenna quivered.

“Jhamel is Aenar,” Shran said by way of response. The seemingly unrelated comment caused Taras to frown, so Shran continued. “She follows their Path of Fallen Snow,” he said calmly. “It is a philosophy of nonviolence that insists upon placid acceptance of what happens in life.” He let his eyes rove around the cargo bay so as to include the other captains and their seconds. “She insists that I would be happier if I followed this Path myself,” he remarked wryly.

“You would,” Jhamel muttered. Her voice was just loud enough that it carried and those who knew Shran well – Tholos and Keval, for example – chuckled at the absurdity of a nonviolent Shran. He gave Jhamel an affectionate smile.

“I am not suited for such a life,” he declared, “but I hope one day to have the chance to see as she does.” He pinned Taras with a hot gaze. “You fear me ruling as a despot,” he said, “but I tell you no such thing can occur.” Sensing the direction of his argument, Jhamel stepped closer to him, placing the back wrist of her left hand against the back wrist of his right; it was an unmistakable gesture intended to highlight their level of intimacy and denoted a relationship akin to being part of a bondgroup. Taras’ eyes widened slightly. “I will not rule,” Shran said flatly, “because I have chosen a mate who will not be accepted by Andorian culture.”

*As have I*, Jhamel added telepathically. Every officer present recoiled, their eyes widening at the display of power that had been, until this moment, only rumor.

“How do we know you aren’t using these mindgifts to sway us?” Taras demanded. Jhamel smiled.

“Would you still have your doubts if she were?” Shran replied. He directed his next words to the entire room. “I propose an Assembly,” he said. “There are enough of us to fill out the eight positions necessary.” He smiled at Taras. “And you,” he said, “should be the Voice.” Her antennae stiffened in shock and dismay – the Voice of an Assembly was the source of moral authority, the one who determined if a course of action was just and worthy of obedience. Only the Voice could overrule all other representatives, though they had to defend their reasoning with eloquence and a strong arm. “I shall be the Sword, of course,” Shran continued, his self-appointment as supreme military commander filled with the appropriate level of bravado necessary for the warrior claiming to be the greatest of those present. Laughter answered his declaration.

“If I become the Voice,” Taras said, “I will not be silenced. I will speak my mind and living spirit.” Shran nodded. “And when this is done,” the *zhen* female declared, raising her voice as she spoke,

“every member of this Assembly will accept Exile.” Shran smiled.

“It shall be,” he said.



“It can’t be.”

The president’s heartfelt comment came quickly on the heels of t explanation about the cause of his wounds, and Jonathan Archer winced at the sight of the woman known across Earth as the Iron Lady collapsing into her chair, shock painted upon her face. She stared at her desk for an extended moment, before finally looking up.

“Sit down, Jonathan,” President Molyneux ordered, and Archer gratefully allowed himself to sink into one of the chairs arrayed in front of her desk. The painkillers he’d been given over an hour earlier were still working, but he could already feel his broken ribs beginning to protest. “You’re sure of this?” the president asked.

“I was there, ma’am,” Jon replied. “The moment Rajiin died, Admiral Gardner retrieved a sidearm and killed himself.”

“How long was he under her control?” a new voice asked. Stepping through a concealed doorway, Eric Harris approached. Jon’s eyes narrowed at the man’s presence, but, at a discreet hand gesture by the spymaster, managed to restrain himself from demanding how the man had access to the president of United Earth.

“I believe you already know Captain Harris of Special Operations,” Molyneux said. “I asked him here for his insight into the situation.”

“We’ve met,” Jon replied tightly. “And to answer your question, *Captain*,” he said to Harris, “we don’t know yet. Probably before Acheron.”

“You’re sure?” The president had a haunted look in her eyes, and Archer completely understood. She had signed off on the mission and now it appeared that it had been a trap from day one.

“We don’t know, Madam President,” Jon said. “My team has already found over twenty surveillance devices in the admiral’s home,” he continued, noting the sour look on Harris’ face. “Most look Xindi, but least three of them are completely foreign to us.” He rubbed his face and tried to blink away the crippling exhaustion that threatened to overwhelm him. It had been there since Erika died – he doubted that he’d gotten a single good night’s sleep in three months – and with each day that passed, more stress seemed to be piling on. “Hoshi – Lieutenant Commander Sato; she was my communications officer on *Enterprise* – has been looking at them and thinks they’re Romulan.”

“She’s basing this on what?” Harris demanded. He looked like he was on the verge of being sick or throwing a violent tantrum.

“You’d have to ask her,” Archer replied. “I’m a test pilot, not a communications expert.” He was about to continue his debriefing before noticing that Molyneux was staring at the framed photos on her

desk. "Madam President?" he asked.

"I introduced him to my grandchildren," she said softly. "He was under this ... alien's control and I introduced him to my grandchildren. *Merde...*"

"Are you sure it was Rajiin?" Harris asked. It was obviously an attempt to steer the president back onto subject. "According to your reports from the mission into the Expanse, she didn't display any of these ... telekinetic powers."

"We found some sort of biomechanical implants during the autopsy," Jon revealed. "It was mostly tied to her brain and spinal cord," he said, "but there were abnormal growths in her hands that weren't on Phlox's original exam." Harris' eyes narrowed.

"Who did the autopsy?" he demanded.

"My team medic," Archer replied. "Right now," he said, "I'm trying to keep the number of people who know about this situation as small a group as possible." Daniels' warning about a traitor in Starfleet Command quickly came to mind.

"A sensible precaution," the president interjected. "What about the admiral's guards?"

"Every one of them is having memory problems," Jon said with a heavy sigh. "It's like they were ... conditioned to simply not see Rajiin." He shook his head, a combination of disgust and dismay warring within him. "Even now," he said, "with her dead, they can't seem to see her. We tested a few of them, but they can't even see the body."

"That's ... less than ideal," Harris growled. "How is something like that even possible?"

"I have no idea," Archer said. "My medic thinks Rajiin did something to the way their brains process visual images. Their eyes see her, but their brain just doesn't recognize the signals." Jon shifted in place on the chair and winced at the sharp twinge of pain that accompanied the movement. "Until we know what else she did to them," he said, "I'm not going to put them in the field." He directed his next comments entirely to the president. "I would like permission to approach Ambassador V'Lar for Vulcan assistance." At Molyneux's surprised look, Archer pressed on. "They have an old ritual called the Fullara which allows them to forcibly suppress memories," he explained, hoping neither of them would ask how he knew about it. Somehow, he didn't think T'Pol would be happy to know he had spilled the beans on her checkered past, though knowing Harris, it was entirely possible he already knew. "I'm hoping," he continued, "that they might have a way to reverse the process and can adapt it for humans."

"I'm supposed to meet with the ambassador tomorrow," the president said. "I'll ask her to contact you."

"Thank you, ma'am."

"Madam President," Harris said a moment later, his lips tight and his eyes narrowed, "we can no longer ignore the possibility of a link between the Xindi and the Romulans."

"Agreed." Molyneux turned to Archer and he nodded.

“I’m already looking into that, ma’am,” he said in response to her unspoken question. “We know the Vulcans have sent some scout ships into the Expanse since the thermobaric clouds vanished,” Jon added, “but they didn’t get far before V’Las’ government fell.” He tried to find a more comfortable spot in the chair but failed. “T’Pau’s government has been having too much trouble keeping just their planetary defenses manned, so we can’t ask them for much help, and the rest of the Coalition has turned out to be pretty much useless.” Jon doubted he was very successful in keeping the bitterness over that fact from his voice.

“My people have heard rumors of a civil war between the Xindi,” Harris interjected. Jon gave him a quick glance before deciding against pursuing exactly *how* Special Operations had heard such rumors.

“Do what you think best, Jonathan,” the president ordered. She steepled her fingers and gave him a long, appraising gaze. “Effective immediately,” she said, “I’m promoting you to full admiral and naming you as commander in chief of Starfleet.” Archer blanched.

“Ma’am,” he quickly started, “there are other officers who outrank me, who are next in line-”

“I don’t *want* other officers,” Molyneux snapped. “I want the one admiral who has consistently shown aggressive initiative and *balls*.” She gave him a tight smile. “Besides,” she added, “since you’re in charge, you have the final say on what gets constructed.” Jon’s eyes widened at that and he glanced away, his mind already buzzing with plans. Yes, the *Daedalus*-classes were easy to build and took a pounding, but with only two NX-classes still functional – though he had to wonder if it was entirely accurate to call the *Endeavour* a NX anymore – the fleet was suffering from a serious lack of command ships with real firepower. Construction of the *Gagarin* and the *Shenzhou*, originally planned to be the NX-07 and NX-08 respectively, had been put on hold while they focused on the far easier to construct *Daedalus*. That would change, Archer decided grimly, if he was in charge.

And, of course, there was the Defiant Program that he’d been fighting to gain support for...

More telling, though, was the poorly hidden fear lurking in President Molyneux’s eyes as she watched him. She didn’t know what to do, Jon realized. Humanity was at war for its very survival and she, an ex-lawyer and grandmother of three, didn’t have a clue what course of action to take. And so, like every other politician throughout the millennia who found themselves at a crossroads in history but didn’t have the will to make the hard decisions, she did the one thing she *could* do.

She passed the responsibility on to someone else.

“Yes, Madam President,” he said. There really wasn’t anything else to say.

“I’ll have a statement drafted at once,” Molyneux continued. She frowned. “What’s the official story we’re releasing about Tom’s death?”

“He passed in his sleep,” Harris replied.

“Would that we could all go that way,” the president murmured. “Keep me apprised, gentlemen,” she said a moment later, her words a clear dismissal. Jon levered himself to his feet, hoping he hid the grimace as pain lanced through his body.

His two man bodyguard detachment – Scott Reynolds and Derek Kelly – fell into step beside him the moment he exited the president’s office. To no one’s real surprise, both men were wearing full combat armor, but their ominous appearance and obvious wariness caused every politician or aide in the capitol building to eye them with trepidation. It didn’t stop the braver ones from approaching, usually to offer their happiness that Jon had walked away relatively unscathed from his ‘shuttlepod accident.’ Archer nodded, smiled and thanked them, all the while hating that he had to lie about the origin of his injuries.

To his disgust, Harris somehow beat them to the waiting ‘pod and was waiting alongside an uncomfortable-looking Petty Officer Woods who had been left behind to guard the transport. As Jon approached, the spy gave him a smile that didn’t come close to touching his eyes.

“Admiral,” he said by way of greeting. “A word, if you don’t mind.”

“And if I do?” Archer demanded as he climbed into the ‘pod and made a beeline for the pilot’s station. Harris followed and dropped into the navigator’s chair.

“You still fly,” he remarked.

“Every chance I get,” Jon said. He began powering up the vehicle, glancing back to see that the security team had entered and pulled the hatch shut. “What do you want, Harris?”

“I know where Commodore Casey is,” the spy said. Archer gave him a look. “In a morgue,” Harris continued, “in China. The official cause of death is radiation poisoning.”

“Official,” Jon repeated. “Did you put him there?”

“Do you really want to know the answer to that?” Harris asked.

“Dammit!” Archer growled. “We’re supposed to be better than that!”

“Most of the time,” Harris retorted, “we are.” He leaned back in his seat. “Do you think I like my job, Admiral?” he asked rhetorically. “Do you think I like being the boogey man who does terrible things in the name of planetary security, that I issue orders that would make most men quail?” He shook his head and sighed, suddenly looking as tired as Jon felt. “The citizens of Earth usually sleep peaceably in their beds,” Harris said, “because men like me stand ready to do violence on their behalf.” Archer grunted before triggering the comm. system.

“This is Sierra Foxtrot Three Three Six,” he said, “requesting departure clearance.”

“Uploading flight pattern now, Three Three Six,” came the quick response. “Clear skies.”

With a muted rumble, the shuttlepod’s engines sparked to life, and Jon fed them power. The ‘pod lifted off the landing pad with subtle grace as Archer manipulated the controls. A moment later, they were racing into the darkening sky.

“Before the commodore died,” Harris said abruptly, his voice pitched only for Jon’s ears, “he was rambling about a woman he kept calling ‘Mistress.’”

“Rajjin?” Archer asked, equally soft.

“That’s a safe bet, I think.” The spymaster was silent for another long moment. “We still don’t know the extent to which Starfleet Command has been compromised,” he added. “Every member of the Admiralty is still under suspicion.”

“Including me?” Jon asked wry.

“*Especially* you,” Harris replied. “I’ve studied some of the recordings of your team’s assault,” he said calmly, watching Archer without a hint of human emotion in his eyes, “and couldn’t help but to notice how you and your Lieutenant Commander Reed alone were able to fight off Rajiin’s telepathic assault. That says something to me.”

“Leave Hoshi alone,” Archer growled. He hoped his expression was blank – more than anything else, he didn’t want this bastard to sink his claws into the communications officer, even if she was mildly telepathic as Jon had started to suspect over the years. How else could someone comprehend totally alien languages as quickly as Hoshi did? Even T’Pol had shown hints of respect for Sato’s linguistic abilities, and Archer knew just how hard it was to impress a Vulcan from past experience. Hell, he still wasn’t sure how Trip had managed to do it on their first damned mission to Rigel; the two had been pretty closemouthed about whatever it was that caused T’Pol to ignore her implicit orders to turn *Enterprise* around and instead push on to help the stinky, illogical humans.

“Just fair warning, Admiral,” the spymaster stated calmly. He tilted his head back, leaned it against the wall, and closed his eyes.

The rest of the flight was silent.



An ominous silence greeted her as she entered Sickbay.

Commander T’Pol paused at the threshold just beyond the door and quickly looked to where Phlox and Lieutenant Reyes stood before the control panel of the imaging chamber. The Denobulan’s arms were crossed and a troubled frown was upon his face. By way of contrast, Reyes appeared openly fascinated.

“I’ve never seen neurological readings like this before, Doctor,” Reyes announced.

“I have,” Phlox replied grimly. He glanced away, noticing T’Pol’s silent approach. “Ah, Commander. Thank you for coming.”

“You wished to speak to me?” T’Pol asked. The distinct sound of pained moaning emerged from the imaging chamber and she raised an eyebrow.

“It is Master Chief Mackenzie,” Phlox said. “His neural readings are quite troubling.” Gesturing with the pointing device he held in his right hand, Phlox directed her attention to the main display panel. “They are showing every indication of systemic damage to the brain consistent with a forced mind meld.” T’Pol frowned. “He’s reacted negatively to all analgesics I’ve given him,” the doctor continued, watching silently as Reyes pushed the button that would begin extracting the master chief.

“I fail to see how I can be of assistance, Doctor,” T’Pol said, lowering her voice as she took several steps away from the bed slowly emerging from the chamber. Phlox gave her a look she could not begin to decipher.

“I was hoping,” he said equally softly, “that you might have some advice regarding the treatment of forced melds.” At her widening eyes, he rushed to explain. “I know the Kir’Shara speaks about healing melds,” Phlox began, “and I was thinking-”

“That would be ill-advised,” T’Pol quickly interrupted. “I am, at best, a novice with melding. Any attempt I may make to correct the damage could easily exacerbate it further.”

A groan, muffled by the acoustics of the imaging chamber, prevented the doctor from responding and drew both of their attention to the features of Master Chief Petty Officer Mackenzie. T’Pol’s breath caught at the agonized expression contorting the man’s face, and, for the span of a heartbeat, she found herself overwhelmed as memory of the hours immediately following Tolaris’ attack swept away her self-control. Neither Phlox nor Lieutenant Reyes seemed to notice as they were completely focused on MCPO Mackenzie as he whimpered.

“Oh, God,” the COB whined, his hands coming up to his temples as he clenched his eyes shut. “It hurts! Can’t you give me something, Doc?”

“I’ve already given you too much,” Phlox replied. He exchanged a quick, worried look with Lieutenant Reyes as they examined the data flashing upon the main monitor. Gone was the lieutenant’s fascination; in its place was open dread that they were going to lose the chief of the boat to an affliction neither were capable of dealing with. T’Pol drew in a steadying breath and made a decision; she was the first officer and the well-being of the crew was her responsibility no matter her own personal discomfort.

“Master Chief Mackenzie,” she called out as she stepped closer to where the man rested. He opened his eyes for a brief second to identify her before closing them again.

“Ma’am,” he said through tightly clenched teeth.

“We have no visual record of what took place in the systems monitoring compartment,” T’Pol said, “so we need to know what the saboteur did to you.” When he did not immediately reply, she continued. “Did she touch your face?” Mackenzie’s eyes shot open and T’Pol barely suppressed a soft gasp at how bloodshot they were.

“I could feel her in my bloody head,” he revealed. “She was doing something to me ... I couldn’t stop her...”

“It is called a mind meld,” T’Pol said. “She used it to create a telepathic link between you so she could absorb your memories.” Mackenzie gave her a horrified look, though she could tell he wasn’t particularly surprised. Obviously, he had figured most of this out already. “The pain you are experiencing is due to-”

“Don’t care!” Mackenzie interrupted. He closed his eyes again. “Just want it to stop!” When he opened his eyes again, tears were leaking from them. “Can you do it too? The meld thing?”

“I ...”

“Please, Commander!” The tears darkened, and T’Pol swallowed at the sight of blood trickling from his eyes. She nodded.

“I will do what I can,” she said. “Lower your hand.” As he obeyed, she placed the fingers of her right hand upon his face, wincing at the psychic pain rolling off of him. Even with this slight Touch, she could tell that the damage wrought upon him was far beyond her skills to repair. A true mind-healer would be necessary, not a barely trained neophyte such as herself. Still, she could give him some peace for the moment.

Closing her eyes, T’Pol relaxed her mental shields slightly and *pushed* toward the master chief. She could feel the change at once – a sensation of movement without motion, of falling toward a flickering presence not her own – but held back from a true connection. “Rest,” she whispered, directing the chain of her intent toward his deeper unconscious mind.

Instantly, Mackenzie’s tensed muscles relaxed and T’Pol could sense the pain lessening as his body slipped into an almost trance-like state. It was not a true healing meld – she doubted she was capable of putting anyone *but* herself and Trip into such a state – but still managed to ease him into a somnolent condition where all but his automatic functions were quiescent. His injuries were far from healed, but until they found someone who could repair the damage, it was the best she could manage.

Easing out of the light mental connection with him, T’Pol nearly staggered as her legs wobbled. Phlox was already there, his hands quickly catching her arm before she could completely lose her sense of decorum, and he gave her a broad smile.

“Well done, Commander,” he said as she recovered her balance. “He appears to be resting comfortably.”

“The damage is not repaired,” T’Pol replied. “He will need a trained mind healer as quickly as possible.” Phlox’s good cheer faltered. “I will contact the Vulcan High Council,” she said, “and request an immediate rendezvous.”

Just outside Sickbay, T’Pol was forced to react quickly to avoid running into Lieutenant Commander Eisler. For the first time since the saboteur’s death six days earlier, he was not in his combat armor, though his expression was still fierce and angry. The moment he recognized her, he assumed a position the humans called parade rest – his feet a shoulder-width apart and his hands clasped at the small of his back. It was the stance he always adopted when he had something he wished to say.

“Report,” T’Pol instructed.

“Lieutenant Ricker’s team isolated the program the saboteur used to trigger the transporter remotely,” he said flatly, “and Commander Hess is certain no one actually used it to beam to another ship.” T’Pol raised an eyebrow at the ingenuity of the diversionary tactic; the discovery of a portable holographic projector in the monitoring compartment had suggested that the saboteur’s “beam out” had been nothing of the sort and this seemed to confirm that there was not a third threat somewhere in the strike group.

“How certain?” T’Pol asked.

“The transporter logs indicate no biomatter was dematerialized or reintegrated at any time,” Eisler replied. “Commander Hess said she was ‘damned certain’ that it only cycled up.” Before she could ask for further information, he was pressing on. “Ricker is running a high end diagnostic that will check every line of code on the ship’s computer. If there are other surprises in there, she expects to find them.” His expression turned sour. “Unfortunately,” he said, “the full diagnostic will take several days and Commander Hess does not want to bring the warp drive back online until it is complete.”

“I will pass that on to the Captain,” T’Pol stated. “Do we know how they uploaded this program?”

“Not yet, ma’am.” From the stiffness of his posture, Eisler was not happy about that. “I will have Lieutenant Ricker forward you her report once it’s complete.” T’Pol nodded. “I have also completed my analysis of the explosive charge the saboteur was attempting to plant in the plasma accelerator.”

“It was undamaged?” T’Pol asked with a hint of surprise. Eisler nodded.

“Yes, ma’am. It was sheathed in a duranium composite that protected it from the plasma flow.” The tactical officer shifted slightly in place, his eyes seeming to turn inward. “It was a good plan,” he remarked with grudging approval in his voice. “If Master Chief Mackenzie had not acted before she completed arming the charge, it could have crippled or destroyed *Endeavour*.”

“I know,” T’Pol said simply. “Your analysis?” Eisler instantly offered a PADD he had concealed behind his back and T’Pol’s eyebrow shot up at the mild tremor running through the lieutenant commander’s hand. She glanced up to meet his eyes as she accepted the data device.

“I haven’t eaten in three days,” he said flatly in response to the unspoken question on her face. “All of the materials in the explosive charge appear to be of Vulcan manufacture. I have already forwarded my initial report to Starfleet Security.”

“Good.” T’Pol glanced over the data on the PADD but did not try to actually read it. “Keep me apprised of their findings.” She was about to turn away, thinking his report was complete, when she noticed discomfort lurking in his eyes. “Commander?” she asked. If it was possible, he seemed to get even more uncomfortable.

“The Vulcan male,” he said carefully, “exhibited unusual ... resilience.” T’Pol felt her own muscles tensing reflexively, though she doubted he noticed the difference.

“Doctor Phlox found trace elements of a compound known as trellium in his bloodstream,” she said. “Along with certain ... medical conditions that had not been ... alleviated,” T’Pol continued, “this compound accounts for his abnormal aggression.”

“Is that why he died when the female did?” Eisler asked. He was watching her intently and T’Pol lowered her voice when she replied.

“Unlikely,” she said simply. “In some instances, the traumatic severing of a matebond can kill.” The tactical officer glowered but looked away, as if to make sure they could not be overheard.

“So,” he rumbled, “if you die accidentally, there is a good chance that the captain would as well?”

T'Pol swallowed.

“It is ... not out of the realm of possibility,” she answered.

The disquieting notion of Trip following her into death pursued her all the way to the technically off-limits A-Deck bridge where T'Pol could sense her mate. It had turned into his favorite spot to brood (although he insisted that he was simply thinking) whenever he wanted to be alone for a while and, as the lift slowed to a stop, her superior hearing allowed her to make out Admiral Archer's voice. Trip barely acknowledged her as she stepped onto the bridge, so intent was he on the larger than life image of the admiral on the main viewscreen.

“Since that time,” Trip was saying as T'Pol approached, “there hasn't been any sign of additional sabotage.” He ran his hands through his hair and T'Pol felt a wave of fatigue pulse off of him as he waited for the subspace signal to catch up. The time delay lag was a relatively new problem; ever since the war began, the Romulans had targeted the communications buoys that enabled almost realtime contact between deployed ships and Starfleet Command. As soon as a new buoy came online, it became a target, and the farther away from Earth, the longer the delay.

“Keep me updated,” Archer instructed several long seconds later. He glanced down at something – a PADD, T'Pol suspected – before continuing. “Any reason you requested a new communications officer?” he asked. Trip sighed.

“Lieutenant Devereux needs to return to Starfleet Medical for additional treatment,” he said. “Phlox doesn't have what he needs to do the surgery and we don't want to put her at any more risk.” The image of Archer flickered and froze before finally resolving. An eternity – fifteen long seconds – passed before his response came.

“All right,” the admiral said. “I'll see what I can do.” A distracted look crossed his face and he looked away, frowning at something T'Pol could not see.

“I don't want this to affect her career, Jon,” Trip quickly added, personalizing the request to ensure it was heard. “She's too good an officer to let this sort of thing cost her a promotion.”

“Noted.” Archer frowned. “Anything else?”

“Admiral,” T'Pol spoke up, “before she was killed, the saboteur initiated a forced mind meld upon Master Chief Petty Officer Mackenzie.” Trip's expression darkened, but T'Pol continued without giving him more than a quick glance to remind him that Tolaris was dead and could not harm her ever again. “He needs to be seen by a Vulcan mind-healer as soon as possible.” Fifteen seconds passed before Archer nodded.

“I'll talk to Ambassador V'Lar and arrange it,” he said. Another long moment passed as the admiral obviously waited for the signal to catch up with any additional commentary from them. When they said nothing, he spoke. “As soon as I have further instructions, I'll contact you. Until then, stay where you are. Archer out.”

“Is Mac okay?” Trip asked as the transmission ended. He sank back into the command chair and began rubbing his temples with the fingers of both hands. T'Pol frowned tightly and stepped closer.

“Lean forward,” she instructed. He obeyed and T’Pol quickly began manipulating the neural nodes along the base of his neck. “He is in considerable pain,” she said. “At Doctor Phlox’s suggestion, I briefly melded with him and placed him into a catatonic state that should enable him to rest until the Vulcan ship arrives.” Her mate’s concern over the meld washed across her awareness. “It was perfectly safe, Trip,” she assured him. “I did not fully meld with him.”

“Good.” He exhaled softly in relief as his tension headache began to ease. “Spoke with Kov earlier,” he said a moment later. “Repairs are mostly done, though they’re just stopgap measures for the moment. They’ll need some time at a shipyard to be fully functional.”

“Which could be difficult to arrange given the problems Vulcan is continuing to experience,” T’Pol said. Noting the change in her tone of voice, Trip glanced up. “I completed my examination of the data from *Vahklas*’ sensor logs.”

“That doesn’t sound encouragin’,” her mate stated.

“It isn’t.” T’Pol ceased the neuropressure, but left her hands upon his shoulders. “Without additional data,” she said, “the chances of determining the shuttlepod’s point of origin are miniscule.”

“Damn it.” Trip was silent for a moment before shifting in the command chair and pulling her into a loose embrace. “I feel like we abandoned him, T’Pol,” he muttered. “He could still be alive and we left him there.”

“The fate of Earth was at stake.” Even to her ears, it sounded like an excuse.

“I know,” Tucker whispered. “Doesn’t seem fair – the universe gave us two children and then took ‘em away again.” He shook his head. “If it wasn’t for this damned war,” he growled, “I’d tell Starfleet to go to hell and find him.”

“As would I,” T’Pol said. She pulled back slightly from his hold and met his eyes. “We should begin making plans for the future,” she added, knowing she did not need to suggest such plans would include seeking out the fate of their timelost son. “This war cannot last forever.” Trip nodded.

“The minute a peace is signed,” he decided, speaking aloud the thought both of them were having, “we’re gone.” T’Pol closed her eyes and leaned closer to him, allowing Trip to enfold her with his arms and bring a moment of peace to their lives, even if it lasted only seconds.

“Agreed.”



She wished she hadn’t agreed to this.

Her arms crossed, Hoshi Sato-Reed stared at the streaking stars just beyond the viewport of the cramped galley and fought back a sigh. The persistent headache that had become her constant companion since the encounter with Rajiin over nineteen days earlier was worse this morning, pounding so badly that she kept discreetly checking her ears to make sure she wasn’t suddenly bleeding. It certainly didn’t help that the Vulcans who crewed the *Ni’Var* kept the light intensity

relatively high to human standards.

At the moment, the dining facility was abandoned, with the majority of the crew either asleep, meditating or on duty, which gave Hoshi a moment of peace, away from the sidelong looks of bland Vulcan curiosity or the whispered rumors of the small Starfleet contingent accompanying her. She wasn't particularly surprised – the fact that the *Suurok*-class cruiser assigned to the Vulcan ambassador to Earth had been delegated to a task amounting to personnel courier was bound to raise some eyebrows, literally in this case. Even more curious was that the ship's captain had been pushing the warp engines hard the entire trip on direct orders from Ambassador V'Lar, despite the fact that *Ni'Var* was only recently restored to full operational status, following the heavy damage received by the Romulan attack on Earth nearly three months ago.

That Hoshi was here, racing toward *Endeavour* for an assignment that she didn't want in the first place was something she was still adjusting to. When she'd received her orders, she'd seen the guilt and worry lurking in Admiral Archer's eyes and recognized just how much he hated himself for having to give them to her, no matter the necessity. He was sending her into harm's way, forcing her to leave her child behind and embark on a mission that she might not return from. If it hadn't been so necessary for the survival of Earth, she'd have resigned her commission right then and there.

What was more frightening, though, was admiral's body language; he seemed almost relieved when she acknowledged the orders, as if he was sending her *out* of danger rather than into it.

*Needs of the service, love*, Malcolm's voice whispered softly from the past. Hoshi tried not to focus on that voice, tried not to think about how hard it was for her to even remember what Malcolm looked like. With each day that passed, her memory of him seemed to be slipping farther and farther away. Entire days passed in which she didn't even think about him, and guilt inevitably came on the heels of those moments.

Unsurprisingly, the Reeds accepted the deployment without question, though an old navy family like them ate duty and honor along with their breakfast. Stuart offered to watch over his grandson before Hoshi even had the opportunity to ask them if they could do so, which immediately caused an argument between him and Maddie over who would have the responsibility. Even now, twenty days after the fact, the memory of their good-natured bickering over which one of them would get the chance to spoil Mal Junior caused her to smile.

The hiss of the galley door opening caused Hoshi to shift her focus from the blurring stars to the reflection of the hard-faced Vulcan woman now entering. Dressed in ceremonial robes denoting her status as a *kolinahr* Initiate-Master, Lady T'Sai's eyes seemed to instantly lock onto Hoshi and the Vulcan started toward her without a trace of hesitation in her step. They hadn't had much interaction for the journey, with the Initiate-Master evidently preferring to spend her time in quarters meditating.

Either that, or she thought Hoshi smelled.

“Lieutenant Commander Sato,” T'Sai said by way of greeting. She took up a rigid stance alongside Hoshi, hands locked together at the small of her back and gimlet eyes locked on the streaking stars beyond the viewport. “I have questions regarding the protocols for greeting *Endeavour's* captain.” A flash of what looked like mild embarrassment crossed the woman's face, though Hoshi suspected most humans wouldn't have even noticed it. “My human Standard is ... not so good,” Lady T'Sai added in broken English.

“Captain Tucker speaks passable Vulcan,” Hoshi replied. She winced at the stab of pain shooting through her skull. “He tends to slur his r’s,” she added, “and you’ve not lived until you hear Vulcan with a Southern twang.”

“You have a headache,” T’Sai said, slipping back into her native tongue. She narrowed her eyes. “Were you recently accosted by a telepath?”

Hoshi flinched. Almost at once, she grimaced at the telling delay in her response, especially in the presence of a woman who had spent most of her life honing the psychic gifts nature had given her. The entire situation with Rajiin was classified well beyond what would normally be Hoshi’s security clearance, and she doubted the admiral would be happy to know that she’d already let someone find out.

“I’m afraid,” Hoshi said calmly, “that’s classified.” Humor suddenly danced in Lady T’Sai’s eyes, reminding Sato that this was a woman who had spent most of her life living under V’Las’ High Command where ‘that’s classified’ was a catchphrase for all sorts of governmental abuse.

“I would offer to aid you with your headache,” T’Sai remarked, “but I understand the need for operational security.” Her Vulcan mask of dispassion fell back into place, wiping away all traces of emotion or amusement. She tilted her head slightly and pinned Hoshi with eyes that seemed to pierce straight through to her soul. “Have you ever been tested for psychic potential?” the Vulcan asked abruptly. Hoshi responded immediately and with great wit.

“What?”

“I suspect that you are unaware of it,” T’Sai continued, returning her attention to the viewport, “but I sensed your potential from the moment I met you.” She raised an eyebrow. “You do not appear surprised,” she said.

“There was ... there was an incident in the Expanse,” Hoshi said. “An alien named Tarquin ... we never learned his species ... he implied that I might be ... sensitive.” She glanced down, once again questioning herself. Was this untapped ability part of the reason she had been able to struggle past Rajiin’s telepathic assault while the security team was rendered insensate? Or maybe explained how she was able to pick up languages so quickly? None of her contemporaries seemed capable of what she could do in her sleep.

“You have been given a great gift,” the Vulcan remarked, “but a much greater burden.” At Hoshi’s look, T’Sai drew herself upright. “There are telepathic species in this galaxy,” she said, “who might perceive what you do unconsciously as an assault on their privacy.”

“I ... had not thought of it like that,” Hoshi replied.

“Of course not,” T’Sai said wryly. “You humans are still young on the evolutionary scale.”

A chime warning them of their impending arrival prevented Hoshi from replying, and, if she didn’t know better, she’d suspect that the Vulcan had timed her comment for exactly that reason. Beyond the viewport, she could see the stars return to normal as the *Ni’Var* slowed from warp speed. Movement was instantly apparent, as *Endeavour* and a *Daedalus* oriented toward them while two other *Daedalus*-

classes maneuvered to protect a heavily damaged Vulcan ship that reminded Hoshi of the *Vahklas*.

“Before we depart,” T’Sai declared, “I will provide you with study material.” She gave Hoshi a long look. “You must learn to control this gift, to harness it.” Her eyebrow climbed. “Have there been human telepaths before?” she asked.

“Not that I’m aware of,” Hoshi replied.

“Then perhaps you shall be the first.” Though the Vulcan clearly meant it to be encouraging, Hoshi suddenly felt a crushing weight of responsibility bearing down upon her shoulders. Was this what Admiral Archer felt after Daniels told him of the future? She had always felt different, unique, but this? This terrified her.

Flanked by a quartet of armored security personnel, Trip and T’Pol were waiting for them at the airlock, muted surprise on both of their faces at Hoshi’s presence. Dropping her duffel bag to the deck, she gave her new commanding officer a reasonable approximation of a MACO salute – damn that Kelly; he’d been a bad influence on her – though it was spoiled by the half smile on her face.

“Lieutenant Commander Hoshi Sato-Reed reporting for duty, sir,” she said, lowering her hand and offering Trip the PADD containing her orders. He accepted it hesitantly, his surprise fading into what looked to be resignation.

“Welcome aboard, Hoshi,” he said without enthusiasm; like Admiral Archer, he clearly didn’t like the idea of putting her back into the fire. “You’re my new Ops officer?”

“Yes, sir.” Hoshi grinned. “The admiral said you wanted the best so he sent me.”

“Then we got the best,” Trip replied with a smile. He exchanged a quick look with T’Pol who nodded slightly. Before either could speak, T’Sai strode through the airlock, her face an imperious mask. T’Pol’s eyes widened fractionally at the sigils decorating the newcomer’s robes and straightened to an almost painful stance.

“I am T’Sai,” the *kolinahr* Initiate-Master announced, bringing her hand up in the *ta’al*. Tucker and T’Pol reciprocated instantly and in perfectly harmony, causing T’Sai’s lips to tighten. Her eyes darted between the two and her nostrils flared. Hoshi was instantly reminded of how easily the woman had detected her own psychic distress and could only imagine what she thought of when facing the bonded pair. When she spoke, T’Sai addressed her comments solely to Trip. “The High Council has informed me that you have the victim of a forced mind meld aboard. I am to take him to Gol for treatment.”

“I’m Charles Tucker,” Trip said in Vulcan, slurring his r’s exactly as Hoshi had warned. “And this is-”

“T’Pol,” Lady T’Sai identified coolly, a hint of disapproval creeping into her voice, “daughter of T’Les. I know her reputation.” Coming from a *kolinahr* Initiate-Master, it was as much as calling T’Pol a *V’tosh ka’tur* and was yet another reminder that, despite all T’Pol had done for both Earth and Vulcan, there were still some who disapproved of her and the choices she had made. Trip’s eyes flared with banked anger and a coldness seeped into his voice that Hoshi had never heard before.

“Commander T’Pol,” he corrected flatly, “is the first officer of *Endeavour* and will show you to sickbay so you can arrange for Master Chief Mackenzie’s transport.”

“His condition is currently stable,” T’Pol said as she gestured for the other woman to follow her. “I was forced to induce a low-level trance to prevent further neural decay,” she began to explain as they rounded the corner and disappeared from sight. Trip’s eyes followed his mate the entire way.

“Damned bigots,” he muttered under his breath before focusing once more on Hoshi. His eyes narrowed at the sight of the small group of Starfleet personnel now crowding out of the Vulcan cruiser. “You brought me more rookies, Hoshi,” he said with a hint of humor. As one, the replacement crewmembers blushed and looked away, most still wearing expressions of awe at being aboard the pride of Starfleet.

“Filling out your roster, sir,” Hoshi replied. “Lieutenant Kimura,” she called out. The named security officer stepped forward. “You’ve been bragging about having memorized *Endeavour’s* deck plan our entire journey,” Hoshi said, “so time to prove it. Escort everyone to the Operations officer on duty and report in.”

“Aye, ma’am.” The lieutenant hefted his bag and set off, the rest of the group at his heels. Trip watched with visible amusement.

“Command suits you,” he remarked with a grin as he grabbed her duffel and slung it over one shoulder. Hoshi blinked – there was probably a regulation somewhere that said one’s captain *wasn’t* supposed to carry your gear – but fell into step beside him without commenting on his old-fashioned chauvinism. If T’Pol couldn’t break him of it, there wasn’t a lot Hoshi could do. “Hoffman,” Trip said, half-glancing at one of the security personnel. “Send somebody with ‘em to make sure they don’t get lost.”

“Yes, sir.” One of the troopers gestured sharply with his head and two of his men headed out in pursuit of the new arrivals.

“Feel free to haze them a little bit,” Hoshi grumbled. Trip shot her a surprised look.

“You’ve turned mean in your old age,” he said with a smirk as they turned away from the airlock. The remaining two security troopers remained where they were and, for the first time, Hoshi realized that Trip was carrying a sidearm on his own ship. She hated what that implied.

“You didn’t have to spend eighteen and a half days listening to them gossip,” she retorted. Lowering her voice, she continued. “I have eyes only orders from the admiral for you, sir,” she said. Trip grimaced.

“I was afraid of that,” he muttered. He nodded to a door leading into a small conference room. Securing the door behind them, Hoshi extracted a data card from inside her jacket and handed it to him.

“You’ll need T’Pol present too,” she said. “Admiral Archer coded it to all three of our voice identities.”

“Lovely.” Trip reached for the comm. panel and depressed the transmit button. “Commander T’Pol to conference room six,” he said before gesturing to the tables. “Now we wait.”

They didn’t have to wait long. T’Pol joined them within minutes of the page, and, from the rigid tension in her muscles, seemed more than glad to have left Lady T’Sai in Sickbay. Together, they

watched the coded instructions, and Hoshi could see the lines forming in Trip's forehead as he glowered.

She knew *exactly* how he felt.

"Should have seen this coming," Tucker said before giving T'Pol a frown. "Pass the word to department heads," he ordered. "I want us ready for warp speed in one hour." The Vulcan nodded.

"It might be best," she ventured grudgingly, "if Commander Sato encouraged Lady T'Sai to accelerate her planned timetable." Trip's eyes flashed and the muscles in his jaw quivered.

"You've got nothin' to be ashamed of, darlin'," he said darkly, "but if you think its best, then that's what we'll do."

"I *do* need to speak with her again before she leaves," Hoshi interjected.

"Then do it." Trip stood, pressing a button on the display device to eject the encrypted data card. "I'll contact Hsiao, Smith and Wong to give them their new orders," he continued. He sighed, and his next words hung heavy in the conference room.

"Looks like we're heading back to the Delphic Expanse."

**END**

**Watch for *Endeavour: Amaterasu* coming sometime before the Rapture...**